



Otter Tracks

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SPOTLIGHT

An Environmental Education Grant

By Carol Ramsayer

The OCAS Education Committee really has the best job ever. This time of year, we review the summaries and photos of Environmental Education Grant winners from the previous year. We read heartwarming stories of tracking, raising fish, learning survival skills, visiting with live birds, taking water quality measurements while canoeing, and drawing from nature. It's a joyful time, as we see how OCAS grant money has provided unique outdoor experiences for kids. For example, the Wren's Nest Forest School invited Vermont children's author Ashley Wolff for a book reading in the school's outdoor setting. She brought a stack of her children's books to read to the preschoolers and their parents as they enjoyed the spring day. One story, "Compost Stew," was brought to life as the children stirred various ingredients into a bucket. Next was a guided drawing activity to go along with Ashley's book entitled "Baby Bear Sees Blue." Thus each child had her own artistic reminder of the day to take home. Finally, refreshments completed the event – bagels and fresh fruit. What a perfectly planned experience for the young naturalists. As their grateful teacher noted, the visit "helped strengthen the existing connections and created new relationships for students between literature and the land, animals, and plants of Vermont."

As the November *Otter Tracks* goes to press, educators from around Addison County are putting together their proposals for 2022 Environmental Education Grants. The Education Committee looks forward to reading how OCAS can support these teacher-designed efforts to enrich their students' outdoor learning. 🐾



Preschooler Oliver Blaise displays his guided drawing creation. Photo by Suzanne Miller



OCAS Mission:

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

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

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Hog Island Audubon Camp, off the coast of Maine, offers a variety of 5-day sessions led by renowned instructors. The website at hogisland.audubon.org provides just a glimpse of what a unique experience this is for nature enthusiasts! OCAS offers an annual \$800 scholarship to either a teacher or teen. To receive an application for summer 2022, interested applicants should email Carol at cgramsmac@mac.com by December 13th.

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Endangered Species

Endangered species were in the news in October. The federal government concluded that 23 species, including the Ivory-billed Woodpecker, Bachman's Warbler, 8 Hawaiian honeycreeper species, a Guam bird species, 3 mussel species and 2 fish. Depending on the species and the extent of knowledge about it, many years may elapse between the last confirmed sighting and the federal declaration of extinction. For example, the federal government considered that the last confirmed sighting of an Ivory-billed Woodpecker was in 1944. Sightings of an Ivory-bill in bottomland forest in Arkansas in 2005 were widely accepted and heralded, but did not meet the standard of confirmation of the federal government. The Cuban subspecies of the Ivory-bill is also confirmed as extinct by the IUCN Red Data Book.

Closer to home, the Vermont Endangered Species Committee recommended to the Vermont legislature the listing of the Eastern Meadowlark as threatened in Vermont. Although the Vermont Department of Fish and Wildlife announced in spring 2021 that the population is between 105 and 163 pairs in Vermont, Kevin Tolan, a biologist with the Vermont Center for Ecostudies, surveyed the state population

in 2021 and concluded that only about half as many pairs exist at present. The species has declined in Vermont by 55 percent in the last 25 years according to the Vermont Breeding Bird Atlas. The VT Endangered Species Committee also recommended that the VT legislature delist the Bald Eagle in Vermont. Forty pairs of Bald Eagles raised more than 60 young in 2020 and a similar number in 2021. This species has recovered well beyond its population prior to the onset of decline due to DDT that caused it to be eliminated as a breeding species in Vermont for a period of time.

The Vermont Endangered Species Committee also proposed several habitats as "critical" for rare species. Proposed "critical" lands include several small Lake Champlain islands where the endangered Vermont population of Common Terns breed. Additional "critical" status was proposed for Aeolus Cave in Dorset, where 70,000 to 90,000 bat overwinter, including small numbers of all four endangered Vermont bat species. Lastly, the Vermont Endangered Species Committee proposed as "critical" the four most productive sites along the Lake Champlain shore where the threatened Spiny Softshell Turtle lays eggs. 🐾

A Hurd Grassland Housing Development

By Ron Payne

Sharp-eyed observers traveling along Weybridge Road adjacent to the Hurd Grassland may have spotted a new building project that occurred there in early June. Twelve brand new houses popped up on the property seemingly overnight. Now don't worry, we have not violated the conservation easement; these houses are, of course, for birds.

Designed and built by OCAS Vice President Gary Starr at the Starr Decoys workshop in Weybridge, these nest boxes were based on what he considered the best features from two different bird box plans acquired from the North American Bluebird Society. The boxes are watertight, well drained, and have easy-to-open access for cleaning them out. They are mounted on 1/2-inch electrical conduit pipes with a PVC baffle attached to keep climbing predators away from occupied nests. The entry holes are sized for use by either Eastern Bluebirds or Tree Swallows and have a roughed-up interior wall to help fledglings climb out.

The morning after the boxes were placed I went to see them, and Tree Swallows were already moving into one. Over the summer every box showed signs of nesting attempts of some kind. The swallows, in particular, showed increased activity at the property throughout the summer, instead of their previous pattern of disappearing after spring. A couple of boxes also attracted the attention of House Wrens, so we may have to evaluate their location, as they aren't our target species, and they are aggressively competitive. But overall we consider this a very successful addition to the Hurd Grassland. 🐾



New Hurd Grassland Housing Development house.

