



# MISSISQUOI MATTERS

NEWSLETTER OF THE FRIENDS OF  
MISSISQUOI NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE

Winter, 2023-2024



## Winter Activities Schedule at Missisquoi NWR *29 Tabor Road, Swanton, VT 05488*

**Bird Tales**

**Thursday, February 1, 2024, 7:00 PM via Zoom**

Bird Tales has become one of the Friends of Missisquoi NWR's most popular events. Mark your calendar and get set for the 8<sup>th</sup> Annual Evening of Bird Tales and find out why! This year's collection of stories will be coming from members of the Green Mountain Audubon Society. These avid birders will certainly have stories that will entertain! Information about registration for Bird Tales and other upcoming winter events will be available on our website: <https://friendsofmissisquoi.org/calendar/>



✂ Ring-billed Gull



✂ Coopers Hawk



✂ Evening Grosbeak



✂ Least Flycatcher



✂ Marsh Wren



✂ Bald Eagle



✂ Northern Cardinal



✂ Red-tailed Hawk



✂ Mallard

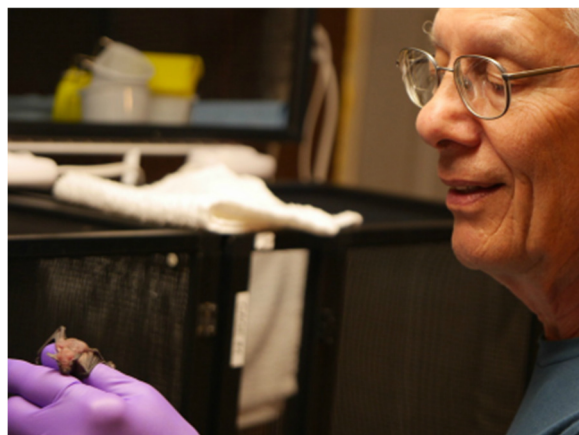
illustration by Hannah Filiberti

## Vermont Bats

Thursday, January 11, 7:00 PM via Zoom

Join this online Zoom presentation featuring Barry Genzlinger, founder of the Vermont Bat Center, as he shares information about one of the most misunderstood mammals. He is a Vermont bat expert as well as a bat rehabilitator. He will give an update on the status of Vermont's bat populations and leave time for some Q & A. Registration information for this and other upcoming winter events will be available on our website:

<https://friendsofmissisquoi.org/calendar/>



## Owl Prowl

Saturday, February 24, 5:30 PM

Join Friends Board members Ken Copenhaver and Tom Hargy for an evening walk to watch and listen for some of our resident birds who operate during the night shift. Recorded owl calls will be played to inspire responses or close encounters, if the birds are willing.

The MNWR owl prowls on Saturday evening, February 24, 2023 (featuring a full moon!), from 5:30 PM until about 8 PM. We will start at the Stephen J Young Marsh Trail parking lot located on Tabor Rd about one mile past the refuge Visitor Center. Look for roadside signage: "Refuge Trails Parking". After a bit, we will head over to Refuge Visitor Center to warm up if needed, and then walk down the Discovery Trail boardwalk to discover if any birds there give a hoot.

Dress appropriately and bring a low-intensity flashlight with you.

Registration for this activity is required. You may register for this event, beginning on Jan. 13th, at the Friends website: <https://friendsofmissisquoi.org/calendar/>

Also, visit <https://www.facebook.com/friendsofmissisquoi> to learn more about the refuge and coming events. You can also look at, comment on, and share your own photos.

You do not need to have a Facebook account to view the page.



Have you missed one of the great Zoom presentations sponsored by the Friends of Missisquoi? Would you like to re-watch "Bird Tales", or the recent presentations about Bobolinks and Meadowlarks, or our recent three-part series about invasive species in Vermont?

Well, you're in luck! Check out our Friends of Missisquoi YouTube Channel:

<https://www.youtube.com/@friendsofmissisquoi1650/videos>







## Missisquoi Matters

is the quarterly newsletter of the Friends of Missisquoi National Wildlife Refuge, Inc., a non-profit 501(c)(3) organization, dedicated to promoting a better awareness, appreciation, conservation, and responsible utilization of the

Missisquoi National Wildlife Refuge.

