

High Peaks Audubon

Adirondack-Champlain 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 107th Annual Christmas Bird Count

Although the weather and the species sighted varied wildly on the twenty Christmas Bird Counts I've participated in, I've experienced the exact same feeling on every one of them, a nagging, somewhat guilty suspicion that I must be breaking some fundamental law of existence by having so much fun while making an important contribution to science. Could calling in a Gray-phase Screech owl as four woodpeckers converged on a birch immediately next to me possibly qualify as work? Did seeing the first Empidonax flycatcher ever sighted on the Ferrisburgh, Vermont CBC amount to a contribution to science? Or how's about the first Ruby-crowned kinglet on the Elizabethtown CBC?

On the topic of guilty pleasures, I daresay that CBCs qualify as the Mobius strip of fun and science, as a great way to spend a day birding even as you gather invaluable data for the longest-running database in ornithology. Begun in 1900 by Frank Chapman and twenty-six other conservationists, the first CBC represented a reaction to the time-honored Christmas tradition of taking to the field to see how many birds you could shoot by proposing taking to the field to see how many birds you could count. It probably sounded quaint and fairly silly to many people at the time, but the concept of the CBC got legs from the get go and hit the ground running.

In its first year participants collected data in twenty-five count circles in North America, last year data poured in from more than two thousand count circles, surveyed by more than fifty thousand volunteers. The collected results of the last one hundred-six CBCs are available online at: www.audubon.org/birds/cbc. Researchers have used this database to identify and verify large and small trends in migration patterns, population movements, habitat loss, climatic change, shifts in breeding and wintering ranges, threatened and endangered species and, well, the list goes on. The CBC database ranks as one of the most important resources in science, one hundred-six years of tens of millions of sightings.

Fifty years ago no one in our area saw a Common grackle or a Tufted titmouse on a CBC, last year several participants sighted both birds. Fifty years ago Common shrikes showed up on everyone's CBC, last year only a few people sighted one. Last year several species inured to wintering well south of here turned up on a count in our area (Empidonax flycatcher species, Ruby-crowned kinglet, Baltimore oriole) like postcards from the volcano of global warming.

All the CBCs in our area and elsewhere operate in pretty much the same fashion. A compiler who collects, arranges and transmits the data to Audubon assigns volunteers a territory within the count circle, a specific area with a diameter of fifteen miles. Participants either meet early in the morning to get a map denoting their territory, then disperse for the day, or make arrangements to get a map in advance and go straight to their territory. The

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Connery Pond

by John Thaxton

HPAS

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compiler tries to match inexperienced birders with experienced birders, and for reasons I haven't really figured out the three best birds I saw on CBCs were all pointed out to me by an inexperienced birder, who only knew the bird looked different. At the end of the day everyone meets and either goes to a restaurant or to someone's house for a count dinner or refreshments, after which the compiler asks if anyone has seen birds on a list that descends from "always seen" to "rarely seen."

I've found count dinners warm and friendly and full of talk and laughter. In a festive atmosphere, people share anecdotes about their sightings, and the coefficient of excitement intensifies as the compiler gets further down the list. Finally, the compiler asks if anyone saw anything else, anything never seen before on the count, at which point, now and again, someone holding a bird close to their chest reports a new species. I've heard collective gasps of disbelief and bursts of uproarious applause at such moments.

Do yourself and science a favor, have fun and make a valuable contribution to a vital ornithological database. Besides, what's wrong with a little guilt during the holiday season?

—John Thaxton



A Message From The President

One of the saddest days of the year for me is when the summer birds which nest in the woods by our house stop singing, especially the Hermit thrush. They stopped earlier than usual this year. It's always an exciting time when the bear is no longer a threat and the feeders can go up and bring other sounds of birds nearby again. I couldn't wait this year and on October 24th put up two of the sunflower feeders that we hang from high branches like bear bags. After two weeks, I didn't even have to refill them.

Pine siskins were singing in the yard but they were eating birch catkins, some of the abundant natural food in the North Country this year. Today, an American goldfinch was near the feeder, so we put up a thistle feeder, also hung from a high branch like a bear bag, and in no time had fourteen goldfinches at the feeders. It could be an exciting winter for feeder birds, and the pleasure one gets from feeding and observing them from the winter comfort of our homes can be enormous.