Photo by Ron Payne



19th Annual Dead Creek Wildlife Day

The 19th Annual Dead Creek Wildlife Day took place on Saturday, October 2, at the Dead Creek Wildlife Management Area headquarters on Vermont Route 17 in Addison. The site is ideal for celebrating the rich fish and wildlife resources of Lake Champlain and the surrounding lands in Vermont and New York. Dead Creek Wildlife Day offers a wide range of activities for families rain or shine. Covid 19 prevented the event from taking place in 2020. Reduced use of indoor space, emphasis on outdoor activities, and liberal use of masks for all events allowed the popular event to take place once again in 2021. A total of 363 people, including presenters, volunteers and staff, attended. Event hosts included Vermont Fish and Wildlife Department, Vermont Department of Forest, Parks and Recreation, and Otter Creek Audubon.

The Vermont Agency of Natural Resources awarded its annual Sally Laughlin Conservation of Endangered Species Award to Scott Darling, a recently retired state biologist who brought Vermont's bats to the public's eye.

Popular favorite kids' activities this year included carving decoys, building bluebird boxes, watching retriever and pointing dogs in action, learning about Vermont's snakes, and watching a live opossum, merlin (an uncommon medium-sized falcon), screech owl and wood turtle. For a fitting finale, visitors watched a biologist fire a rocket net, used to capture waterfowl for banding.



Above: Finishing touches on a bluebird house at Dead Creek Wildlife Day.

Photo by Amy Alfieri

Left: Southern VT Natural History Museum's Mike Clough shares an opossum with his audience at Dead Creek Wildlife Day.

Photo by Amy Alfieri

OCAS Calendar of Events November 2021 – February 2022

ADDISON COUNTY CHRISTMAS BIRD COUNTS

SATURDAY, DECEMBER 18 FERRISBURGH CHRISTMAS BIRD COUNT. Call Mike Winslow at 877-6586 for details and possible changes 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.

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, November 13, 8-10 AM

Saturday, December 11, 8-10 AM

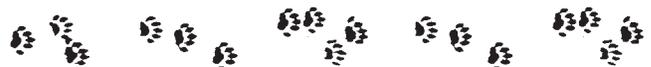
Saturday, January 8, 8-10 AM

Saturday, February 12, 8-10 AM

Chlorpyrifos' Last Chapter

Chlorpyrifos is a neurotoxic organochlorine pesticide used on 50 kinds of agricultural produce. It has been the most widely used pesticide in the U.S. (See *Otter Tracks* September 2020 for a summary of the struggle to keep this pesticide out of houses, then out of agricultural fields across the country). An EPA report in October 2015 during the Obama Administration banned all uses for the chemical. But in 2017 the EPA Administrator in the Trump Administration reversed the decision without any new evidence. A lawsuit brought in the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Ninth Circuit by a coalition of environmental law organizations, conservation groups, and state governments (including Vermont) has required the EPA to carry out the ban, which took place on August 18, 2021. The chemical may now only be used if it can be shown that its use won't show health risks.

No such uses presently exist. 🐾



Update on Wisdom

Wisdom is a female Laysan Albatross who nests on Sand Island, one of three islands of Midway Atoll in the Northwestern Hawaiian chain. She and her current mate, Aki'akemai, meaning "love of wisdom" in Hawaiian, are sharing incubation duty of an egg, foraging for fish and squid for two-week stretches and returning back to Midway to spell their partner, who immediately starts in on a two-week search for food over much of the north Pacific (See *Otter Tracks* May 2011, February 2016, and February 2019). They took a holiday in 2020, a not uncommon practice among albatrosses. This is her eighth chick of the last eleven years.

Wisdom is widely viewed as the oldest banded bird of the millions of birds that have been banded. She is 70 and has raised at least 35 chicks to fledging. She was initially banded in 1956 by famed ornithologist Chandler Robbins when she was incubating an egg, making her at least 5 years old at that time. She is the first documented wild avian septuagenarian and the first wild avian 70-year old mother with a current chick.

Rodents have been part of life on Midway since the Second World War, when black rats and house mice were introduced inadvertently. The black rat population was eliminated in 1996. In December 2015 a small number of house mice from Sand Island were reported to have learned that they could kill incubating Laysan Albatrosses by climbing their backs and necks and taking small chunks of flesh from their heads or backs without retribution, since the incubating albatrosses seemed to have entered a trance-like state, paying no attention to the mice.

The resulting wounds festered readily, killing some albatrosses. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, which owns Midway, has been working with several partner organizations on a seabird protection plan since 2019, the primary target for which is removal of house mice from Sand Island. Onset of the Covid Pandemic has forced postponement of the plan to eradicate mice. In the meantime the area occupied by the mice that have learned the albatross-killing technique has spread. Fortunately, Wisdom's and her mate's nest is $\frac{3}{4}$ of a mile distant from the nearest albatross-attacking mouse population.

Annually about one-third of the albatross chicks die before they fledge, at least some of which is due to ingestion of plastic. Plastic at sea takes on a tangy dimethyl sulfide odor generated by the breakdown of algae and krill, a smell of food to many seabirds. This appears to be the reason that seabirds eat plastic of all shapes and sizes. Albatrosses sometimes starve because most of their gut is filled with indigestible plastic, thinking it is food because of its odor. This is a problem on a global scale that didn't exist when Wisdom hatched 75 years ago. 🐾



Wisdom Incarnate

Photo by Jon Brack/USFWS

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Otter Creek Audubon Society

PO Box 938

Middlebury, VT 05753