

Buffer Song, *continued*

The diets of songbirds are widely varied. Some exclusively eat plants; others eat only insects. But most are omnivores with protein as a main course. They devour huge numbers of invertebrates: weevils, beetles, caterpillars, snails, termites, ants, mites, centipedes and millipedes, crustaceans, earwigs, grasshoppers and crickets, spiders (themselves important insectivores), worms, slugs and snails, gnats and mosquitoes and flies. The list is long. If I did not already love these birds for their songs, I would admire them as my garden's best friends. By dining on invertebrates they serve me by protecting the garden from predation. In helping themselves they also help me keep those pesky snails under control.

I do not need a calendar or even departure of snow to tell me when it is time for spring clean-up. The arrival of the male grackles and red-wings leaves no doubt. They show up even before the Robins, who are not far behind - among the first to arrive and the last to leave. Robins dine on leftover crabapple and other wild berries too sour for my taste (and theirs, too, if fussy picking is any indication), before moving on to yummy snails, grubs, worms and the fruit of sumacs, juniper and dogwood.

Enjoy spring! Enjoy the song birds! Help protect the woods and buffers in which they flourish, and thereby protect the pond or stream near your home.



Wood Thrush. Source: Wikipedia.

JOIN VERMONT INVASIVE PATROLLERS (VIP)!

Protect Your Pond from Harmful Invasive Plants and Animals

Early detection is vital to protect Vermont's waterbodies from harmful invasive plants and animals. Nearly one fourth of Vermont's lakes and ponds with an area of 20 acres or more have invasive species. Calais has magnificent lakes and ponds. Most of them are free of exotic invasive species.

The best way to protect Calais ponds is to find invasive species as soon as they arrive. You can help keep your favorite pond free of them by becoming a Vermont Invasive Patrollers (VIPs). This is a program run by the VT Agency of Natural Resources. Volunteers are taught to recognize invasive species. Periodically throughout the summer VIPs paddle around the shoreline, peer into the shallow waters and look for evidence of the arrival of one of these invasive species.

In 2010 Victoria King will be coordinating an effort to establish VIPs at all of the lakes and ponds in Calais. If you can help please contact her at vkingvt@gmail.com or call 802-229-4674.

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 SPRING



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SPRING IS ON THE WING AND IN THE MEADOWS

by Candice Shaffer, Calais, VT

Most of us love the familiar chorus of bird song that arrives with spring. But, many song birds are in peril, especially the grassland birds. In the United States, grassland songbird numbers have plummeted since the 1960's. Of these, the ones we know best are the Bobolink, which has declined by 50% and the Meadowlark which has decline by 91%. Other meadow nesters are Henslow's Sparrow, Sedge Wren, Upland Sandpiper, Grasshopper Sparrow, Vesper Sparrow and Savannah Sparrow. All of these birds are endangered, state-threatened or uncommon in the state of Vermont. What they have in common is that they all require open land dominated by grasses, sedges and broadleaf herbs with little or no woody vegetation in order to rear their young and survive as a species.

Most of us do not realize how we contribute to the decline of grassland birds as we manage our lands. In fact, we have the farmers to thank for providing potential habitat the birds need to breed. In Vermont, the conservation of land and birds has united to take a greater role in the survival of these species since grasslands elsewhere in the Northeast and Midwest have been converted to other uses. Hard times for farming in our state have proven difficult for grassland birds here as well. The decline in farming has led to many fields growing up into forests, converting into housing or other types of development. Many of the remaining farmers are using more intensive methods of management which cut short the time frame within which the birds can rear their young. When a field is cut before the young have fledged from the nest, virtually all the young birds and/or eggs are destroyed. Modern farming techniques with short cutting intervals make it impossible for birds to successfully reproduce in their native habitat; yet, the farmer has to make a living.

How can we help grassland birds get back on the nest? A Vermont federal program through the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS is a branch of the U.S Agriculture Department) , pays farmers \$135 an acre to complete their first cut by June 2nd and wait 65 days to start their second cut no sooner than July 15th. Using The Grassland Bird Conservation program, the farmer is reimbursed for the reduced quality of the postponed second-cut hay while allowing enough time for the songbirds to raise their young. Mowing from the center of the field to the outside is a best practice for bird survival. This is a hard habit to adopt, but it allows birds and other wildlife to escape during mowing.