The information people gather at their feeders is also invaluable to several ongoing censuses throughout North America, including Project Feeder Watch (www.birds.cornell.edu/pfw or 1.800.843.2473) and the Great Backyard Bird Count (see article on page 3). So clean and fill your feeders and get ready to tally and report on what could be a very exciting winter.

Have fun and happy holidays.

—Pat Thaxton

10th Annual Great Backyard Bird Count February 16th-19th 2007

What started out as a modest, joint project of The Cornell Lab of Ornithology and the National Audubon Society, sponsored by Wild Birds Unlimited, burgeoned into a behemoth snapshot of North America's birdlife last year. Over 60,000 observers sighted more than 7.5 million individuals of 623 bird species; participation in the GBBC was "up 15 percent compared with last year and up a whopping 40 percent from two years ago."

A quick review of the data reveals some fascinating trends in bird populations, especially apropos of our warming climate. Tree swallows increased their wintering range from 11 states in 2001 to 20 states in 2006, the number of observers reporting Orange-crowned warblers rose by 55 percent and the number of birds by 94 percent, Pine warbler sightings are up 12 percent from last year with a 74 percent increase in individuals, Brown creeper reports were up 57 percent with a 53 percent increase in individual birds, a Black-throated blue warbler was hanging out in Connecticut and flocks of American robins in Washington State were so legion: "The noise was reported by one person as sounding like four or five big jet engines in need of lubrication because they screeched so much."

The GBBC snapshot of North American birdlife in February is becoming an increasingly valuable and accurate database, a resource that perfectly compliments Audubon's Christmas Bird Count data. In 2006 New York State participants submitted more checklists by far than any other state, and I feel we would do well to maintain that position of leadership. This is another easy way to make a valuable contribution to ornithology, without even leaving home.

- No Fee or registration required
- All ages and skill levels welcome
- Track results in real time online
- Count in your backyard, schoolyard, park, wildlife refuge
- Be a part of the network

Join with thousands of others to find out how many birds are being seen in your area and across the continent this winter. By participating in the Great Backyard Bird Count, you help document where birds are, and track changes in their numbers compared to previous years, helping scientists paint a picture of the state of birds this winter.

For more information, or to get started, go to:

<http://www.birdsource.org/gbbc/>

January Board Meeting

The next HPAS Board Meeting will be held at 1:00 p.m. on Saturday, January 27th at the Adirondack Ecological Center in Newcomb. The entrance to the center is located approximately a mile west of the Newcomb VIC on Route 28N. Contact Vice President Charlotte Demers (cdemers@esf.edu) for more information.

January & February Field Trips

Saturday, January 20, 2007 Ski Trip to Marcy Dam/ Avalanche Camp

Time: 10 a.m.

Description: Ski from South Meadow on the Marcy Dam Truck Road 3 miles to Marcy Dam and, conditions permitting, another mile to Avalanche Camp. A moderate ski, this trip will include beautiful views of Mt. Colden and Avalanche Pass from Marcy Dam, where hungry Black-Capped chickadees expect to be fed sunflower seeds and land on your hand to get them. From Marcy Dam, Avalanche Camp is a moderate uphill ski on the hiking trail, and if the snow is right, a wonderful, controllable, glide down. The trails are not groomed for skiing.

Bring: Appropriate layers of apparel for the weather and temperature, skis, water, lunch or snacks.

Meet: At South Meadow Parking Lot (left turn off Adirondack Loj Road to the end).

Leaders: HPAS members Pat & John Thaxton

Registration: Contact Pat & John Thaxton: (518) 576-4232; email: jpthax5317@aol.com

Saturday, February 24, 2007 Ski Trip to Santanoni Great Camp

Time: 11 a.m.

Description: A lovely, moderate-level ski to a storied destination, this ten-mile round-trip is a classic Adirondack winter journey to an historic Great Camp. The dirt road trail is not groomed for skiing.

Bring: Appropriate layers of apparel for the weather and temperature, skis, water, lunch or snacks.

