



NORTHEAST KINGDOM AUDUBON

A Chapter Of The National Audubon Society

Winter 2005/2006

The mission of Northeast Kingdom Audubon is to foster the stewardship and enjoyment of birds, other wildlife and natural habitats.

Notes from the President

A whirl of wings startled me as a bird exploded from nearly under my feet as I walked a wood road in early November. A ruffed grouse was my first thought, but I quickly noted that this was a different sound—a familiar high-pitched wing noise. With a glance I saw the fleeting bird's long bill angling downward as it flew up—a woodcock!

The American woodcock (*Scolopax minor*) inhabits moist woodlands, abandoned fields and alder bottomlands. This well camouflaged, football-sized shore bird eats its own weight each day in earthworms and other soil invertebrates, which it locates by foot stomping. Tactile sensors in the long bill tip enable the bird to zero in on its prey. Because a woodcock's large eyes are located near the back/top of his head, they stay dirt free and allow him to watch the rear as he probes deeply into the soil.

In the scrubby old pasture below my house, I have been treated to the marvelous sounds of the male woodcock's display for years. As dusk slips into night on late spring evenings, I first hear a simple nasal "peent ... peent ... peent." A few days later the peents are followed by an incredible series of high-pitched twitterings and then chirpings as the woodcock spirals up and then zig-zags down on this "lek," his mating territory. After mating, the male leaves that female and goes on to mate with others while the female lays her eggs in a shallow scrape on the ground about a hundred yards away. A series of poke holes may indicate a feeding area.

Surveys indicate there may be only half as many American woodcocks today as there were in 1968. This decline is mainly due to loss of suitable habitat on both its breeding grounds here in the north and on its wintering grounds in the southern United States—a fate that we know many other species are experiencing as well. Partners-in-Flight has designated the American woodcock "A Species of Concern" and there are some initiatives to manage public lands for this species' benefit. In all

land and water-use decisions, we must strive to make the creation and conservation of wildlife habitat a top priority.



2005 Field Trips Recap

During the past year NEK Audubon offered 15 different field trips to a variety of locations throughout Vermont. We also visited Massachusetts, New Hampshire and Maine on coastal treks. When we add in our Birdathon and Christmas Bird Count it made for an opportunity to see almost 180 different species in a single year!

From Common Redpolls in January to Horned Grebes in October, and almost every month in between, we saw an amazing variety of birds. We found Gray Jays in the Victory Basin. We snuck up on a pair of Spruce Grouse as the male displayed in the Wenlock Management Area. We saw scores of Harlequin Ducks, all three Scoter species and Common Eider on a coastal trip led by Charlie Browne. We saw Rough-legged Hawks, Boreal Chickadees and Eastern Meadowlarks. We had White-crowned Sparrows and Field Sparrows, Black-backed Woodpeckers and Dowitchers. Wow, there was even a Black-tailed Gull on Lake Champlain, a state record.

In May, Charlie Browne led a series of field trips for those with vision or hearing impairments. We also offered a birding morning at two local high schools during May. In June, Airie Lindsey took young birders up Bald Mountain on a day trip. Jim Ashley took us over to Dead Creek in late June to see the Bald Eagles. And who could forget the 5,000 Snow Geese in October.

During the next year we hope to continue to offer the kind of trips you all are interested in joining. If you have a particular place (in or out of state) or a particular species you would like to try and locate let either Tom or Airie know.

Bird Chatter . . . an Ominous Shadow

I first noticed our resident Red-tailed Hawk as a fleeting shadow that swept over me one August day. I instinctively ducked as the shadow rushed by me and gained immediate sympathy for the mice, rats, squirrels, rabbits, reptiles and amphibians that fall prey to these skillful hunters, whose vise-like talons prove to be deadly weapons. Since that first encounter, I have been a spectator to its daily soarings above our woods and open fields. I will step outdoors and notice in a distant white pine a prominent large white cluster that turns out to be our perching hawk. Or I will look across to a branchless, dead tree and see it balancing on the very top of the tree, nearly invisible because of its brown colors that merge with the colors of the tree's trunk. From that vantage point, this daylight hunter can survey the pasture and focus its keen vision on the small rodents that forage among the grasses.

