










Otter Creek Audubon Society

February 2024

Otter Tracks

Inside

-  A Trip to Guam
-  Better Living Through Birding Book Review
-  Words of Gratitude for Grants
-  OCAS Scholarship to Hog Island
-  Hurricane Island Storm Damage
-  Calendar
-  Winter Rain

How many birds can you find?



27th Annual Great Backyard Bird Count
Feb 16-19, 2024
birdcount.org



Peregrine Falcon/*Falco peregrinus*.
Photo: Marky Mutchler/Macaulay Library

The Great Backyard Bird Count

The 2024 Great Backyard Bird Count (GBBC) takes place Friday, February 16 through Monday, February 19. The GBBC works with eBird to provide global coverage. It's easy to participate: count the birds in your backyard, favorite birding spot, even traveling, and then submit your list on-line. Before you submit a list, you must create a free GBBC account. Go to BirdCount.org for complete instructions. If you are already registered with eBird or Project Feederwatch, use

your own 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.

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 50, No. 1

www.ottercreekaudubon.org

Printed on 100% recycled paper

Sign Up for 2024 Salamander Escorts

On warm, wet nights from mid-March to mid-April, frogs and salamanders move from their wintering sites on high ground to breeding sites in wetlands to mate and lay eggs. Their route to the nearest vernal pool sometimes takes them across a road where mortality rates can be incredibly high. Several of these crossing sites are in Addison County; OCAS and the Salisbury Conservation Commission invite you to help at one of them.

The crossing we monitor has little traffic which makes it safer for people as well as wildlife. The site supports not only large numbers of amphibians but also remarkable species diversity: four salamander and three frog species. If we happen to get a "Big Night", we'll move more than a thousand amphibians in a two-hour period but even on smaller nights, anyone who comes has an opportunity to experience this remarkable natural phenomenon first hand.

If you're interested, sign up for the 2024 amphibian email alert at kinglet@together.net, even if you were on the list previously. We plan to monitor twice between March 15 and mid-April. We'll try to send out a "heads up" email in the morning and if it still looks good, a confirmation at about 6 pm. Movement starts around 8:15 pm. Volunteers may arrive and leave when they wish and are responsible for their own safety and the safety of others in their group. Upon arrival, Jim Andrews and OCAS will provide species identification tips and a reminder of appropriate behavior. With your help we'll record the numbers of each species we move for two hours.

Otter Creek Audubon Society

Board of Directors 2023-2024

Officers

Ron Payne **President**
388-6019

Gary Starr **Vice-President**
388-6552

Warren King **Secretary**
388-4082

Kathy Starr **Treasurer**
388-6552

Board Members

Alan Coulter 545-2213
Mac Gallagher 610/864-9796
Melissa Green 388-0103
Dave Guertin 989-1767
David Hof 388-2414
Barb Otsuka 388-6829
Carol Ramsayer 989-7115

Director Emeritus

Abbott Fenn*

Audubon Vermont

David Mears
Director

* Deceased

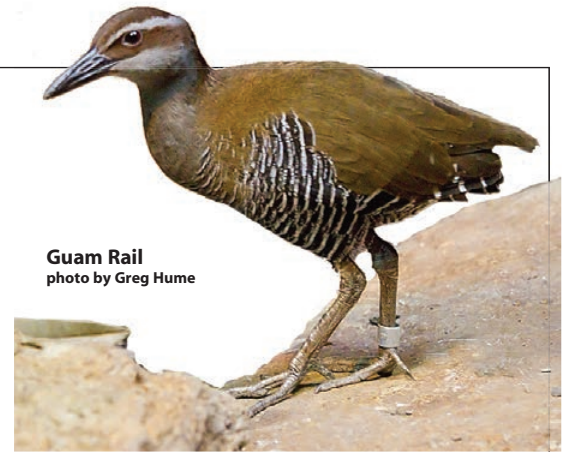
A Trip to Guam

by Warren King

It's 11 October 1979. We've been flying westward from Honolulu for hours and are now working our way through the dense clouds, lightning and turbulence generated by a tsunami. The pilot tells us to buckle up; we land raggedly and hard. As we taxi to the small airport, I watch a coconut palm blow down and another one sail past us.

I had come to Guam through my work with the International Council for Bird Preservation (now Birdlife International) to learn firsthand about a threat to Guam's avifauna from an invasive snake. The brown tree snake was unintentionally introduced in 1952, probably after stowing away on cargo ships coming from New Guinea where it is native. Not having any predators on Guam, these snakes spread across the island, destroying native bird populations as they went. The use of DDT and Malathion as well as significant habitat alteration heightened the threat to the birds but the brown tree snake was the key source of devastation. The snakes, which can grow to about 9', easily move up and down trees preying upon nesting birds and nestlings. They also prey upon ground-nesting birds. The flightless Guam Rail, once abundant, was particularly vulnerable.