Meet: At the parking lot for the Santanoni Great Camp off Route 28N in Newcomb.

Leaders: HPAS members Pat & John Thaxton

Registration: Contact Pat & John Thaxton: 518.576.4232; email: jpthax5317@aol.com

Christmas Bird Counts

Ferrisburgh (VT/NY) CBC

Saturday, December 16. The Ferrisburgh count circle includes a swath of Lake Champlain shoreline as far west as Route 22 and the Magic Triangle, as far south as Camp Dudley and as far north as Whallon Bay. The New York territory has an excellent variety of habitat and always increases the number of species observed on the count. Volunteers meet at the Westport Boat Launch at 7:30 a.m., bird the bay and the woods surrounding it and then have breakfast before dispersing for the day. Everyone meets again at the boat launch around 4:00 p.m. and gives their data to the coordinator. Most participants then take Essex Ferry to Charlotte and drive a short way to Vergennes, where the count dinner will take place at the home of Debbie Bushey. It's a well-organized, well-attended pot-luck dinner with a surplus of good cheer. This will be the 45th year of the count. Contact: Mike Winslow at (802) 877-6586 or mikekira@verizon.net

Plattsburgh (NY) CBC

Sunday, December 17. 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, contact Judy Heintz at (518) 563-5273 or heintzjf@northnet.org to arrange for a territory. Judy sends participants a map prior to the count day and stresses the value of feeder sightings, so call in your sightings if you live within seven and a half miles of the count circle center. At the end of the day participants drop off their lists at Judy's house, where she puts out light refreshments and has the computer ready to compile the initial count numbers. Feeder watchers usually call in their sightings on Sunday night.

Elizabethtown (NY) CBC

Saturday, December 23. The 34th annual Elizabethtown Christmas Bird Count will be held on Saturday, December 23rd, 2006. This count circle includes a mix of forest, field, and Adirondack wilderness area, hosting a range of species from Rough-legged hawk and Northern shrike to Common raven and Boreal chickadee. This year's count should be an intriguing one, as many species of conifer currently have a heavy cone crop. It has been many years since the count has had big numbers of winter finches, so this could be the year! For more information, please contact Matt Medler at (802)999-1438; etowncbc@yahoo.com. The count dinner will be held at the lovingly refurbished Deer's Head Inn at 5:00 p.m. (bar opens at 4:00).

Saranac Lake (NY) CBC

Saturday, December 30. This is the 51st year of this count! Meet Matt Medler at Howard Johnson's on Route 86 in Lake Placid at 7:00 a.m. sharp, or (preferably) contact the compiler, Larry Master (617) 285-9086; larry@masterimages.org and/or Matt Medler at (802) 999-1438 or etowncbc@yahoo.com ahead of time if you plan to participate. A festive count dinner will be held at a location TBD in Saranac Lake on Saturday evening, December 30, from 4:30 to 7. The key to seeing a lot of birds on this count is the number of observers both in the field and at feeders. So please take part, if only to report on birds visiting your backyard feeders.

The count is centered in Ray Brook and includes the villages of Lake Placid and Bloomingdale, as well as some nice boreal forest areas with resident Goshawks, Barred and Saw-whet owls, Black-backed and Three-toed woodpeckers, Gray jays, and Boreal chickadees. Over the 50 years of the count, a total of 94 species have been observed on the count (including 4 count week-only species). Some highlights of past counts have included Three-toed woodpecker (7 times), Great gray and Hawk owls, American bittern, Bohemian waxwing (1/4 of counts), Hoary redpoll (recently every other year), Red crossbill (1/3 of counts), White-winged crossbill (2/3 of counts), Pine grosbeak (2/3 of counts), and North American record numbers of several finch species. An enormous conifer seed crop portends many Purple finches and White-winged crossbills for this year's count!



photo by John Thaxton

Wickham Marsh Viewing Platform

Although at times it felt as though the project had been grinding along for decades, it's really only been a little more than two years since I started working with Audubon New York, the DEC and Haselton Lumber on a viewing platform for Wickham Marsh. It is now complete (on Lake Street at Lakeshore Road), except for a plaque we will make for a dedication ceremony in the spring and an educational kiosk, which the DEC will build and HPAS will finance thanks to an Audubon New York Mini-Grant.

