



Otter Creek Audubon Society

September 2021

Otter Tracks

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Bar-tailed Godwit on it's New Zealand wintering ground. Photo by Gary Starr



OCAS Mission:

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

OTTER CREEK AUDUBON SOCIETY

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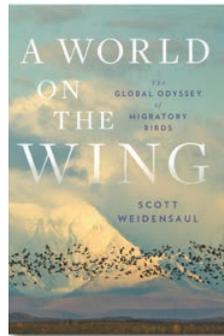
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A World on the Wing: The Global Odyssey of Migratory Birds by Scott Weidensaul

2021, W.W. Norton

Review by Warren King

Many of us will recall the visit paid by Scott Weidensaul to Addison County in November 2018, when he presented at the OCAS annual dinner. His talk, a dramatic illustrated lecture entitled "Project SNOWStorm," was about the massive Snowy Owl irruption of 2013-2014 and the causes of such irruptions. At the time, he mentioned his intention to spend time in India studying a unique raptor migration. That study forms the basis of the final chapter of his new

book, *A World on the Wing*. The book is a survey of the most striking feats undertaken by migratory birds in their physically challenging migration between hemispheres, continents and oceans. One of Weidensaul's earlier books, *Living on the Wind, Across the Hemisphere with Migratory Birds*, was a Pulitzer Prize finalist in 2000.

The journeys Weidensaul addresses include the migration of the Spoon-billed Sandpiper, now an estimated 220-340 pairs up from a low of 80 pairs. The birds migrate between breeding grounds in easternmost Siberia and wintering sites along the Bangladesh, Myanmar and Thailand coasts. The route takes them along the Yellow Sea shore in China where they find crucial feeding habitat. The shorelines along their whole route is in peril from development. Weidensaul also describes the length of migration of the several godwit species, mostly over open water, and the remarkable height of migration of the Bar-headed Goose and the Ruddy Shelduck, recorded at 22,000 feet over the Himalayas, with only a third of the oxygen available at sea level. He compares the ability of several species, including frigatebirds, Pectoral Sandpipers, and Alpine and Common Swifts to avoid sleeping on the wing for periods of days or even months at a time by having half of their brain asleep while the other half is awake. In terms of sheer number of migrants, Weidensaul offers us a one-day "reverse migration" he witnessed, where migrant songbirds crossed the St. Lawrence heading north only to find that the north shore was still in the dead of winter, snow-covered and without insect food. He observed and carefully calculated that about a million songbirds of many species made their way southwest back along the north shore of the St. Lawrence without having to re-cross the very wide estuary. Weidensaul travelled to Veracruz, eastern Mexico, to witness the pinch point along the coast where between half a million and a million raptors are counted on a reasonably good day. He gives us a summary of the distances covered by seabirds that travel the oceans worldwide for, in some instances, years at a time. And the finale involves a migration that Weidensaul visited in Nagaland, easternmost India, where, following the creation of a large reservoir, Amur Falcons, similar to but slightly larger than American Kestrels, now gather in the millions on their way south. Getting there (Nagaland) is nearly as hard for people as for Amur Falcons.

Weidensaul witnessed most of these migrations himself and participated in the studies of a few. This makes it an exciting book for those of us interested in bird migration. I strongly recommend it. The manufacture and deployment of smaller and smaller, yet continually more effective electronic devices, installed to show where migrants are located at any time of night or day on their migration, promises new opportunities for understanding the migration requirements for birds of any size, even hummingbirds. This book will give you an idea of the extraordinary tales of migratory exploits that we'll learn more about in the next few years. 🐾

Otter Creek Audubon Society

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American Bittern on a Bike

By Gary Starr

In June, Kathy and I went bike riding on the rail-to-trail path from Poultney to Castleton VT, primarily for the exercise. Fortunately, we took binoculars and cameras. Our first 1.5 miles took over an hour as a result of frequent bird sightings. At one point, we watched 5 Green Herons and 3 American Bitterns at once. They were flying from forest edge to open, flooded fields.

The American Bittern is a medium-sized heron that breeds in Canada, central, and northern USA and winters in the Gulf of Mexico, Caribbean, and Central America. The bird will hide in plain sight with straight, sharp bill pointed upward, while blending into the fresh water, wetland reed habitat.

The American Bittern has been observed on Otter Creek Audubon's Hurd Grassland during our monthly birding walks. 🐾



Two of the three bitterns in a territorial display. Note the distinctive black feathers in the neck area.

