

# AUDUBON VERMONT

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## IMPACT REPORT



2020

 Audubon





Peregrine Falcon

## THANK YOU!

From Bennington to Newport, from the Connecticut River to Lake Champlain, with your help we have been working to protect birds and the places birds need to thrive through science, advocacy, education, and on-the-ground conservation programs. Together with Audubon Vermont, you are making an important impact as we join together across the state to protect our green hills and silver waters, so vital to our birds—and to our communities.

In this report, we highlight our recent and most notable accomplishments in protecting our forests and fields, connecting people of all ages to the outdoors, and providing a voice for birds and wildlife at the Vermont Statehouse.

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## A YEAR LIKE NO OTHER

Audubon Vermont is rising to meet the challenges of our time. In addition to encouraging people to connect with birds and nature virtually during the COVID-19 outbreak, we are leveraging digital tools to empower people to make their case for birds and the planet to legislators. We have also used this past year to catch up on deferred maintenance (come see our restored Education Barn!), as well as to plan for the future. As difficult as this past year has been for all of us, we are excited about the growing awareness among Vermonters of the importance of birds to our lives and communities.

Building on that growing awareness, we are committed to ensuring that our Audubon Vermont family of staff and members reflects and includes the people in our community—and that our work incorporates and centers community needs and voices. Audubon Vermont is searching for new ways to provide access to our programs, and to introduce more people to the joy of observing and protecting birds and nature, whether at the trails of the Green Mountain Audubon Center, your own backyard, or in the open spaces in your community. In so doing, we are broadening the base of support for our work and becoming more effective in the pursuit of our mission.

Recent events across the country have produced a growing recognition of how issues such as public health, climate change, clean water, economic inequality, and systemic racism are all intertwined and cannot be addressed in isolation. We are living in a moment in which people across our state and the nation are attuned to issues of diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging and, at the same time, we have never been more divided. Audubon Vermont is committed to bringing people together in support of durable solutions through our shared connection to nature and love of birds.



# CLIMATE

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The number of climate-change related disasters around the nation and the globe this past year have brought back memories of Tropical Storm Irene and serve as a reminder that the single greatest threat facing birds, and our communities, is the global climate catastrophe. Eighteen months ago, Audubon released *Survival by Degrees*, our comprehensive climate report that reveals that two-thirds of North American bird species are threatened with extinction from climate change—hard news for any bird lover to hear. At the same time, our science also provides hope: If we take decisive action now to control the rise in global temperature, we help mitigate the extinction risks for 76 percent of these threatened birds.

For this reason, at Audubon Vermont, we are considering the impacts and benefits of all of our work on the climate. A central theme of our work is to build on the growing recognition that the same nature-based solutions that improve the places that birds need to thrive, also address climate change. Restoring and protecting our forests and fields, and wetlands and floodplains, is not just good for birds, but increases our state’s ability to withstand extreme weather events caused by climate change, and captures and stores carbon.

Audubon Vermont was a proud supporter of the passage of Vermont’s Global Warming Solutions Act. We are now engaging with the Climate Council and Agency of Natural Resources Leadership and staff to advance the development of policies that support natural climate solutions as part of the state’s plan to achieve the goals established in this historic new law.

If we work together across the state, from our cities to our towns, from our valleys to our hills, we can find and implement solutions that protect birds and the places birds need to thrive through supporting a network of working farms and forests, outdoor recreation, and tourism-based businesses that will ensure prosperous communities. We are working to advance this goal in collaboration with individuals, businesses, community leaders, and public officials who recognize the importance of making these investments through our unique mix of education and outreach, advocacy, and science-based conservation.

