



Bird Notes

From Northeast Kingdom Audubon
1302 Main Street, Saint Johnsbury, Vermont 05819

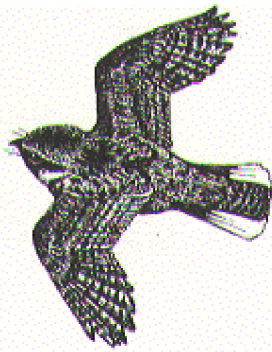
For Immediate Release

Moonlight in Vermont

With all due respect to the New Hampshire readers, this well-known song connects us not to owls, but to a grassland bird, the warbling meadowlark. Despite the name, it is really not a lark at all, but rather a member of the oriole and blackbird family. And warbling is not exactly what the bird sounds like, more of a whistling sound. The songwriters created a very romantic setting with sycamores and pennies in a stream, why not a little poetic license with a 'warbling meadowlark'? By this weekend's full moon, perhaps we will all have seen the eastern meadowlark in some field or pasture.



To distinguish the meadowlark from the other grassland residents, this medium-sized, stocky songbird shows a short tail, bright yellow chest, throat and belly, and dominant black "V" across the chest. The brown and white streaking all down the back help to hide it in the grasses. Females are somewhat smaller with similar markings. The unmistakable song is nothing short of plaintive, with clear whistles that slur and descend. Perhaps you have seen them just after mowing? Insects and seeds disturbed by the cutting are conveniently available to the birds feeding nestlings. Their low-to-the-ground nests are sometimes missed in the haying process, sometimes not. Two to three females may mate with one male to keep the population growing, but numbers show an overall decline in the species throughout their range (Eastern and Central North America). As we lose our fields and farmlands, so goes the meadowlark. Delaying haying or brush hogging, if possible, until August gives grassland birds an advantage and us an opportunity to hear that "warbling".



Courtesy of www.inhs.uiuc.edu

But what birds can we connect with other less popular phases of the moon? For example, the first quarter moon gives us an opportunity to listen for another bird on the decline in the region, the whip-poor-will. At dawn and dusk, it sings its name loudly from high perches or spots with good sound projection (steep gravel banks, for example) when the moon is above the horizon and at least 50% illuminated. Due to the whip-poor-will's reliance on moonlight, its breeding cycle is synchronized with the lunar cycle. Whip-poor-wills lay their eggs so that they hatch as the moon is waxing. In this way, they have the advantage of maximum moonlight while feeding their growing young. Vermont Breeding Bird Atlasers will be hard at their moonlight work again during this final year of the 5-year atlas. Look and listen for these beneficial insect-eaters near open woodlands with well-spaced trees and low canopy. If you have these specialized birds in your area, contact Rosalind Renfrew, the VBBA coordinator at 802-457-1053 X 127, or email: rrenfrew@vinsweb.org

Happy Moonlight Birding!

Carolyn E. Boardman is a board member of NEK Audubon living in Brownington, Vermont. NEK Audubon is one of 8 chapters of Audubon Vermont and part of the National Audubon Society. NEK Audubon is a non -profit organization that encourages people's enjoyment of birds, wildlife and natural habitats through field trips, programs and publications. For more information about meetings, field trips and special events visit www.nekaudubon.org. Art work by Robin Rothman.