Through NRCS's partnership with Audubon Vermont, The Champlain Valley Grassland Bird Initiative was launched last



Bobolink.

year to help landowners manage their land for bird habitat as well as agriculture. It is hoped that more landowners will participate in the program now that Audubon is taking the initiative to reach out and inform them about the program. Here is what Audubon provides as the most bird friendly management activities:

What you can do:

- For the best habitat for grassland birds, delay cutting fields until late in the nesting season (after August 1). By this time most young have left the nest and are capable of sustained flight.
- For fields that cannot be cut that late, delay cutting until after the 4th of July. Many birds will be able to raise young by that date.
- To prevent encroachment of shrubs and plants like goldenrod, cut fields at least every other year; annual cuts are best.

- Remove hay to provide the best conditions for regrowth of grass. Birds are more likely to settle in fields that green up quickly in the spring.
- Birds will continue to nest in uncut portions of fields. Thus, leaving areas with high nesting densities uncut can provide a critical refuge.
- In grazing areas, fallow paddocks provide important habitat for grassland birds.
- If forage quality is of primary importance, an early cut (before 1 June) followed by a 65-day period of rest will provide sufficient time for birds to re-nest on cut fields. Shorter cutting intervals will lead to nest failure.
- Consistency in management is important! Birds are faithful to nesting fields, such that delayed mowing for several years followed by an early cut is the worst possible management scenario.

The Calais Conservation Commission and Audubon Vermont invite you to learn about conserving grassland birds. Everyone is welcome to “Bird Night”! If you own or work fields, come learn how to protect Bobolinks and Meadowlarks. Share any bird materials you may have (nests, eggs, photos, books, stories, feathers etc. . .) while enjoying a dessert potluck. Children are welcome too, so bring the family and celebrate the return of our winged ones at two locations:

Maple Corner Community Center on April 29th at 6:30

Adamant Community Center on May 13th at 6:30

For more information about “Bird Night” contact Candice Shaffer at 456-7047 or monalisa@wildblue.net

For more information about conserving grassland birds contact Audubon at mlabarr@audubon.org

THE WINOOSKI RIVER SOJOURN: *Exploring the Flora and Fauna of the Watershed*



June 22nd to 27th

The Sojourn is a project of the Friends of the Winooski River. The Friends work to restore and conserve the health of the Winooski River and its tributaries. The Sojourn is an opportunity for the community to know their river better while raising money for its preservation.

Each day participants will paddle a new stretch of river with stops to explore the ecological features of the watershed. The Sojourn will feature a ‘floating naturalist’, who will help participants find plants, birds, animal signs and, in general, develop a better understanding of the landscape surrounding them. There will be talks by noted experts such as Susan Morse of Keeping Track and Sharon Plumb of The Nature Conservancy. The trip will include a talk and walk about wild edibles followed by a dinner that includes some of these plants.

Participants can choose to paddle for the entire trip, multiple days, a single day or a half day. Check out the schedule at www.winooskiriver.org our website for more information on difficulty levels and river conditions. To register visit www.WinooskiRiver.org or call 802-655-4878.

— ANN SMITH, Executive Director,
Friends of the Winooski River



Family canoeing.

HELP RESTORE THE PEKIN BROOK *Volunteers Needed*

Please join your friends and neighbors on Saturday May 15th to help restore riparian buffers along the Pekin Brook. We will be planting trees and shrubs as well as installing ‘willow wattles’ that stabilize stream banks.

We will be working on the Eckhaus property at 1659 Pekin Brook Road from 9:00 AM to noon on May 15th. Lunch will be provided. Advance sign up is appreciated. Contact the Friends of the Winooski River at fwr@sover.net or call 655-4878. Please wear long pants and closed-toed shoes. Bring a shovel and bucket if you got ‘em! We will have gloves available.

If you can’t make the 15th but are still interested in helping out, there are other options. We will also be working with a group of volunteers from National Life on the morning of May 4th and with kids from the elementary school (date TBD).

Why is this important?

