



# Otter Tracks

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Rose-Breasted Grosbeak  
Photo by Jane Ogilvie

## Maroon-fronted Parrot

By Warren King



In November 1979, four of us set out from Ithaca, New York, where we were in graduate school, to Monterrey, Mexico. Our destination was slightly uncertain. One of us had heard rumors of a large colony of Maroon-fronted Parrots in the Sierra Madre Oriental Mountain Range near Monterrey. Our objective was to confirm the colony's existence, estimate its size, and confirm nesting.

Finding the colony turned out to be easy, since it was thriving and noisy, with dozens of calling parrots. The parrots were brilliant green with red shoulder patches and a maroon patch between the eye and the bill. They were large, about 16 inches tall, gregarious, and noisy, forming nesting colonies in the cliffs.

We climbed up the base of the cliff as far as we could, and were able to watch individual birds enter and exit their nest holes. It seemed like the closest pair was visiting their hole every few minutes. Occasionally a third bird would stick its head out but would retreat almost immediately. We surmised this was a fledgling. The next day we kept constant vigil and were rewarded by seeing the youngster take flight, a parrot parent close by either wingtip. The youngster grabbed the top of a pine a little too small to support its weight. After vigorous flapping the youngster managed to leave that tree and land more successfully in a larger pine. We were struck by the dramatic instantaneous transition from life in a hole in a cliff to life on the wing. Mission accomplished – ours and the birds'.

In 1998 and 2006, forest fires in the Sierra Madre Oriental caused serious declines in the population of Maroon-fronted Parrots; they are now considered Endangered. I don't know if "our" colony was affected or not. 🐾



### 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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## Birdathon Anecdotes

**B**irdathon, OCAS' biggest annual fundraiser, is also a fun-raiser – especially in retrospect. We end each event with a remarkable variety of tales; some funny, all interesting. Here is a selection of abbreviated stories from Otter Creek Audubon friends, members and Board members, describing their days' adventures. Let us know your tales, too. Come to the post-Birdathon potluck for the food and the fun.

🐾 Last May, we saw a single Purple Martin fly between the Inn and a Cottage at Bread Loaf. Martins usually come in flocks since they nest communally, almost exclusively

in Martin houses on the shore of Lake Champlain, so this lone bird in Ripton was a real oddity.

🐾 We were walking a road in a residential area of Ripton when we heard a loon calling. It was so unlikely, we thought we were hearing a bird-song clock from the open window of the nearby house. Finally, we saw the loon flying over.

🐾 One evening, we were gratefully taking a break at a remote beaver pond. We were eating noisy food like carrots and gorp. We almost missed hearing a Saw-whet Owl because we were munching so loudly.

# Otter Creek Audubon Society

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## Education Happenings

By Carol Ramsayer

*Hog Island Audubon Camp.* We are thrilled to award the annual \$1000 OCAS scholarship to Deb Martin, a teacher at Mary Hogan Preschool. Deb will be attending the session entitled *Sharing Nature: An Educator's Week*. Immersed in birds and coastal ecology, she will have hands-on nature-based experiences that she can bring home to share with other educators as well as her young students. Enjoy your camp week along the beautiful Maine coast, Deb!

*Beginning Birders Walk.* Nature enthusiasts of all ages are invited to join us on this morning ramble in Wright Park. Saturday, June 17<sup>th</sup> is the date; 9:00 until about 11:00 is the time. We will divide into three groups, plus one family group, and explore the richness of this section of the Trail Around Middlebury. Experienced birders will lead as we look and listen for birds and whatever nature gifts come our way. As always there will be a surprise station and hike-appropriate snacks. Bring binoculars or borrow ours. The morning is jointly sponsored by OCAS and Middlebury Area Land Trust. Call 713/818-7033 with questions.



