



Otter Tracks

Inside

- Presidential Last and First Days, Editorial by Warren King
- A Birding Challenge and Opportunity
- MALT 2022 Phenology Calendar
- What a Hoot!

2021 Great Backyard Bird Count

February 12-15



Tufted Titmouse photo by Cindy Sedlacek/Great Backyard Bird Count



photo by Becky Purdum

The 2021 Great Backyard Bird Count (GBBC) takes place Friday, February 12 through Monday, February 15. The GBBC works with eBird to provide global coverage. It's easy to participate: count the birds in your backyard, your favorite birding spot, even traveling, and then submit your list on-line. You can no longer mail in your observations so **before you submit a list you must create a free GBBC account.** Go to BirdCount.org. You'll find downloadable instructions to create your free account, to enter your observations, and other opportunities. If you are already registered with eBird or Project Feederwatch, use the same login information. Help provide a 4-day snapshot of bird distribution and abundance around the globe.

Here's what you do:

- Count the highest total of each bird species for at least a 15-minute period in your yard or wherever you want. Taking the highest total avoids duplicate counting.
- Create your GBBC account and send your totals for one or more days during the GBBC period to birdcount.org. Use a separate checklist for each day or each site on a given day.

National Audubon collaborates with the Cornell Lab of Ornithology and Bird Studies Canada to bring GBBC to you. 🐾



OCAS Mission:

To protect birds, other wildlife and their habitats by encouraging a culture of conservation within Addison County.

Self Awareness in Birds

By Barry King

"Bird Brain" generally isn't a compliment but a couple of new studies about birds' brains might start to reverse that notion. It has long been believed that birds weren't capable of conscious thought and action; comparative studies of mammal and human brains seemed to bear that out. Consciousness and planning take place in the neocortex, the outer layer of mammalian brains. Birds don't have a neocortex nor anything that looks like one. How some birds, especially corvids like ravens and crows, are able to display cognitive abili-

ties without this type of structure has been a puzzle.

A study by Onur Güntürkün and Martin Stacho, neuroscientists at Ruhr University Bochum in Germany, helps explain this. Using three-dimensional polarized light imaging, they viewed nerve fibers in a region of the avian brain called the dorsal ventricular ridge (DVR). They found that similar processes took place in this area as in the mammalian neocortex. Their studies on barn owls and

cont. on page 3

OTTER CREEK AUDUBON SOCIETY

PO Box 938
Middlebury, VT 05753

Ron Payne, President
Warren King, Editor
388-4082

Winslow Colwell, Design and Layout
www.wcolwell.com

Vol 47, No. 1

www.ottercreekaudubon.org

Printed on 100% recycled paper

Otter Creek Audubon Society

Board of Directors 2020-2021

Officers

Ron Payne **President**
388-6019

Kathy Starr **Vice-President**
388-6552

Warren King **Secretary**
388-4082

Gary Starr **Treasurer**
388-6552

Board Members

Alan Coulter 545-2213

Amy Douglas 897-2169

Melissa Green 382-0123

David Hof 388-2414

Barb Otsuka 388-6829

Carol Ramsayer 989-7115

Director Emeritus

Abbott Fenn*

Audubon Vermont

David Mears
Director

* Deceased

Presidential Last and First Days

Editorial by
Warren King



VIEWPOINT

Among President Trump's final initiatives in January 2021 was the sale of leases of 1.6 million acres on the coastal plain of the 20-million acre Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, the largest in the National Wildlife Refuge system. The coastal plain is home to massive herds of migrating caribou, hundreds of thousands of migrating waterbirds, and one-third of the polar bear maternal dens. One estimate is that drilling and the accompanying infrastructure would have an impact on this area for at least 50 years.

The sale of the nine leases did not interest Big Oil as had been anticipated. Instead, all but two were purchased by Alaska Industrial Development and Export Authority, an Alaskan state agency. It bought them for the minimum sale price of \$25 per acre, a small fraction of the income expected by the Trump team. Two small oil companies bought the remaining two parcels.

