

Northern New York Audubon

Serving the Adirondack, Champlain, St. Lawrence Region of New York State

Mission: To conserve and restore natural ecosystems in the Adirondacks, focusing on birds, other wildlife, and their habitats for the benefit of humanity and the Earth's biological diversity.

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Audubon's 115th Christmas Bird Count

How Christmas Bird Counts Help Protect Species and Their Habitat

The data collected by observers over the past century allow researchers, conservation biologists, and other interested individuals to study the long term health and status of bird populations across North America. When combined with other surveys, such as the Breeding Bird Survey, it provides a picture of how the continent's bird populations have changed in time and space over the past hundred years.

The long term perspective made possible by the Christmas Bird Count is vital for conservationists. It informs strategies to protect birds and their habitat and helps identify environmental issues with implications for people as well. For example, local trends in bird populations can indicate habitat fragmentation or signal an immediate environmental threat, such as groundwater contamination or poisoning from improper use of pesticides.

In the 1980s CBC data documented the decline of wintering populations of the American black duck, after which conservation measures were put into effect to reduce hunting pressure on this species. More recently, in 2009, the data were instrumental in *Audubon's Birds & Climate Change* analysis, which documented range shifts of bird species over time. Also in 2009, CBC data were instrumental in the collaborative report by the North American Bird Conservation Initiative, U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service *State of the Birds 2009*. The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) has included Audubon's climate change work from CBC data as one of the twenty-six indicators of climate change in their 2012 report.

In 2007, CBC data were instrumental in the development of two Audubon State of the Birds Reports: *Common Birds in Decline*, which revealed that some of America's most beloved and familiar birds have taken a nosedive over the past forty years, and *WatchList 2007*, which identified 178 rarer species in the continental U.S. and 39 in Hawaii that are imperiled.

These three reports helped scientists and policy makers to identify threats to birds and habitat, and to promote broad awareness of the need to address them.

See page 3 for the CBCs in the NNYA area.

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Gray Jay JT

NNYA

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Northern New York Audubon, Inc.
 A chapter of National Audubon Society
 serving the Adirondack, Champlain and
 St. Lawrence regions of northern New
 York, including Clinton, Essex, Franklin,
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Audubon's 18th Annual Great Backyard Bird Count

February 13th-16th

The Great Backyard Bird Count (GBBC) is an annual four-day event that engages bird watchers of all ages in counting birds to create a real-time snapshot of bird populations. Participants are asked to count birds for as little as 15 minutes (or as long as they wish) on one or more days of the event and report their sightings online at www.birdcount.org. Anyone can take part in the Great Backyard Bird Count, from beginning bird watchers to experts, and you can now participate from anywhere in the world!

It's free, fun and easy. Each checklist submitted during the GBBC helps researchers at the Cornell Lab of Ornithology and the National Audubon Society learn more about how birds are doing, and how to protect them and the environment we share. Last year, participants turned in more than 144,000 online checklists, creating the world's largest instantaneous snapshot of bird populations ever recorded.

Please visit the official website at www.birdcount.org for more information and be sure to check out the educational and promotional resources.

This count is so fun because anyone can take part—we all learn and watch birds together—whether you are an expert, novice or feeder watcher. I like to invite new birders to join me and share the experience. Get involved, invite your friends, and see how your favorite spot stacks up, says Gary Langham, Chief Scientist, National Audubon Society.

Bird populations are always shifting and changing. For example, 2014 GBBC data highlighted a large irruption of Snowy Owls across the northeastern, mid-Atlantic and Great Lakes areas of the United States. The data also showed the effects that the polar vortex had on bird movement around the country. For more on the results of the 2014 GBBC, take a look at the *Halftime Report* and be sure to check out some of the images in the *2014 GBBC Photo Contest Gallery*.

On the www.birdcount.org website, participants can explore real-time maps and charts that show what others are reporting during and after the count. All participants are entered in a drawing for prizes that include bird feeders, binoculars, books, CDs and many other great products.

By looking at the real-time picture of which birds are being reported where, participants can get an extremely vivid and accurate idea of bird populations all across the continent and the world.

Those interested can find more information by visiting www.birdcount.org. For questions and comments, please contact the Cornell Lab of Ornithology or the National Audubon Society at:
(800) 843-2473

Audubon's 115th Annual Christmas Bird Count

Ferrisburgh (VT/NY) CBC

Saturday, December 20th. The Ferrisburgh count circle includes a swath of Lake Champlain shoreline as far west as Route 22. For information contact John & Pat Thaxton: JPTthax5317@gmail.com or 518.576.4232.