The flying bittern, with its bright orange legs, has a distinctive shape and coloring compared to the smaller Green Heron.



Photos by Gary Starr

Special Puffin Appears on Matinicus Rock

2021 marks the 32nd year that Steve Kress, now retired, and his crew started Project Puffin by capturing, transporting and banding Atlantic Puffins from Newfoundland to a group of islands in the Gulf of Maine, where they had formerly been plentiful but were extirpated by the 1980s. Thanks to his foresight and commitment, Atlantic Puffins are once again abundant along the Maine coast.

This summer Project Puffin researchers discovered one of the puffins banded by Kress in 1989 and raised on Seal Island National Wildlife Refuge. They discovered it on nearby Matinicus Rock — 32 years after Kress banded it.

Steve Kress spoke to the OCAS annual dinner in November, 2011. 🐾

Mystery Bird Mortality Event

In May 2021 starting in the Washington D.C. area, birdwatchers reported that thousands of songbirds, especially those that visit feeders, began to develop symptoms of an as yet undiagnosed disease. Twelve species have been affected, particularly Common Grackles, Blue Jays, American Robins and European Starlings. Fledglings have been hit hardest. The affected area stretched from the East Coast to Indiana and Kentucky and north to Pennsylvania. New England birds have thus far been spared. Symptoms include lethargy, loss of balance, and a crusty covering over the eyes. Death is the usual result.

Scientists have tested for the presence of a substantial number of avian diseases and have come up empty-handed. As the summer progressed and songbirds finished nesting, the intensity of the disease appeared to diminish. One theory, that the disease was transmitted to songbirds by eating 17-year brood X cicadas, has now been discounted, since sick birds have been found in areas where cicadas were rare. Birds tend to avoid eating cicadas affected by *Massospora* fungus, one possible source of sickness.

Researchers have now eliminated a substantial number of avian disease as the source. By August the number of birds reported with disease symptoms had declined. We may never know the source of this deadly mysterious disease. Mass bird mortality events are not uncommon, especially among species that form dense flocks or come to feeders. The scale of this disease, although extensive, is not thought to be a long-term risk to any bird species. 🐾

The Grants Go On!

By Carol Ramsayer

Despite pandemic restrictions, the 2021 OCAS Environmental Education Grant program continued this past school year, again giving educators a chance to design outdoor learning experiences for their students. We awarded nine grants totaling \$5,103, potentially reaching 376 students in 9 schools.

Lincoln Community School's grade 5/6 teachers engaged a tracking and wilderness survival educator to guide students in four mornings of tracking and firebuilding. The Literacy Intervention students at Middlebury Middle School gained respect for their natural world through a visit to the site of an ice fishing tragedy, meeting with an historian and a wildlife warden. Grant funds paid for individual (and thus safe) Naturalist Bags for each preschooler at Quarry Hill School. Drawing materials, collection boxes, and "real binoculars" were among the items in the bags that enriched the children's regular outings. And at Salisbury Community and Weybridge Elementary schools 3rd and 4th graders learned about adaptations and climate change impacts through meeting live animals from the Southern Vermont Natural History Museum.

OCAS applauds the efforts of these teachers and others as they navigated a challenging year when visitors were not allowed inside schools and field trips were denied until late spring. 🐾



Quarry Hill pre-schoolers each had their own Naturalist Bag to take on outdoor adventures.

Photo by Su White

Sixth IPCC Report: Climate Change Not in Doubt

On August 9, 2021, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change issued Part 1 of 3 parts of its 6th Report on Climate Change. The panel has grown to more than 200 climate experts around the world and has consulted 14,000 publications in the process. 195 nations approved Part 1. The tone of report language has gradually changed from an initial hesitancy to make firm statements to now an undoubted certainty of climate change. The Report includes convincing evidence of impacts already at hand and a strong promise of intensification of future impacts. Depending on our actions this decade, we will either keep within an increase of 1.5 degrees Celsius, and still have a reasonable chance of a livable planet, or, if we do little or nothing, we will ensure an increase of 3 degrees Celsius or more.