The idea for the project came from Dr. Dana Rohleder, founder and owner of the NNYBirds list serve and former HPAS webmaster, who noted that the Vermont side of the Lake Champlain Birding Trail had more and nicer viewing platforms than the New York side. He suggested a platform at Wickham Marsh. When the HPAS board asked me to look into the possibility of arranging for a viewing platform, I called the DEC to inquire as to whether or not they would allow us to construct such a platform. After giving my spiel to half a dozen people at the DEC, each of whom listened politely before transferring me to someone else, I delivered my rap to Ed Reed, Director of Wildlife Management Areas, Region 5, who said nothing when I finished speaking.

“Hello?” I said, fairly loudly, expressing my frustration with gusto.

“Sorry,” Ed said, “I didn’t say anything because I’m stunned. I wanted to build a platform at Wickham Marsh, selected a site, have the design, took care of all the permitting and, at the eleventh hour, had the funding pulled. I’m almost positive I can supply the labor if you can supply the materials.”

After a frustrating year and a half of pursuing a way to fund the materials for the platform (calling, writing, applying for grants) I made a cold call to Sam Haselton, who listened patiently and said, simply,

“Send me a wish list.” Hey, you never know.

—John Thaxton

Lillian Stoner Award Winner

What I learned at the 2006 NYSOA Annual Meeting

As a burgeoning birder and ecology student at Plattsburgh State University, attending the NYSOA annual meeting in Oneonta this year was a great experience. The presentations were of high quality, the setting was nice, and the people were friendly. Here's a shakedown of two of the highlights:

The first evening's presentation was a stunning, feathery portfolio presented as a slideshow set to music by artist Jeff Nadler (who must be a very quiet guy in the woods). Included were photo after photo of crystal clear, close up shots of Adirondack birds. The few images of a beautiful Snowy owl Jeff admitted he captured just outside the park border, but no one, including me, seemed to mind. From misty Common loons to Bicknell's thrushes to Black-backed woodpeckers to various native neotropical migrants, the presentation provided a very pleasant way to spend an early evening, and a question and answer session at the end proved very informative.

After the second day's fun-filled field trips and papers session, we gathered for the cocktail reception and banquet. I received the Lillian Stoner award, which was indeed exciting, but the highlight of the night was surely the guest speaker, retired Cornell professor Donald Kroodsma, who gave a charismatic presentation on Raven Lite software. This is a software that enables the listener to view sonograms of individual bird songs, slow them down, and compare them. Slowing down a Winter wren's song many times, for example, enables one to thoroughly analyze tonal differences between single notes or phrases that would be undetectable to the human ear at their normally bubbly speed. It enables us to understand more fully how the *birds themselves* hear theirs and their neighbors' different songs, and it even shows patterns and tonal differences that can help us identify subspecies! In addition to explaining the potential of this software for evolutionary science, Kroodsma spoke enthusiastically about genuinely starting to listen to individual birds. For example, he walked us through some sonograms at high and then low speed, asking us to decide, among eight sonograms on the screen, which one we had heard. Thinking about the song and its individual parts really made me think about what I was hearing, and Kroodsma's demeanor really made me feel that it will be just as worthwhile to "leave the checklist at home" at times, and start to get to know individual birds, and through them their species, more fully.

Just to be in a room as part of a group of birders who are as avid and passionate as any, was a warming experience, and I and my two fellow student companions, Justin King and Carrienne Pershyn, all had an eye opening, good time. I thank Matt Medler and Pat Thaxton of HPAS for nominating me for the Lillian Stoner award, and giving me the impetus to go to NYSOA '06, John Thaxton who allowed me to write this piece and Dr. Kenneth Adams of PSU for getting me started in a noble hobby and perhaps career.