The Kingsbury Branch and the Pekin Brook, like many of Vermont’s rivers, are still feeling the affects of the large scale deforestation that occurred in the 19th century. As the valley

was settled, much of the forest was cut for timber and/or cleared for agriculture. Although some natural reforestation has begun to occur in the past few decades, long stretches of the river still lack any type of natural vegetation on one or both sides.

Riparian buffers improve water quality while providing habitat for wildlife and fish. They help maintain the integrity of stream channels and shorelines; reduce the impact of upland sources of pollution by trapping, filtering and converting sediments, nutrients and other chemicals. They provide a transition zone ensuring a balance between water and human land use. Buffers are complex ecosystems that provide habitat and improve the stream communities they shelter by supplying food, cover and thermal protection to fish and other wildlife.

The planting project is organized by the Friends of the Winooski River, the Winooski Natural Resource Conservation District, the Calais Conservation Commission and the US Fish and Wildlife Service.

— ANN SMITH, Executive Director,
Friends of the Winooski River



A young helper!



Reestablishing the buffer-planting trees.

BUFFER SONG

by Susan McKenney, North Montpelier, VT

I am so excited! Mr. Song Sparrow has returned! I know it is mister because Mrs. doesn’t sit at the top of our arbor and run musical scales at the top of her lungs. She is fitting about on the ground near the safety of the closest cover. Both are searching for a good nesting site amongst tall grasses, flower gardens or brush. They are on the lookout for seeds, wild fruit and a wide array of invertebrates to eat. All spring and summer they spend each day feeding in the gardens and in the buffer of tangled grasses, bushes and trees that separate North Montpelier Pond from my yard.

Song Sparrows are in that eclectic category we call “song-birds.” They are one of the perching birds belonging to the order Passeriformes, suborder Passeri (or Oscines), which is composed of ~ 4,000 different species worldwide. Songbirds make up almost half the world’s known birds. They all have well developed vocal organs and live in open vegetated spaces, transition areas between forest and water, and in forests. A very few even populate deserts and other extremes.

I have always enjoyed birds for personal and aesthetic reasons. Passive bird watching brings me great pleasure. Now I have learned that birds, most in the song bird category, are important indicators of the health of the woods and buffers around our lakes and ponds.

Audubon Vermont has produced a list of the “Birder’s Dozen;” twelve relatively common Vermont species who reside in a range of forest conditions. These twelve bird species particularly prefer wooded areas along lakes and streams. Diverse woods and buffers offer a variety of feeding and habitat condi-



Scarlet Tanager. Source: Wikipedia.

THE BIRDER’S DOZEN

1. Wood Thrush
2. Blue-Headed Vireo
3. Eastern Wood-pewee
4. Yellow-Bellied Sapsucker
5. Chestnut-Sided Warbler
6. Black-Throated Green Warbler
7. Black-Throated Blue Warbler
8. Scarlet Tanager
9. White-Throated Sparrow
10. Canada Warbler
11. American Woodcock
12. Veery

tions to satisfy even the pickiest of species. When these birds are present they are good indicators that the wooded habitat, and ultimately the lake or stream near the woods, are healthy.

Check out the diversity and health of the bird populations and woods around your lake by downloading a fact sheet about the Birder’s Dozen at www.vtaudubon.org, click on “Science and Conservation,” then on “Forest Birds Fact Sheets.” The Birder’s Dozen fact sheet also provides suggestions on enhancing habitat for these species. Remember, land conditions good for these birds are conditions good for the lake or stream as well. You can use this list to see how many are in the woods around you and along the lakeshore, and check to see if they are returning each year.

Of the 51 species of birds I have identified in or around my yard, 35 are songbirds. All of the songbirds utilize that narrow patch of buffering vegetation between our house and the pond, including the barn and tree swallows that flit overhead on a summers’ day gobbling up flying insects.

The swath of anchoring plants in the buffer do more than absorb wind and keep our land from floating down to our neighbors. Within that narrow expanse are mini ecosystems that provide living spaces and food for the birds. I would not even know the Brown Creepers and Black-and-White warblers were there if I did not sit within the confines of the buffer from time to time. I can hear them, but they almost never venture beyond the buffer which is their world.

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