Part 1's first finding is "It is unequivocal that human influence has warmed the atmosphere, ocean and land." In the eight years since the Fifth Report increasingly sophisticated observational data, computer models, and attribution research linking specific extreme events with climate change have strengthened our understanding of climate change. We have warmed the earth 1.1 degrees Celsius since the 19th Century, and will reach a 2-degree Celsius increase by 2040. It is clear now that 2 degrees Celsius increase will bring more difficult challenges, including the potential for pass-

OCAS Calendar of Events October – January 2021

SATURDAY, OCTOBER 2 **DEAD CREEK WILDLIFE DAY.** Dead Creek Wildlife Management Area Headquarters, Route 17, Addison.
9:30 AM-4 PM

THURSDAY, NOVEMBER 11 **OCAS ANNUAL DINNER AND MEETING.** This may change due to COVID. Check our website for updates. If it happens, members will receive tickets by mail and publicity will be in the *Addison Independent*.
5:30-8:45 PM

ADDISON COUNTY CHRISTMAS BIRD COUNTS

SATURDAY, DECEMBER 18 **FERRISBURGH CHRISTMAS BIRD COUNT.** Call Mike Winslow at 877-6586 for details and possible status change due to coronavirus.

SUNDAY, DECEMBER 19 **MIDDLEBURY CHRISTMAS BIRD COUNT.** 6 AM pre-count breakfast at Rosie's and post-count potluck at the Andrews' are on. Call Jim or Kris Andrews at 352-4734 for details and possible status change due to coronavirus.

SATURDAY, JANUARY 2 **MT. ABE CHRISTMAS BIRD COUNT.** Call Randy or Cathy Durand at 453-4370 for details and possible status change due to coronavirus.

SATURDAY, JANUARY 2 **HINESBURG CHRISTMAS BIRD COUNT.** Call Paul Wieczorek at 434-4216 for details and possible status change due to coronavirus.

OCAS-MALT MARSH MEADOW AND GRASSLAND WILDLIFE WALKS

A monthly joint OCAS-MALT event. We invite community members to help survey birds and other wildlife at Otter View Park and Hurd Grassland. Meet at Otter View Park parking area, Weybridge Street and Pulp Mill Bridge Road, Middlebury. Shorter and longer routes possible. Beginning birders are welcome. Come for all or part of the walk. Please bring a mask. For information call 388-1007 or 388-6019.

Saturday, September 12, 7-9 AM

Saturday, October 9, 8-10 AM

Saturday, November 13, 8-10 AM

Saturday, December 11, 8-10 AM

ing "tipping points" like the slowing of the Atlantic Gulf Stream, which may make parts of northern Europe unlivable. With many lives and the welfare of human civilization at stake, it will be essential for the world's governments to collaborate as they never have before. Now is the time for action. 🐾

Wind Towers to Be Developed off the California Coast

At more than 200 feet deep, the coast off California has long been considered too deep to locate wind towers. Floating wind turbines, although used regularly by oil and gas corporations, were previously thought too expensive to site there, particularly considering the cost of long mooring lines, electrical cables and anchors. Also, the U.S. Navy said the 300 somewhat permanent floating oceanic turbines would conflict with naval operations. However, a floating turbine project with six towers began in Scotland in 2017 and several demonstration projects are now up and running in Europe and Asia.

On May 25 U.S. Secretary of the Interior Deb Haaland and California Governor Newsom launched a program to initiate development of floating wind towers in a 399-square mile area of Morro Bay along the coast of central California and in an area of undetermined size off the coast near Humboldt, just south of the Oregon border. President Biden convinced the U.S. Navy that wind power development off the West Coast is worth the headaches of additional navigational challenges. Since the Department of Defense now views climate change as a threat to U.S. defense both at home and abroad, Undersecretary of Defense Colin Cole said, “any negative effects [of the project] were mitigated and certainly balanced against the imperative of moving in a clean energy direction.” Gina McCarthy, National Climate Advisor, stated: “This a breakthrough that will allow the siting of offshore wind in

the Pacific Ocean.” Proponents say it will create the beginnings of a critical mass for offshore wind.

These floating islands are not without potential negative impacts. Commercial fishermen are very concerned over the loss of fishing areas and the impact on fish of the huge deep sea-
port that would be needed to service the structures. Birds and marine mammals in the project areas may also be affected as the wind towers come on line in future years. The California-based Environmental Defense Center said in a statement, “We must remain vigilant in our efforts to ensure offshore wind is a net positive for California by also implementing robust environmental protections.” 🐾



A floating offshore wind turbine in Portugal.

Photo by Wikipedia contributor Untrakdrover

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