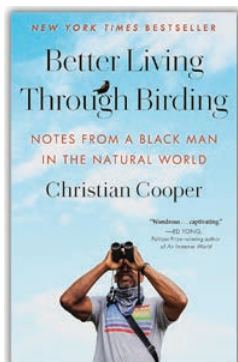
Mark Jenkins of the Guam Division of Aquatic and Wildlife Resources accompanied



Guam Rail
photo by Greg Hume

me the two days I was on the island. He and I saw ten of Guam's 14 native forest bird species, most in the thin band of native forest along the island's northern edge. We did not see any brown tree snakes.

Forty-five years after my visit, the brown tree snake has continued to thrive on Guam despite major efforts to control it. Of the 14 native bird species, only three remain living in their native habitat. Two other species are now extinct, six are considered extirpated and the remaining three are in captive breeding programs. In a very minor way, my visit helped facilitate, five years later, the capture of the remaining twenty-one Guam Rails to start a captive breeding program. This project has been successful enough to reintroduce the species on small nearby islands where they are doing fairly well. The Guam Rail's status has been changed from extinct in the wild to Critically Endangered, a small but important victory. 🐾



Better Living Through Birding:

Notes from a Black Man in the Natural World

by Christian Cooper

Review by Ron Payne

Christian Cooper unintentionally gained national notoriety in the spring of 2020 when, while birding in New York City, he—a black man—asked a dog walker—a white woman—to leash her dog, and she responded by calling the police on him. And since this happened in the aftermath of George Floyd's murder in Minneapolis, this act of calling the police could only be construed as a threat of violence. A threat he deftly defused by recording the encounter on his phone. And while this book delves into the details of this incident, and the social ramifications surrounding it, it is much more about why

he was there in the first place: Birding.

Cooper is a talented nature writer, telling of his initiation to birding as a young child going on an Audubon bird walk, his mentorship with experienced birders, and his solo birding adventures, with passages that makes you feel like you are right beside him viewing the same birds he is. Interspersed throughout the book there are mini essays giving his favorite birding tips, as well as longer sections detailing some of his favorite birding trips.

This is also a full memoir of his life, his relationship to his family, his coming out as gay, his work and his romantic life. Parts of this were more interesting to me than others. As someone who read a lot of comic books as a kid, I found reading about his time working for Marvel and DC fascinating, but the section about his unique spiritual worldview less so. But birds and birding pervade and contextualize it all, convincingly demonstrating the thesis of the title; that birding contributed to a better life for him, and can for you too. 🐾



Words of Gratitude for OCAS Environmental Education Grants

By Carol Ramsayer

Thanks to our members and generous donors, OCAS will be supporting 14 educators from 12 schools with our 2024 Environmental Education Grants. The \$8,795 funds teacher-designed proposals to provide Addison County students with outdoor enrichment opportunities. Here is a sampling of the grants and the teachers' responses when they received the news.

Bridge School: Providing 2 field trips to Otter Creek Gorge Preserve to explore waterways, geology & ecology. *"Oh, this makes my heart sing! Thank you so much, OCAS! We are so excited to continue to develop this relationship!"*

Bridport Central: Bringing a VINS live bird program to strengthen current student interests. *"Thank you so much for helping make this opportunity possible for our school and students!"*

Bristol Elementary: Supporting a field trip to the Birds of Vermont Museum & the Green Mt. Audubon Center. *"Thank you so much for supporting our trip once again. It is truly a highlight for our first graders."*

Mary Hogan K: Exploring the Robert Frost Trail in Ripton, through hands-on activities out in nature with peers. *"This is the most welcoming and generous news I have received in quite a while... Thank you, all!"*

Mary Hogan Preschool: Providing start-up equipment for an outdoor nature learning lab (built by Hannaford Career Center). *"This is the best news I've heard all week!! Thank you so much! We love exploring our outdoor environment and this will allow us a space for investigating, discovery, and discussion!!"*

Quarry Hill School: Purchasing a coop, a feeder and a water drinker for 2-3 laying hens, to be cared for by the preschoolers. *"Wohoo! This is great news and we are so excited and grateful! Thank you so much for considering and honoring our unique request."*

Ripton Elementary: Purchasing 8 pairs of binoculars for local bird study. *"Thank you for the fabulous news. I appreciate the generosity of OCAS for providing these funds to support students in ACSD."*

Salisbury Community: Providing cross country rentals and lessons at the Rikert Outdoor Center, followed by ski explorations in the woods. *"Awesome News! Thank you so much for continuing to support my efforts to make my students little naturalists! I hope that it will be the favorite thing my class did all year!"* 🐾

Good News!