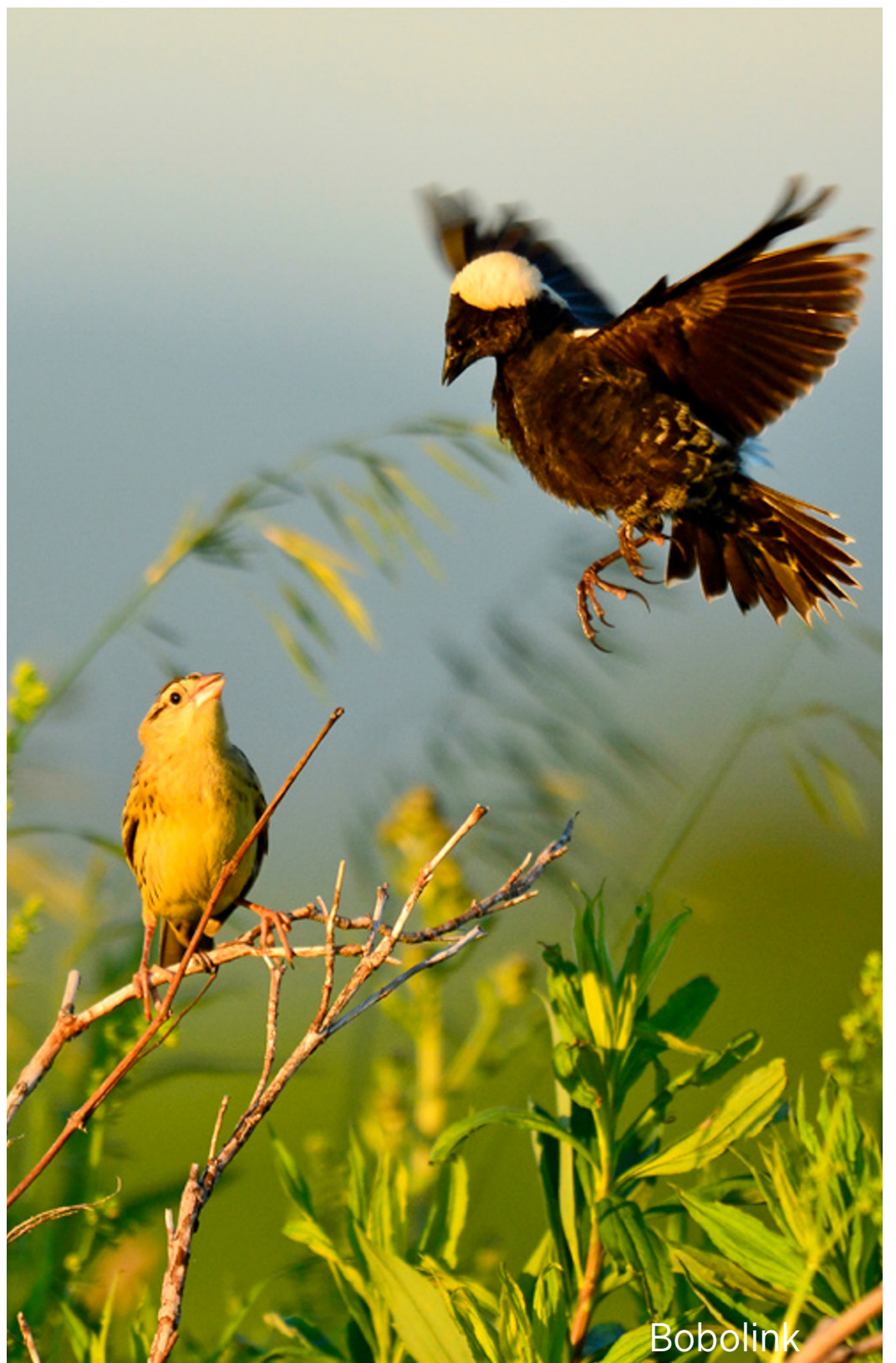
# BIRDS AND WATERSHEDS

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In this new initiative, building on our Champlain Valley Grasslands program, we are implementing management and restoration projects for grasslands and forested areas along streams and rivers, and associated uplands, as a means of enhancing bird habitat, with a focus in the Lake Champlain watershed and a longer-term goal of expanding statewide. By incorporating bird friendly site selection and design principles in these projects, we are restoring habitat while also providing clean water, flood resilience, and carbon storage benefits. We work with private landowners interested in benefiting birds and wildlife through improved land management practices as well as with local, state and federal government landowners, and land trusts.

## LEWIS CREEK

In partnership with the Vermont Department of Fish and Wildlife, we planted more than 350 shrubs and trees along Lewis Creek at the Lewis Creek Streambank Wildlife Management Area in Starksboro. Most of these plantings included fencing to limit deer browsing. We are piloting an innovative approach involving the clustering of shrubs and trees to minimize the need for fencing and increase the success rate of tree plantings. We hope to demonstrate that the state should use this approach on other state lands managed for wildlife habitat.