As part of the Republican-led 2017 'Tax Cuts and Jobs Act' an additional several hundred thousand acres must be auctioned off by the federal government by 2024 despite opposition by the native Gwich'in people. The Gwich'in, whose livelihood has depended on the Porcupine caribou herd in the coastal plain for centuries, filed lawsuits joined by other organizations including the National Audubon Society. The day before the lease sale, Judge Sharon Gleason denied their request for a preliminary injunction on the basis that the plaintiffs "would not suffer imminent irreparable harm" since drilling won't start immediately.

During his first few days in office, President Joe Biden reversed some of the more than one hundred anti-environmental initiatives undertaken by the Trump administration. Among his executive orders was the rejoining of the Paris Climate Accord and the cessation of work on the northern leg of the Keystone XL Pipeline. Another one put a 60-day hiatus on new oil and gas leasing and drilling permits on public lands and waters. This may be followed by a complete moratorium on such activities. The Interior Department has been asked to review the decision-making around Arctic oil development, including possibly redoing the environmental analysis that allowed the ANWR lease sale to go through. It has not yet been determined if the sale of the parcels on the Alaskan coastal plain can be reversed.

Some of the Trump administration's other environmentally destructive initiatives will take longer to turn back and some may prove to be permanent. At least we now have a White House that understands that the environment is important to all people and not just those who can exploit it. 🐾



Gray Jay: Kris Andrews' 200th Vermont species of the year 2020.

Photo by Kris Andrews

A Birding Challenge and Opportunity

By Gary Starr

In 2019, Kris Andrews identified 166 bird species in Vermont. During the OCAS's 2020 First Day Bird Walk at Button Bay State Park, when asked, Ron Payne mentioned that it was quite possible for Kris to see 200 bird species during the year, and as Kris says, "the challenge was on".

The COVID pandemic created an opportunity as all 12 weekend sales events for Kris's basket business (Naturally Inspired) were canceled and Jim's herpetology field trips were curtailed. Both eBird and advice from fellow Vermont birders were important for targeting unusual birds. It was a great year for shore-

birds, especially at Delta Park where Dunlins, Sanderlings and Buff-breasted Sandpipers were located. Other places visited were the Champlain Islands, Swanton Airport and the Champlain Valley. In October, Kathy and I joined the Andrews in the Northeast Kingdom and Kris got number 200, a Gray Jay that perched on her hand. A new goal of 220 was immediately established. On the last day of the year, Kris went to Lake Champlain chasing and missing a Tufted Duck, but with Sue Wetmore's help, she spotted a Pacific Loon for the final and 220th bird of the year. Kris said of her sidekick Jim, "I would not have been able to do it without him, and the challenge made us better birders." Although hardcore birders identified more species in 2020, we applaud the Andrews' effort and dedication to birding. 🐾

OCAS Calendar of Events February – May 2021

FEBRUARY 12-15 **GREAT BACKYARD BIRD COUNT.**
See related article, page 1

SALAMANDER ESCORTS, normally taking place on two selected warm, wet, evenings in the last two weeks of March and the first week of April, will be cancelled in 2021. If you wish to monitor sites in Addison County on your own, feel free to do so, but be aware of vehicles not expecting people on roads on wet nights. A day-glo vest is useful outerware. Jim Andrews, jandrews@vtherpatlas.org, would be happy to receive a report from you of amphibians you identify and count.

THE OTTER CREEK AUDUBON BIRDATHON, the most important fundraising effort of the year, will take place during the first three weeks of May. OCAS members are encouraged to count bird species on a day of your choice. Ask friends to support your efforts or efforts of a board member at an amount per species or with a flat sum. Report your efforts and send raised funds to OCAS Treasurer Gary Starr, 782 Weybridge Rd, Weybridge VT 05753. Contributions to OCAS are tax deductible.

TWELFTH ANNUAL CABIN FEVER LECTURE SERIES WILL TAKE PLACE VIA ZOOM

To register email ocasvt@gmail.com

THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 18, 7 PM: **CHICKADEES**
Presented by David Hof

THURSDAY, MARCH 11, 7 PM: **BIRDING NEW ZEALAND**
Presented by Gary Starr

OCAS-MALT MARSH MEADOW AND GRASSLAND WILDLIFE WALKS

Due to COVID-19, the monthly joint OCAS-MALT Marsh, Meadow and Grassland Wildlife Walks are cancelled until further notice.