Plattsburgh (NY) CBC

Sunday, December 14th. The count circle is centered on Route 9 just south of the entrance to the former Plattsburgh Air Base. As the participants in this count do not meet before dispersing to their territories, to arrange for a territory contact Michael B. Burgess @ (518) 564-5277 or michael.b.burgess@plattsburgh.edu

Elizabethtown (NY) CBC

Sunday, December 21st. If you are interested in participating in this year's count, please contact Charlotte Demers at: c-demers@frontiernet.net or (518) 582-2157. There will be a festive count dinner at a location to be announced

Potsdam—Canton (NY) CBC

TBA. This will be the 6th consecutive, and the second registered and official, Potsdam—Canton CBC. Call Jeff Bolsinger: (315) 854-0852; or email: jsbolsinger@yahoo.com.

Massena, N.Y.-Cornwall, ON CBC

Saturday, December 27th. Join us for the 43rd annual Massena portion of the Massena-Cornwall CBC on December 27th. A little more than half of the circle is on the US side of the border. We look forward to a festive count dinner in Massena afterwards. Call Eileen Wheeler at 315-386-2482 or email: eiwheeler@yahoo.com.

Saranac Lake (NY) CBC

Sunday, January 4th. Interested potential participants should email or call Larry Master, lawrencemaster@gmail.com (518) 645-1545 to indicate their availability to participate in this year's count. Past participants should indicate your willingness to cover the same territory they have covered in the past. Shortly before count day, I will email a list of territories and maps based on responses to this email and telephone conversations. This year the count compilation dinner and festivities will again be at our house at Intervale Lowlands in Lake Placid (www.intervalelowlands.org). Directions are online at <http://intervalelowlands.org/30-2/directions-visitaton/>.

Vice President's Message

There are some smudges on the glass from faces peering out, looking at The Wild Center's regular visitor these past few weeks. A wonky-looking great blue heron has been tucking in a nook along our Greenleaf Pond, sheltered in a corner where the pool meets the building. This preferred spot happens to be flush with an outdoor exhibit pool housing bullhead, small-mouth bass, pike and other smaller fish. While we're not sure if part of the appeal is proximity to deceptively "easy" prey, our team is sure that the school groups and general visitors are enjoying every minute of this wild encounter.

In my profession, I have many opportunities to foster wonder and awe in our visitors using our amazing education animals like skunks, barred owls and North American river otters. Most people just don't get the chance to see these animals up close, and it is thrilling to see them from just a few feet away. While these experiences can be compelling, thought provoking and impactful, observing an animal in the wild is just way beyond compare. You've stumbled upon them or tracked their song or footprints, or maybe they've landed just outside your window. But suddenly there they are, in the world with you. And you get to be a part of it.

I'm sure that you know exactly what I'm talking about, but not everyone gets to have these experiences. I do love these personal connections I have with nature, but what I love even more is being able to open that door for others. When we help forge these connections, we build recognition of all that is in our six million acre backyard, and hopefully spark a feeling of responsibility and stewardship. So head outside, walk in the woods. And bring along some friends.

Enjoy the beautiful beginnings of our Adirondack winter.