*Audubon VT Policy Intern, Vermont Youth Conservation Corps Crew Leader and UVM Campus Chapter President participate in the Audubon Survival By Degree Press Conference.*

## ADVOCACY

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The year 2020 also impacted state government. Facing the COVID-19 pandemic and the associated economic stress, Vermont's General Assembly worked through September instead of wrapping up in April as is typical at the end of a biennium. Despite the challenges of legislating via Zoom, the legislature tackled a number of significant environmental bills. With the help of hard-working Audubon Vermont Policy Interns, and thanks to the many calls from our members, we were able to muster the votes to pass several important bills for birds, and for our communities

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### **MIGRATORY BIRD PROTECTION**

In response to a change in federal law, and in light of recent reports demonstrating that North American bird populations are facing significant declines and are also at risk from the impacts of the climate crisis, the Vermont General Assembly passed H.683 nearly unanimously. This legislation prohibits actions where the death or harm of birds is a "direct and foreseeable result" and where the action causes at least local population impacts. This legislation fills a gap left behind from a rollback of the federal Migratory Bird Treaty Act by the U.S. Department of Interior in 2017.

### **GLOBAL WARMING SOLUTIONS ACT**

The Vermont General Assembly passed this bill into law over Governor Scott's veto. The override vote is an indication of the high level of support for action to address climate change in the General Assembly. This bill is important to Audubon Vermont since the greatest single threat facing birds today is due to the climate crisis. The new law sets carbon pollution reduction targets, requires the development of a state plan to achieve those goals, and creates an enforcement provision for the public to sue the state for non-compliance with implementing that plan. Audubon Vermont joined together with a broad coalition of organizations across the environmental, housing, social services, and energy sectors to help advance this bill. As noted above, we are particularly excited about the inclusion of natural climate solutions in the plan requirements.

### **ACT 250 MODERNIZATION**

This bill passed the General Assembly but was vetoed by the Governor. The bill would have added new protections for large forest habitat blocks in Vermont, while setting the state on a path to develop a streamlined regulatory oversight program for the development of recreational trails. With enhanced protection for intact forests, this bill would have supported rural economic development, helped tackle climate change by promoting carbon storage and sequestration, and encouraged new recreational trail development. Audubon Vermont has been working to advance these forest protections for years, as part of a coalition of groups called the Forest Partnership. We will continue to work to advance these protections in the coming session.



# WORKING LANDS

Our work prioritizes working with landowners in the adoption of practices that promote vital habitat for birds in forests and grasslands while also improving watershed health, responding to the threats of climate change, and supporting Vermont's rural working lands economy.

The COVID-19 pandemic, combined with our growing realization of the severe impacts of climate change, have highlighted the vulnerability of Vermont's rural working economy and environmental health. At the same time, the pandemic has connected more people to the outdoors and to birds. As a result, we are seeing a greater understanding by landowners and the public of the importance of taking stronger actions.

This moment requires innovation built on science and proven conservation strategies, applied in collaboration with a broad array of partners. Audubon Vermont's Working Lands program engages private and public landowners to create and maintain grassland, shrubland, and forest habitats. We work with our partners in state and federal agencies, land trusts, land management professionals such as foresters, and forest and farm landowners to implement bird-friendly restoration, protection, and management practices.



## WOODS, WILDLIFE, AND WARBLERS

We extended this innovative program statewide, beyond our initial focus on southern Vermont. Through this program, we work with foresters, local and regional conservation organizations, and organizations such as Vermont Woodland Association and Vermont Coverts, to provide support and help private landowners in the adoption of bird-friendly forest management practices. A key addition to the program is a partnership with International Paper's (IP) Ticonderoga, NY mill. By giving purchasing preference to wood from bird-friendly harvests, IP is using the marketplace as a way to promote bird conservation on private lands.



*Our BIRD-FRIENDLY MAPLE PROGRAM is currently working with 62 maple syrup producers, resulting in the application of bird-friendly forest practices across more than 10,000 sugar-bush acres*

## BIRD AND POLLINATOR FRIENDLY FARMING

We have launched a new program to advance on-farm, bird-friendly practices in partnership with the University of Vermont's Gund Institute for the Environment. We seek to advance farming practices that promote and support the creation of habitat to enhance the resilience of birds and pollinators to climate change. Through promoting land management practices that support birds, we are also helping pollinators and other wildlife, while contributing to other benefits including clean water, carbon storage, and reduced the use of harmful chemicals.