Red-tailed Hawks are a study in adaptation. They are native to the Nearctic region, but can be seen in deserts and the tropical forests of Central America. In Vermont, they live in deciduous forested areas, adjacent to fields and open areas, but they, also, call scrub deserts, plains, grasslands, New York City's Central Park, and Costa Rica's rainforests home. They have learned to coexist with humans, (who hasn't seen them along the interstates?) but, even though they are legally protected, they face the dangers of automobiles, towers, skyscrapers, utility wires and individuals, who mistakenly accuse them of posing an economic hardship to poultry. While their average life-span is two years, a wild Red-tailed has been known to live 21 years and one in captivity lived to be over 29 years old.

Among the most endearing qualities of these hawks are their mating and nesting practices. Many mate for life and their soaring, mating flights among the thermals are so graceful and beautiful. Mates can be seen perching shoulder to shoulder. Together, they build nests, in the crotches of tall trees or on ledges, which consist of large sticks lined with bark, corncobs, catkins and other softer materials. They often return to these same nests year after year. These nests become home to other birds as well, such as the house sparrow, where both species have learned to cohabitate in a common nest, supplied by the efforts of the red-taileds.

At around 3-years old, mating begins in April

and 2 to 4 dull white, brown-blotched eggs are laid. The incubation period is 28 to 34 days; and most of the incubating is done by the female while the male feeds the female and occasionally relieves her. The fledgling period is around 6 weeks and both parents care for the offspring. By 10 weeks, the young have reached the age of independence.

Red-taileds are among the largest of hawks, reaching lengths of 18 to 21 inches and a wing-span that can exceed 4 feet. The females are larger, which is a common trait among birds of prey. The red-taileds markings vary and the immature bird does not have the distinctive rust-colored tail of the two-year old. One consistent marking is a broad belly band. At least 14 subspecies have been identified, adding to the challenge of identifying them. They are often heard before they are seen since their elongated cry of "kee-eeee-arr" is so distinct.

These impressive birds have captured the imaginations and souls of many. Native Americans from the Ojibwa Nation believe the Red-tailed Hawk represents leadership, deliberation, and foresight. Through its flight it communicates with humans and with the great creator spirit. It awakens our vision and inspires us to a creative life purpose. Now, that is inspiring!

—Bill Marshall

Sources: 1. *Animal-Speak: The Spiritual and Magical Power of Creatures Great & Small*, Ted Andrews. 2. *University of Michigan's Museum of Zoology, Animal Diversity Web*, Delena Arnold and Tanya Dewey. 3. *Personal observations.*

NOTICE TO OUR READERS:

Last month, NEK Audubon's entire e-mail list was inadvertently deleted! It has been re-created, but there are undoubtedly errors. If you do not now receive monthly e-mail notices of NEK Audubon Events, but would like to . . . OR if you now receive these notices and want to be deleted from the list . . . please email me:

airie@kingcon.com

(Note: If you recently received the Agenda for our December Board Meeting, you are on the new list.)

Upcoming Events • December 2005 - February 2006

All activities and Board Meetings are open to the public. Events are listed in our newsletter and in local newspapers, but may be updated or change. **We appreciate a \$3/member or \$5/non-member donation and pre-registration for trips and programs.** Contact Airie Lindsay airie@kingcon.com (802) 748-8515 for details or to receive this calendar (and updates) via email.

Monday, December 5: Informational and Planning Meeting 4:30 – 6 p.m. Fairbanks Museum Classroom. Open to all.

Saturday, December 10: Lake Memphremagog, search for remaining waterfowl. Meet at 7 a.m. at White's supermarket parking lot Lyndonville next to Agway. Register by calling Tom Berriman at 626-9071 or email thomas.barriman@verizon.net

Monday, January 2: Informational and Planning Meeting 4:30 – 6 p.m. Fairbanks Museum Classroom. Open to all.

Saturday, January 28: Plum Island National Refuge in winter. Meet at Exit 44 Int. 93 welcome center at 6 a.m. Register by calling Tom Berriman at 626-9071 or email thomas.barriman@verizon.net

Monday, February 6: Informational and Planning Meeting; 4:30 – 6 p.m. Fairbanks Museum Classroom. Open to all.

Saturday, February 18: Snowshoe bird walk in the Victory Basin. Meet at Damon's Crossing on the Victory road at 8 a.m. Register by calling Tom Berriman at 626-9071 or email thomas.barriman@verizon.net

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ANNUAL CHAPTER EVENTS

Christmas Bird Count: January 1
Camp Scholarship Awards: early March
BIRDATHON: late May
Annual Meeting: last Sunday in July
Campers' Presentation Potluck: first Sunday
in November
Newsletter: April, September and December

For Upcoming Events Calendars via email:
contact airie@kingcon.com (748-8515)