Self-Awareness in Birds

continued from page 1

pigeons revealed that although the DVR doesn't resemble the mammalian neocortex, the cellular organization and wiring is similar. Apparently that's what counts and it explains birds' otherwise surprising cognitive abilities. These neuroscientists believe that most, if not all, birds share this feature. Another neuroscientist, Suzanaerculano-Houzel of Vanderbilt University, commented that although the DVR isn't the same as the neocortex, this study does suggest they are equivalent. The

research may also shed light on the evolution of animal brains. The ancient reptile precursor to both mammals and birds may have had a brain that, in mammals, evolved into the neocortex while in birds it became the DVR.

In a separate study, neurobiologist Andreas Nieder of Germany's University of Tübingen, worked with carrion crows to find out if they have any sensory consciousness. Primates possess this form of consciousness but birds weren't thought to have it. Nieder and colleagues trained two carrion crows to respond to particular visu-

MALT 2022 Phenology Calendar By Naomi Cutler

In partnership with the Otter Creek Audubon Society, the Middlebury Area Land Trust is **accepting photo submissions** to our 2022 Phenology Calendar. This calendar will focus on seasonal change in our natural landscape, on and around MALT lands and trails. Phenology is the study of cyclical events in nature, such as flowering, hibernation, and migration. We have placed photo posts at six locations on MALT lands and trails (see stars on map). **Anyone** can submit photos taken at these locations, or at any other location in Addison County! Submit your photos at maltvt.org/news.

Part of MALT's mission is to conserve natural landscapes in our community, and to enhance educational opportunities about these natural landscapes. We hope that this project will allow our community to connect with the natural landscape more deeply, as we watch the natural world change with the seasons. Once our calendar is created and sold, any profits will be donated directly to our lands and trails. Please reach out to info@maltvt.org with questions, or for more information. 🐾



al stimuli and then tested them to see what their nerve level response was. Their results suggest that some birds do have some ability to recall and act on previous sensory experience – sensory consciousness. This study indicates that the brains of primates and birds are more similar than previously thought. Based on this study and her own work, Herculano-Houzel said, "I hope that more people will be tempted to drop the notion that there is something very unique and exclusive about the human brain." 🐾



What a Hoot!



The following is an actual post on the Mad River Valley Front Porch Forum and seven replies that were edited slightly for brevity. Names have been omitted to protect both the innocent and the witty.

House Break in

Hello fellow neighbors,

I have recently moved to the valley from Boston. I've only lived in this house for about two weeks. I came home from Shaws to find my back window smashed in. I immediately called my husband as I was panicked that we had been broken into. I searched the house to see what was missing and what I found was a dead bird laying on my kitchen floor by the broken window. I was very surprised to see that the robbers had used a dead bird to smash my window. Thankfully I haven't found anything missing or out of place. Please write back to me if you know anything about this or a similar thing has happened to you.

Thank you

Re: House Break in

This birdery sounds serious. God forbid it was an attempted murder (of crows.)

That same bird tried to break into my place! Luckily, I have triple pane windows so all he managed to do was leave a couple of feathers and a smudgy imprint of his body.

From the evidence you presented, there can be but one culprit: the cat burglar.

I've thought about this post for a while...is ... this a joke? Apologies if this post was sent in earnest but it seems you've caught the robber red "feathered".

The same thing happened to me!! Last summer I was watering plants on the deck and heard a loud bang around the corner of the house. When I ran to see what had happened, I found that someone had thrown a dead bluejay at my glass door!

What is this, Front Perch Forum? It's a parrot you had a close caw. The fowl perpetrator who was robin you must be put in a cage.

It's clear the perp is stork-raven mad and needs to cease these ill eagle activities. I have no egrets in saying toucan play at that game. As unpheasant and hawkward as it will be, I will help protect this valley and relieve it of this birden. I'm egg-sited for a crime-free future.



Non-Profit
U.S. Postage
PAID
Middlebury, VT
Permit No. 15



Otter Tracks
Otter Creek Audubon Society
PO Box 938
Middlebury, VT 05753