**Naturalist and tracker John Hunt organized a one-match fire building competition.** Photo credit to Camie Thompson

*Spotlight: an Environmental Education Grant.* The most recent grant project to be completed was designed by educator Camie Thompson, of Willowell's Walden Project. Her Vergennes high school students were led on five fall afternoons by John Hunt – local tracker, naturalist, and citizen of the Nulhegan band of Coosuk Abenaki. Students experienced mindfulness practices, native plant walks, a one-match fire competition, learning about plant domestication through harvesting nuts, and seeing seasonal changes through the eyes of a local indigenous culture. Camie expressed sincere gratitude for the grant funds. 🐾

## Birds' Neglected Sense by Warren King

**J. J.** Audubon, among history's greatest bird artists, was centuries ahead of his time in researching the ability of vultures to find food by their sense of smell. He decided they used sight, not smell, to locate their food. Ornithologists accepted his findings – which were incorrect, as it turned out.

In the 1960s, after nearly a century and a half, olfaction in birds suddenly became a hot topic with a PhD dissertation by Kenneth Stager. This was followed in the 1980s by several significant articles by Betsy Bang and Bernice Wenzel, both separately

and then together, including a summary on avian olfaction in the book series *Form and Function in Birds*. *The Secret Perfume of Birds* by Danielle J. Whittaker and *An Immense World* by Ed Yong, both published in 2022, also discussed the subject. It has taken a long while, but it is now clear that birds do smell, and that smell plays a singular role in kiwis and tube-nosed seabirds (albatrosses and their relatives). The former, with small weak eyes, find prey underground by probing earth with their bills and smelling their prey. The latter find their fish-based food by following

the odor of fish upwind in a zigzag pattern. Seabirds also depend on scent to allow individuals to return to nest holes and to mates or offspring with precision over great distances at sea.

The recent books by Whittaker and Jong trace the biochemical pathways of olfaction. Whittaker, who has studied junco biology in depth, has clarified the role of smell in junco biology, not because it is strikingly different from other passerine species, but because smell in juncos sheds light on smell in passerines in general. 🐾

## OCAS Calendar of Events May – Sept 2023

NOTE: The Annual Cabin Fever Lecture Series will not take place in 2023.

**MON MAY 1 – WED MAY 31**      **OCAS BIRDATHON**  
Our main fundraiser of the year. OCAS teams identify as many species as they can under self-imposed rules in a 24-hour period. OCAS members are encouraged to count bird species on a day of their 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 Kathy Starr, 782 Weybridge Rd, Weybridge VT 05753. Contributions to OCAS are tax deductible. See insert, this issue.

**SUN, MAY 14**      **WARBLER WARM-UP**  
**7:30-10:30 AM**      Hone your birding identification skills before leaf-out! Ron Payne and Chris Runcie will lead a search for newly arrived spring migrants. Co-sponsored with The Watershed Center. Meet at the Bristol Waterworks, Plank Road, east of North Street, Bristol. Call Ron at 802/388-6019 if in doubt about the weather.

**SAT, JUNE 17**      **BEGINNERS' BIRD WALK**  
**9-11 AM**      Jointly with MALT at Wright Park. Led by experienced naturalists.  
All ages welcome. Meet at Wright Park (northwest from the Middlebury Green on Seymour St., then just before Pulp Mill covered bridge, turn right onto Seymour St. Ext. to parking area at end.) Call Carol Ramsayer at 713/818-7033 with any questions.

### 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. Beginning birders are welcome. Come for all or part of the walk! For information, including the latest COVID constraints, call 802-388-6019 or 802-388-1007.

Saturday, May 13, 7-9 AM  
Saturday, May 13, 7-9 AM  
Saturday, June 3, 7-9 AM  
Saturday, July 8, 7-9 AM  
Saturday, August 12, 7-9 AM  
Saturday, September 9, 7-9 AM

## Amphibian Movement in 2023

For the 16th year Otter Creek Audubon, Salisbury Conservation Commission and Jim Andrews of the Vermont Atlas of Reptiles and Amphibians identified, counted and moved amphibians across a short stretch of road from their wintering grounds on a Salisbury hillside to their breeding swamp.