—Kendra Ormerod, Vice President



The Joseph and Joan Cullman Conservation Foundation 2014 Grant

- **The Joseph and Joan Cullman Conservation Foundation/Northern New York Audubon Avian Outreach Award (\$2,500)** partially underwrote the salary of an intern who continues to assist with the research and education effort of *Biodiversity Research Institute's Adirondack Center for Loon Conservation*, which continues to serve as a vital advocate for the preservation and protection of the Common Loon and its aquatic habitats in and around New York's Adirondack Park. The intern revised and expanded ACLC's elementary school *Loon Scientist's Program* curriculum, coordinated the *Second Annual Adirondack Loon Celebration* in Saranac Lake, analyzed nest camera images, long-term productivity and nesting platform datasets and coordinated and managed the *Fishing Line Recycling Program* throughout the park. The intern will work on these and other projects until Spring, 2015, at which juncture ACLC will submit a final report summarizing the intern's accomplishments in 2014-2015.
- **The Joseph and Joan Cullman Conservation Foundation/Northern New York Audubon Boreal Studies Award (\$2,190)** underwrote completely the costs of a research project designed to evaluate the impact of human generated noise on Adirondack boreal wetland birds. Samouel J. Begin, a Master's candidate at SUNY ESF, identified 21 boreal lowland wetland study sites where he deployed *Wildlife Acoustics SM2+* digital recorders, 3 at a time at 7 different sites, and programmed them to record soundscapes for 55 hours, from 4:00 a.m. to 10:00 a.m., during the course of 3 days, from May through June. He logged more than 20 days and 200 hours in the field, producing a total of 2,310 hours of recorded boreal soundscapes. He placed some recorders close to roads and human infrastructures and some in increasingly remote areas, suspecting different populations in both quantity and diversity of species, and plans to analyze his data and calculate the ratio of animal noise to anthropogenic noise at each site. His recorders captured the sounds of more than 35 species of bird, as well as, among other species, spring peepers, American toads, coyotes, buzzing insects, red squirrels and "what sounds like a black bear sniffing the recorder."
- **The Joseph and Joan Cullman Conservation Foundation/Northern New York Audubon Boreal and Montane Studies Award (\$2,000)** underwrote the salary and travel expenses of an intern, Yale student Madeleine Rubenstein, at the Wildlife Conservation Society. Profoundly interested in climate change research, Ms. Rubenstein undertook a comprehensive review of documented cases of phenological (the scientific study of periodic biological phenomena—i.e., flowering, breeding, vegetation, migration—in relation to climate) mismatches in songbird and woodpecker communities inhabiting northern forest landscapes and the life history characteristics of species in which such mismatches have been demonstrated. She investigated as well potential data sources to document whether boreal forest bird arrival dates have advanced in the Adirondacks, investigated potential data sources to document phenological changes in food resources for boreal bird species in the Adirondacks and analyzed these data to compare the timing of arriving/breeding migratory bird species and peak food availability. She also participated in field activities at Intervale Lowlands Preserve in Lake Placid and other locations in the Adirondacks in order to gain experience with research methods WCS uses to study songbird communities.

- **The Joseph and Joan Cullman Conservation Foundation/Northern New York Audubon Great Adirondack Birding Celebration Annual Lecture/Workshop (\$2,000)** underwrote travel expenses and the honorarium for this year's guest lecturer and workshop leader, Noah Strycker, Associate Editor of *Birding* magazine and author of the recently published and widely praised *The Thing with Feathers: The Surprising Lives of Birds and What They Reveal about Being Human*. A genuine wunderkind, Mr. Strycker, though scarcely into his thirties, has already piled up an extremely impressive list of publications and accomplishments, and he proved an amazingly informative, personable, warm and funny speaker, delivering a lecture that had the audience alternately bursting into laughter and gasping at the direness of certain bird population trends. Mr. Strycker co-led two field trips, one to Madawaska Preserve and one up Whiteface Mountain to look for Bicknell's thrushes and other boreal birds, and delivered during each something of a field workshop, complete with everything from novel identification facts and techniques to descriptions of where species tend to appear in a particular environment, in the case of Bicknell's thrush noting that the species almost always gets sighted within six feet of the forest floor. Quite a few people commented on Mr. Strycker maturity and the seemingly effortless ease with which he by turns informed, entertained and charmed attendees at the Celebration.
- **The Joseph and Joan Cullman Conservation Foundation/Northern New York Audubon Endangered Species Research Award (\$1,000)** underwrote boreal bird surveys and expanded habitat assessments of a large boreal peatland complex at Shingle Shanty Preserve and Research Station, which has 67 boreal bird point locations; researchers will supplement these with 20 intensive vegetative assessment plots and locations within 50 meters of a subset of the bird point locations, describing forest structure by quantifying species composition and stem density of woody plants on the ground, shrub and overstory strata, basal area of overstory and coarse woody debris volume in 25 square meter plots. The work, on permanently marked sites for continued long-term monitoring, will include quantifying environmental variables such as pH, conductivity, peat-depth and soil class, etc.
- **The Joseph and Joan Cullman Conservation Foundation/Northern New York Audubon Public Health Award (\$800)** underwrote a study of the ecology of range limits for Lyme disease in the Adirondacks undertaken by the *Center for Adirondack Biodiversity* at Paul Smiths College in consultation with the *New York State Department of Health* and the *Trudeau Institute*. Suspecting that climate change will facilitate the movement of ticks into the Adirondacks, and that migratory birds likely transport them here from warmer habitats, the researchers used the most sensitive way to detect the Lyme disease bacteria (*Borrelia burgdorferi*) by sampling the reservoir species of small mammals that carry the ticks. The first phase of the work involved deploying 200-250 Sherman traps at each of five sites, two historically endemic ones (Queensbury and Albany) and three in representative Adirondack habitats (Schroon Lake, Black Brook and Paul Smiths). The team captured seventy-five small mammals and extracted total genomic DNA from tick and mammal samples using the *DNeasy Blood and Tissue Kit*TM. The trapping will continue through the Fall of 2014; in 2015-2016 the researchers will continue to collect and sample ticks and their mammal hosts, create species distribution models and formulate predictions.
- **The Joseph and Joan Cullman Conservation Foundation/Northern New York Audubon Hamilton County Boreal Birding Festival 2014 Annual Lecture (\$500)** underwrote the honorarium for this year's speaker, Joan Collins, who delivered a lavishly illustrated, lively talk about Adirondack boreal bird species. The photos and videos, many of which Joan took herself, included stunning close-ups of several species and an amazing video of the mating ritual of the common goldeneye duck, which involves an almost slapstick bout of head jerking that had the audience laughing heartily out loud. Joan supplemented her audio/visual presentation with her infectious enthusiasm and encyclopedic knowledge of Adirondack boreal bird species.

