

By Dean Whitlock

Photographs courtesy of National Audubon Society

Protecting Birds and Our Ecosystem

Audubon Vermont promotes conservation and stewardship

Every spring, around 150 species of birds migrate thousands of miles to Vermont, where they are greeted by thousands of birdwatchers. Have you ever wondered why those birds migrate? And why so many people watch them?

One surprising reason songbirds migrate north in the spring is the ample availability of caterpillars. The tropics provide adequate food for adult birds in the winter when food is scarce in the north, but the nesting habitat and food supply aren't adequate for raising chicks. Many migratory songbird chicks need thousands of insects—more than 90 percent of them caterpillars—to grow to adulthood. Migration solves that problem.

People watch birds for many reasons: their beauty, their fascinating variety, their important place in our local ecosystem, and their role as canaries in the environmental mineshaft. Audubon Vermont welcomes everyone, for every reason.

MONITORING VERMONT'S BIRD POPULATION

With its century-old annual bird counts and its new, more focused Climate Watch counts, the National Audubon Society's regional chapters are able to monitor the health of our bird populations. The bad news is that bird counts have steadily declined over the past decades, primarily due to habitat loss, greatly exacerbated by climate change. Two-thirds of North American bird species are at risk.

The good news is that Audubon Vermont and its sister chapters are already implementing many community education programs to help mitigate the negative effects, helping to protect not only birds but all other animals in our ecosystem.

A male Baltimore oriole forages for insects on a native willow shrub.
Photo by Shari McCollough/Audubon Photography Awards.



A female eastern bluebird gathers nesting material, while the male holds a spider. Photo by Mark Boyd/Audubon Photography Awards.



A male red-winged blackbird defends its nesting territory in the early springtime. Photo by Michael Gale/Audubon Photography Awards.



Blue-winged warbler populations are declining throughout all of their range as early successional habitats revert to forest and are lost to human development. Photo by Joseph Mahoney/Audubon Photography Awards.



A red-breasted nuthatch feeds on the seeds of a native pine cone. Photo by Peggy Cadigan/Audubon Photography Awards.

Pat and Sophie Benzie are a case in point. Seven years ago, they purchased a large piece of forested property with a small 1930s cabin in South Pomfret. Soon after, during a seminar on forest management hosted by Vermont Coverts, they heard presentations from Vermont Fish & Wildlife, foresters including Andy McGovern from Tamarack Forestry and Land Management, and many others,

including conservation biologist Steve Hagenbuch from Audubon Vermont.

Pat and Sophie made a point of speaking with Steve, and he was happy to walk their property with them. Steve pointed out different bird habitat areas, problems like invasive plants, and ways to improve the habitat, particularly for birds; for example, creating micro clearings about the size created by one

fallen oak tree. Now Steve is helping them rewrite their forest management plan for the next 10 years.

Working with Steve, Pat says, “has dramatically changed how we view the property. Being aware of what’s going on with the birds makes being there much more satisfying . . . bird conservation seems like a pretty straightforward decision.”



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An iridescent blue male indigo bunting. Photo by Jessica Nelson/Audubon Photography Awards.

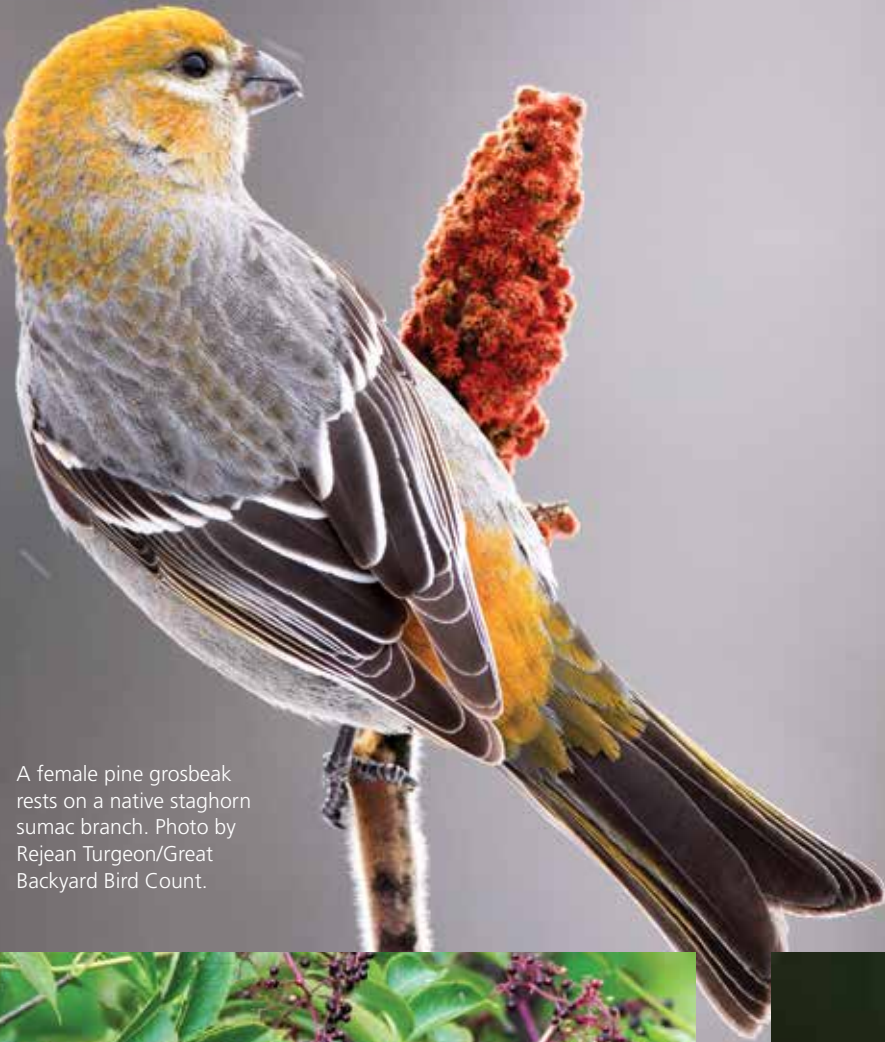


A northern mockingbird feasts on native winterberry. Photo by Will Stuart.