—Brian Glidden

2006 Camp Colby Essay Contest Winner Report

I would like to thank the Audubon Society for sponsoring me to go to Camp Colby in August of 2006. After I arrived at Camp Colby and checked in, I had to take a swimming test to make sure I was comfortable in the water and knew how to swim. I did know a few people there, but during my week stay I made many new friends. We slept in bunk houses with bunk beds. My bunk was the bottom. There were about three bunk houses of boys and three bunk houses of girls during my stay. I had a lot of fun. I was able to take a Hunter Safety Course. I had to study a lot, but it paid off in the end because I passed the test! At the end of the course, we were able to shoot at targets. That was a lot of fun. We took a day trip and hiked up Ampersand Mountain. What a beautiful day that was with a really clear view at the top. During the evenings, we sat around the campfire and sang songs. At the end of our stay, we all put on a play. I loved Camp Colby! It was a great experience.

—Tyler Freiman

Attention 12- to 17-year-olds

Spend a week at Camp Colby or Pack Forest next summer for free

HPAS announces its annual essay contest. Each year we sponsor two students to attend summer camp. This year we are sponsoring one camper at Camp Colby (ages 12 to 14) and one at Pack Forest (ages 15 to 17). Submit an essay of 250-300 words long about why you want to go to camp to:

**Ellen Rathbone, Education Chair
High Peaks Audubon Society
47 Sanford Lane
Newcomb, NY 12852**

One winner will be selected by 1 February 2007 to spend a week at Camp Colby near Saranac Lake and Pack Forest in Warrensburg. Parents or guardians need to provide transportation to and from camp.

Deadline: Essays must be postmarked by 31 December 2006

Be sure to include your name, address, age and telephone number.

For more information about the contest contact: Ellen Rathbone (518) 582-4198 or advicrathbone@yahoo.com

For more information about Camp Colby or Pack Forest, visit the DEC Youth Education Camp website:
www.dec.state.ny.us/website/education/edcamps/html

Faces in the Snow, Bushnell Falls photo by John Thaxton

Poetry Corner

The Snow Man

One must have a mind of winter
To regard the frost and the boughs
Of the pine trees crusted with snow;

And have been cold a long time
To behold the junipers shagged with
ice,
The spruces rough in the distant
glitter

Of the January sun; and not to think
Of any misery in the sound of the
wind,
In the sound of a few leaves,

Which is the sound of the land
Full of the same wind
That is blowing in the same bare
place

For the listener, who listens in the
snow,
And, nothing himself, beholds,
Nothing that is not there and the
nothing that is.

--Wallace Stevens



Editor's Note

When I talk about snow anymore I strain with all my might not to sound as though I were delivering a eulogy teetering on the brink of avalanching into a rant about global warming. As Francois Villon put it, circa 1461, no doubt anticipating melting glaciers, "Where are the snows of yesteryear?" Or of this year for that matter? My fellow HPAS board member Ellen Rathbone said in a post on NNYBirds that she saw a flock of Snow buntings, adding, questioningly, that it seemed strange to see them without snow, no?

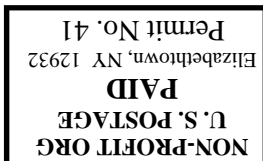
Sometimes you need a lot of imagination, and the state of the atmosphere of late seemed like a perfect opportunity to feature one of my favorite poems this issue, along with a photograph that always makes me think of it. When I hear the expression "wrap your mind around that" I immediately think of Wallace Stevens' "The Snow Man," which I've read scores of times but only "got" on a handful of occasions. It strikes me as a mind-bending, lyrical sort of Zen koan, or perhaps a cerebral snow cone. I saw the faces in the accompanying photograph only after getting the film developed and projecting the slide.

Owing to a sneaking suspicion that the personal computer is here to stay, I devoted large blocks of space to the two premiere citizen science birding projects—Audubon's 107th Christmas Bird Count and The Great Backyard Bird Count. Researchers have known for decades the value of the CBC database, and it seems to me that the GBBC is burgeoning rapidly and on the verge of achieving something of a database critical mass. In ten years the GBBC has produced a series of absolutely compelling snapshots of North America's birdlife over the course of a weekend, as well as a great deal of interactive fun.

Speaking of fun, I trust many readers were as pleased as I was with the results of the mid-term elections, which I imagine we all feel delivered a congress more inclined than recent ones to work on enhancing the integrity of the environment rather than despoiling it or selling or giving it away.

Have a happy and healthy holiday season, and hope for peace.

—John Thaxton



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