The first public event was on March 31. Twenty volunteers showed up and counted and moved 56 amphibians. There were 33 Blue-spotted Salamanders, 10 Spotted Salamanders and 13 Woodfrogs. Interesting to note is that there were no Red-backed or Four-Toed Salamanders or Spring Peepers, likely because of the chilly temperatures.

The second movement night was on April 5. Between 8:15 and 10:15 PM 62 volunteers, many of them Middlebury College students, moved 196 amphibians of seven species. Blue-spotted Salamanders were again the most abundant at 57 individuals, followed in order of abundance by Four-toed, Red-backed and Spotted Salamanders, Wood Frogs, Spring Peepers and Eastern Newts. An additional 13 dead salamanders were counted. The organizers would like to thank the volunteers for turning out. 🐸

### Anecdotes

*continued from page 1*

- 🐸 As we circled the Hurd Grassland, we heard a song we didn't recognize. We finally got a good look at what turned out to be a sparrow but not one we recognized. Once back home, our field guide convinced us it was a Clay-colored Sparrow, a lifer for us!
- 🐸 On a mid-day break from my Birdathon to walk my dog, we walked down the boardwalk at Otter View Park – and flushed a Least Bittern! I got to walk my dog and tally another species at the same time.
- 🐸 Four Canada Geese were standing across the Lemon Fair as we started to launch our canoe from the very muddy bank. I tried to be quick, but wasn't quick enough. Both my feet sank into the gray slimy clay and my right foot disappeared up to my ankle. I couldn't lift either foot and only sank in deeper when I tried. My husband grabbed my arm and yanked me backwards. I yanked my foot up and we managed to extract my feet and sandals from the bottomless mess. With pants, feet, arms, legs and canoe covered in mud, I followed him to a slightly safer launch site. Once in the boat, I looked across the river. All I could see were four long, perfectly still periscopes sticking up out of the tall grass. Those four Canada Geese were still watching. All the tension exploded from me and I burst out laughing.
- 🐸 Ted Murin, an excellent birder in the Burlington area, has said that the key to a big day is misidentification. Here's a case in point: One of us thought he heard an Indigo Bunting. The bird didn't sing again, but thanks to the stop we made, we did find a Great Horned Owl, a Field Sparrow and a Chestnut-sided Warbler, three species we hadn't yet tallied that day.
- 🐸 And one more, obviously not from a May Birdathon. One winter, my wife and I spent 20 minutes trying to determine if the white shape on a fence post in a distant field might be a Snowy Owl. We returned the next day with a scope, only to discover that it was a cow skull! 🐸



## Cockatoos Join Tool-Use Club

**H**uman use of tools set them apart from all other animals until 1871, when Charles Darwin noted tool use in chimpanzees. The list of animals that use tools is now lengthy, including many mammals, especially primates and cetaceans, as well as birds, including gulls, herons, parrots, crows and finches, and fish, cephalopods and a few insects. As the list grows, the definition of the most restrictive category has changed so that humans and very few others qualify. Members of this group include only those species that select a variety of tools based on prior tool use experience. Joining humans and chimpanzees in this exclusive category is one bird species, Goffin’s Cockatoo. This species occurs in the wild only on Yamdena, an island group in the East Indies. Captive Goffin’s Cockatoos have been the subject of recent research, when it became apparent that they were quite intelligent. They were found to use three tools, the equivalent of a wedge, a knife and a spoon, to help them open a food source in the wild. In captivity, these Cockatoos not only could select the right tool for a particular task, they also could plan ahead and carry it with them if they had to move from the “tool shed” to the food source. This planning is comparable to us grabbing our phone, car keys and wallet before heading off. What does it say about those of us who often forget one or the other? 🐾

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