## BOBOLINK PROJECT

Vermont leads New England states in the number of acres enrolled annually in the Bobolink Project, in which farmers and landowners are paid to alter their haying regimes to allow Bobolinks and other grassland birds to nest successfully. In 2020, we helped enroll 756 acres in this project in Vermont.



# BIRD-FRIENDLY COMMUNITIES

## GREEN MOUNTAIN AUDUBON CENTER EDUCATION PROGRAMS

In the midst of the COVID-19 outbreak, we had to close our Center to the public and cancel our in-person programming including our summer day camps. Our creative education team of teacher-naturalists developed new online programs and found ways to provide outdoor education resources for families and young children while they adjusted to remote learning. We developed virtual programs for people of all ages, which have allowed us to expand our reach far beyond Vermont's borders. Webinars we offered on Facebook live had view counts as high as 10,000!

Last fall we started a new online program series called Ask a Naturalist in partnership with the Birds of Vermont Museum and the Vermont Reptile and Amphibian Atlas. Ask a Naturalist is a free program where the public can tune in to ask questions of naturalists from each organization. During our first program, students whom we have worked with from the Newcomer's Academy at Winooski Middle School participated and submitted a lengthy list of questions they had about winter in Vermont. It was a great way to stay connected with the students and the public and share with them our expertise in an easily accessible way.

We did resume some limited, in-person, outdoor, educational programming. After a trial period, we began offering Forest Playschool in the fall for preschool children and their families. In addition to this program, we also resumed our monthly homeschool program, playfully called Unschool, and began offering a new weekly program called Forest Classroom, serving elementary school students who are remote learning. Unschool gave children who do not attend a traditional school the chance to come together each month and take advantage of a full day of outdoor learning on a nature-based topic.

We also grew our new Youth Conservation Leadership Program. The young people engaged with us through this program provide a hopeful glimpse of the future. Audubon Vermont is creating a pathway for young adults to gain experience in the environmental field, including opening opportunities for students from communities that are underrepresented in the conservation and environmental professions. One highlight of this program was the work by our interns to organize and lead in a webinar "Tough Conversations" series. Their latest webinar was entitled Fires, Floods, and Feathers, and explored the millennial generation's perspective on the current climate crisis and the need to prepare our communities for climate related disasters.

On a more concrete (literally) note, we were delighted to receive enough support to restore our beloved and historic Education Barn. The contractors did a fantastic job of restoring the Barn's exterior while maintaining its historic characteristics, and they are now completing the interior renovations including a new hardwood floor, a wood ceiling, and upgraded lighting and fans. Our work to renovate the barn is a demonstration of Audubon's commitment to preserving a piece of Vermont's past while keeping our work fresh and relevant!



*Audubon Vermont's newly renovated Education Barn*



*A student in Audubon Vermont's Unschool program searches for aquatic insects at the Audubon Center's Beaver Pond.*



*Winooski Newcomer Academy students find just the right location for a native serviceberry tree.*



**Your generosity has enhanced and will continue to enhance Audubon's capacity to shape a better future for birds and people.**

In the coming years, we will recruit new supporters and volunteers from every corner of the region and engage an increasingly diverse audience by expanding our work within and alongside historically underrepresented communities.

With science as our guide, we're establishing substantive conservation goals targeting many of the most essential and threatened habitats in Vermont and New England, while pioneering environmental practices for the rest of the country to follow. Where birds thrive, people thrive.

**Thank you for being a key component of our success.**



PHOTO CREDITS

(1) Christian Tompkins/Audubon Photography Awards; (2) Joe Gliozzo/Audubon Photography Awards; (3) Lynn Cleveland / Audubon Photography Awards; (4) Rae Bronenkant/Audubon Vermont; (5) Shirley Donald/Audubon Photography Awards; The Vermont Maple Farm (6) Kim Guertin/Audubon Vermont; Gwendolyn Causer/Audubon Vermont; Jean Plasse/Winooski School District; (7) Jaime Lyons/Audubon Photography Awards