A rose-breasted grosbeak forages in a native sugar maple tree. Photo by Putneypics/Flickr Creative Commons.

Pat described Audubon Vermont's programs as "very practical functions that don't ask for big sacrifices or dramatic changes in your world." Gwen couldn't agree more, adding, "These individual efforts, when taken together, can have a big impact."



A female pine grosbeak rests on a native staghorn sumac branch. Photo by Rejean Turgeon/Great Backyard Bird Count.



A brown thrasher eats native elderberry. Photo by Will Stuart.



A ruby-throated hummingbird sips nectar from a native cardinal flower. Photo by Will Stuart.



A Cape May warbler rests in a flowering crab apple tree. Photo by Janet Pellegrini/Audubon Photography Awards.

EDUCATION AND PROGRAMS

In similar partnerships with Audubon Vermont, dairy farmers are protecting meadowland birds by adjusting hay-cutting schedules; vegetable farmers are creating bird- and bee-friendly habitats around their gardens; and commercial sugar-makers are increasing the resilience of their sugarbushes by leaving snags and letting other tree species grow

among the maples.

In return, the farmers and sugar-makers receive planning assistance, grants to defray some of the costs, and brand recognition from being in the programs. According to Gwen Causer, an Audubon Vermont environmental educator, all of these programs have been well received, opening up large tracts of healthier habitats for birds and the insects they feed

on. “The sugaring season is short but the sugarbush is there all year long,” Gwen points out.

Activities for large landowners can be scaled down easily to any woodlot, backyard, or garden. Audubon Vermont provides a wealth of resources on its website to help homeowners and renters get started and will happily answer questions via email.



Bald eagle. After being listed as a state endangered species since 1987, bald eagles are now considered a recovered species and are no longer listed in Vermont. Photo by Brian Kushner/ Audubon Photography Awards.

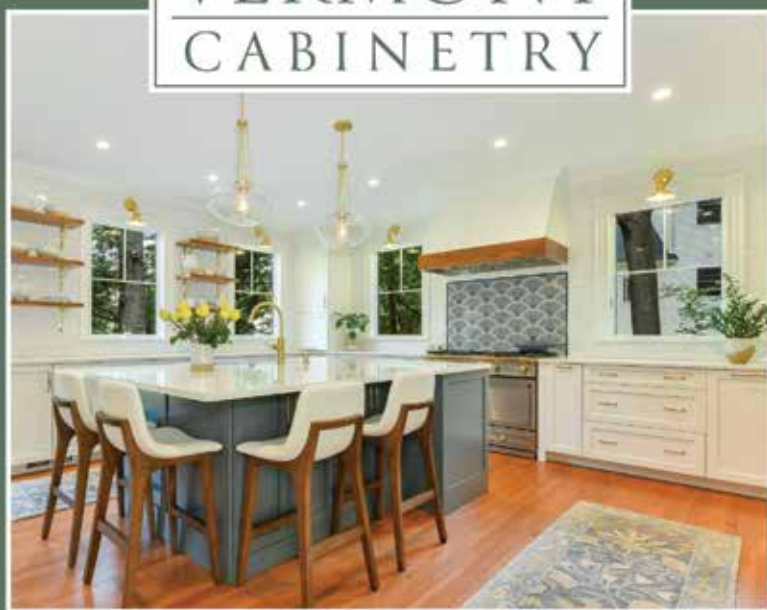
As the Benzies learned, perhaps the first effective action any landowner should take is to replace invasive plants with local varieties. Our native birds, plants, and insects evolved together into an interconnected ecosystem: plants provide food and habitat, insects provide pollination services, and birds spread seeds and keep insect populations in check. Non-native plants do not provide the same quality of nutrition or breeding habitat for either birds or insects. An oak tree, for example, can host more than 450 species of caterpillars; the non-native ginkgo tree hosts only five.

The Audubon Vermont website has a database of native plants that are good hosts for birds and pollinators, searchable by zip code, type of plant, and type of bird. There is even a page of “superstar” natives, ranked by the number of caterpillar species they can host and the types of food they provide.

INDIVIDUAL EFFORTS HAVE A BIG IMPACT

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Audubon Vermont also provides educational programs for children and teens, including school field trips and summer camps at the Green Mountain Audubon Center in Huntington, 255 acres of an old sheep farm with hiking trails, forest, a beaver pond, ancient sugarbush, and land along the Huntington River. Committed to equity, diversity, and inclusion, Audubon Vermont has an agreement with the Western Abenaki that acknowledges them as the historical stewards of the land and recognizes their right to harvest the natural resources surrounding the center. The general public is welcome to visit and—of course—watch birds. 🐦

Audubon Vermont

Green Mountain Audubon Center
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A magnolia warbler looks for insects amongst the blossoms of a native box elder tree. Photo by Dennis Derby/Audubon Photography Awards.



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