“Get Rusty” this spring to save a declining blackbird!

Rusty Blackbird Spring Migration Blitz: Calling All Birders!

Why? Over the past half-century, the historically abundant Rusty Blackbird has endured one of the steepest population declines ever documented among North American landbirds. Within the last 15 years, scientists have learned more about this bird’s breeding and wintering ecology, and this knowledge allows us to target conservation initiatives during these phases of this bird’s annual cycle. However, as with many migratory species, we know very little about Rusty Blackbird ecology, distribution, and habitat use during migration. Are there hot spots where many individuals congregate? Are there stopover areas that are used predictably each year, and are these locations protected? The Rusty Blackbird Spring Migration Blitz will address these and other questions to help focus future research and conservation of one of North America’s most vulnerable blackbirds. We’re recruiting an army of birders to participate in this effort to help conserve this fascinating songbird. Will you accept our birding challenge?

Who? The International Rusty Blackbird Working Group, eBird, and the Vermont Center for Ecostudies are partnering with local organizations such as Northern New York Audubon to recruit volunteer observers from across the southeastern U.S., East Coast, Midwest, Alaska, and Canada.

What? Each participating state, province, and territory will have a 3-8 week target window during which birders will search for Rusty Blackbirds. Within this window, birders may explore favored birding haunts or newly identified areas that they suspect may harbor Rusty Blackbirds. We’ll provide some guidance on potential habitats to explore, but birders should feel free to get creative – and ambitious! – with their searching.

When? Spring 2014 kicks off the first year of this three-year Spring Migration Blitz; the Blitz window will span early March through mid-June, with more specific timeframes identified for each state or province to account for the northward migratory progression.

Where? Get ready for a continent-wide event! The Spring Blitz will span the Rusty Blackbird’s entire spring migration range, from the wintering grounds in the southeastern United States, up the East Coast and through the Midwest to Canada and Alaska.

How do I get involved? Easy! If you’d like to contribute data to the Spring Migration Blitz effort, bird as you normally do, focusing on potential Rusty Blackbird habitat during the Blitz time frame established for your region. You can seek out the best-known places for Rusty sightings or explore uncharted territory. Make sure to report ALL of your observations to eBird – we want to know both where you saw these

birds and where you didn’t. Check out the newly revamped website of the International Rusty Blackbird Working Group (<http://rustyblackbird.org/outreach/migration-blitz/>) for information about identification, vocalizations, habitat preferences, and types of data to collect to support this initiative. Also, a coordinator for Northern New York State is needed, and if you would like to volunteer for this important position please contact Spring Migration Blitz Coordinator Judith Scarl (jscarl@vtecostudies.org) to get involved in the broader Blitz initiative!

Thanks for “Getting Rusty” with us this spring!

Like us on Facebook:

(<https://www.facebook.com/rustyblackbirdspringblitz>) to follow up-to-the minute information about our Blitz, and happy birding!