2024 OCAS Scholarship Announced

We are very pleased to announce the winner of the OCAS \$1000 scholarship to the Hog Island Audubon Camp for summer 2024. She is Camie Thompson, who teaches for Vergennes Union High School at Willowell Foundation's Walden Project. Camie will be attending the camp session entitled "Sharing Nature: An Educator's Week." Have a spectacular Hog Island experience along the coast of Maine, Camie! 🐾

OCAS Calendar of Events February – May 2024

FEBRUARY 16-19, 2024 27TH ANNUAL GREAT BACKYARD BIRD COUNT. *See related article.*

MARCH 15 TO APRIL 15, 2024 SALAMANDER ESCORTS. *See related article.* Email kinglet@together.net to sign up, even if you participated previously.

CABIN FEVER LECTURE SERIES AT THE ILSLEY PUBLIC LIBRARY ALL PROGRAMS AT 7 PM

Feb. 8 – *The Snakes of Vermont*

Herpetologist Jim Andrews will talk about the snakes that live in Vermont and why they are your friends.

Mar. 14 – *Mosquitoes Suck!*

Craig Zondag from the Lemon Fair Insect Control District will tell us about mosquito biology and what makes a good year for them and a bad year for us.

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, February 10, 8–10 AM

Saturday, March 9, 8–10 AM

Saturday, April 13, 7–9 AM (Note earlier start time.)

Hog Island Storm Update

By Carol Ramsayer

Those of us who have been to Hog Island Audubon Camp were shocked to hear of damage caused by back-to-back storms that pounded the Maine coast the first week in January. Winds were wild in Addison County, but along the coast they combined with record high tides and storm surge. The mainland boathouse was lifted off its foundation, and a walkway washed up onto the rocky beach. On Hog Island itself, the Queen Mary, the historic nature lab and museum, was spared. That was only because 2 years ago \$300,000 was spent to raise the building 3 feet in anticipation of just such a climate change-driven event. Other repairs and extensive tree clean-up will be needed. Volunteers have lined up to donate their time and funds to assure that the camp will be ready to open on schedule in June. We are grateful for their efforts! If you wish, donations can be made here: <https://fohi.org/support/>. 🐾

Winter Rains

By Barry King

*In winter, when the dismal rain
Comes down in slanting lines,
And Wind, that grand old harper, smote
His thunder-harp of pines.*

Alexander Smith,
Scottish poet 1829-1867

Alexander Smith's words aptly describe what happened in Addison County in mid-January. Scores of trees were laid waste, either broken off by the wind or tipped over, roots and all, after the soaking rains first loosened the soils. Power lines, buildings and other infrastructure were damaged. You know. You were there or saw the pictures.

Those winter rains, predicted to be more frequent and copious as the climate warms, have other, more insidious effects. One is the long-term impact on the Northern Hardwood Forest and thus on the wildlife it supports. This natural community, dominated by Sugar Maple, American Beech and Yellow Birch, is Vermont's most abundant forest. Although not common within the Champlain Valley itself, it is the main forest type below 2700' throughout the state. This forest is threatened by increasingly warm winters with rain instead of snow.

Scientists from UVM and the US Forest Service's Northern Research Station studied tree ring data from Beech, Yellow Birch, Sugar Maple as well as Red Maple to see how past climate conditions affected tree growth. They compared moisture, temperature and pollution data with tree ring growth to predict how these species will respond to the evolving changes in our climate. Their analysis showed that all four species grew better with increased moisture during the growing season but the change in the winter moisture regimen from snow to rain was detrimental, except perhaps to Red Maple. The other three species are adapted to having a snowpack's insulation keep their roots from freezing. The roots store sugars which the trees use for growing in the spring so if roots are damaged, the trees won't thrive. The researchers concluded that while pollution had little impact on tree growth and increased temperatures had some adverse effects, it was the loss of a consistent winter snowpack that had the most significant negative consequences. They are concerned that the Northern Hardwood Forest will be increasingly vulnerable to the predicted climate changes ahead.

If this iconic Vermont forest community declines, so too will many of the native birds and other wildlife that depend on its large, unfragmented tracts for habitat. Many of the bird species dependent on Northern Hardwood Forests are already in decline — species such as Scarlet Tanager, Wood Thrush, Canada Warbler, and Veery. Their future may be as bleak as this day of January rain, although as I finish this article from my perch in Ripton, the rain has stopped, there is no wind, and I can see sun on the Adirondacks. 🐾

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



Otter Tracks

Otter Creek Audubon Society

PO Box 938

Middlebury, VT 05753