**The International Rusty Blackbird Working
Group
Cornell Lab of Ornithology
Vermont Center for Ecostudies
Northern New York Audubon**



Red-winged Blackbird John Thaxton



Final Notice

This is Your Last Paper Copy of the Northern New York Audubon Newsletter

At its July meeting the NNYA Board of Directors voted to **transition to *electronic-only* newsletters for the members of National Audubon Society who do not contribute directly to NNYA.** This means the following:

- National Audubon Society members at large who do not contribute directly to Northern New York Audubon *will no longer receive the Northern New York Audubon Newsletter unless they provide us with an email address*
- *Members of Northern New York Audubon have the option of receiving a paper or electronic copy—* simply indicate which version of the newsletter you want when you respond to the Annual Appeal Letter, or by emailing Pat Thaxton, NNYA Membership Chair, at: jpthax5317@aol.com

This transition will begin with the March-May 2015 Northern New York Audubon Newsletter. In other words, this change will not take effect until March, 2015.

What you Need to Do

- If you are a member of Northern New York Audubon you do not need to do anything; you will continue to receive your paper or electronic copy of the newsletter as usual. You can, at any point, switch from a paper to an electronic newsletter, or vice versa, if you want.
If you are a member of National Audubon Society who has not joined Northern New York Audubon you need to supply us with an email address if you want to continue to receive the Northern New York Audubon Newsletter.

How to Supply Your Email Address

By Mail: Send your email address to:

Pat Thaxton

NNYA Membership Chair

PO Box 488

Keene Valley, NY 12943-0488

By Email: Send your email address to:

jpthax5317@aol.com

Northern New York Audubon Does Not Share Member Email Addresses With Anyone!

Audubon New York and National Audubon Society both recommend transitioning to electronic newsletters, which take a considerable amount of pressure off of both natural and financial resources. Printing and mailing paper newsletters is by far the biggest expense that NNYA incurs during the course of a year, and the board of directors feels strongly that reallocating its financial resources from printing and postage to educational and conservation initiatives is very much in keeping with the spirit of Audubon.

Editor's Note

The last painting my brother did before he died, a dreamy, billowy, abstract cloudscape executed in the palest possible shades of green and blue and pink and yellow, four feet by five, hangs on the wall immediately left of our bed and at certain times of the year, like now, functions as a chiaroscuro palimpsest of branch and twig and bird shadows, sometimes rocking slowly in a gentle breeze and at others smudging wildly in a blur of shadows, once in a while, as this morning, performing like a textbook of still shadows bobbing only from the weight of birds, a magic lantern, if you will, with sufficient detail for me to identify the birds landing on the branch immediately next to the copper bird feeder, indeed on the feeder itself—the enormous blue jays disturbing the whole universe with their upside down antics and shadow boxings on the painting, the chickadees blowing in and out in a heartbeat and the goldfinches planting themselves for an extended feeding session, suddenly to blast away when the jay zooms in again, hanging upside down and flapping wildly until it fills its crop and flies a few feet to a convenient branch to break open the sunflower seeds and blow off into the woods, at which point the chickadees renew their flash-in-the-pan sorties and goldfinches settle in for some leisurely feeding, looking, on my brother's painting, like the shadow of a streetlamp incapable of shedding light, or a shadowy cylinder festooned with a shimmering border.

When I think about projects like the Christmas Bird Counts and the Great Backyard Bird Count I can't help but think about the fragility of life, of things that die long before they should, like my brother, a physician who died at age thirty-five of AIDS, and I sigh at how many species seem far more in peril than we imagine, far more likely to take a steep dive while we wonder about something else, something perhaps almost as compelling, something interesting but nevertheless distracting, something that can wait.

The sort of data that the Audubon Christmas Bird Counts and the Great Backyard Bird Count accumulate and disseminate to millions of people can focus our attention on compelling bird population trends and, one hopes, focus our collective efforts on species teetering on the brink, like the rusty blackbird or the golden-winged warbler or the American black duck, not to mention the Bicknell's thrush.

I can't imagine the environmental landscape without the input of Citizen Scientists, those intrepid Yeomen/women who trudge out in the snow and rain and bone-chilling cold to discover that species unheard of on the Elizabethtown Christmas Bird Count twenty years ago have shown up every year since 2005, such as Carolina wren. These sorts of data don't come out of University Labs: They come out of intrepid birders, from the experienced to the clueless, who schlep through cold and snow and clouds of black flies, their binoculars heavy on their necks, and keep vital records of bird species.

I remember my brother saying, in a tremulous voice, "Johnny, please keep loving the birds when I'm gone."

—**John Thaxton**