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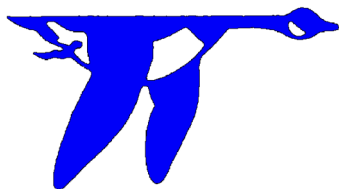
[www.friendsofmissisquoi.org](http://www.friendsofmissisquoi.org)

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Newsletter edited by Al Crist

### Board of Directors

Rich Kelley	<i>President</i>
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### Refuge Staff

Ken Sturm	<i>Refuge Manager</i>
Judy Sefchick	<i>Wildlife Biologist</i>
Lisa Swainbank	
	<i>Office Administrative Assistant</i>
Chris Whitaker	
	<i>Maintenance Mechanic</i>

## Monthly Bird Monitoring Walks

Friends board members and birders extraordinaire Ken Copenhaver and Julie Filiberti lead the walks on various refuge trails beginning at 8 AM on the **third Saturday of each month (except for December, when it is on the 2nd Saturday)**. The purpose of the walks is to gather long-term data on the presence of birds, their abundance, and changes in populations. Observations are entered into the Vermont eBird database. These walks are appropriate for birders of all skill levels and provide a wonderful opportunity to learn about birds throughout the seasons.

After 164 months of walks, we have recorded 164 species of birds. Registration for the walks is not required.

The schedule for the next three months is:

**December 9: Maquam/Black Creek Trail.** Meet at the parking lot located on Rte. 78, approximately 2½ miles west of Swanton village.

**January 20: Old Railroad Passage Trail:** Meet at the parking lot on Tabor Rd, about a mile past the refuge Visitor Center

**February 17: Maquam/Black Creek Trail.** Meet at the parking lot located on Rte. 78, approximately 2½ miles west of Swanton village.



Bird-walk leaders, Ken and Julie

If and when new Refuge events are scheduled, they will be posted on the Friends website as soon as dates are known. To check for any schedule changes or additions, visit the Friends website [www.friendsofmissisquoi.org](http://www.friendsofmissisquoi.org) and click on "Calendar".

For more information about the refuge, visit [www.fws.gov/refuge/missisquoi/](http://www.fws.gov/refuge/missisquoi/)

## **Refuge Managers Update - November, 2023**



Another field season is in the books at Missisquoi National Wildlife Refuge. And as always it seems like mother nature throws curve balls, making our staff be ever adaptable for conducting field work based on

changing conditions. Recently we have seen excessively dry conditions creating real difficulty in accessing many of the refuge's remote wetland areas. But, as we all know, the summer of 2023 will be known as a wet one.

The flooding in July raised the lake level over a foot and a half, seemingly overnight. And it kept raining. Typically, the months of July and August are times of slow draw downs in the lake, which naturally stimulate many important waterfowl food plants to grow, such as wild rice. This year the rice had started to grow but was overtopped by the quickly rising lake, greatly reducing the amount of rice in our wetlands. Luckily for waterfowl, there are many sources of food on the refuge and other plants such as smartweed and buttonbush seem to have provided plenty of resources for our migrating ducks.

High water in the middle of the field season also made for much easier access for our staff conducting surveys, posting boundaries and conducting invasive species control operations. We typically struggle to access many remote areas during our European water chestnut control work, but this year we were able to cover much more area. In Big Marsh Slough, we

*by Ken Sturm, Refuge Manager, Missisquoi NWR*

covered double the acreage we have been able to cover in the past several years.

This increased access made me wonder if we would see a large increase in the quantity of water chestnut removed from the refuge, given the expanded areas we were able to search. In fact we did see an increase in both Cranberry Pool and Big Marsh Slough this year, the second year in a row of a troubling trend. However, once all the work was completed and the data was analyzed, it was apparent that the increased area covered was not primarily responsible for the increase in chestnut harvested. By comparing the GPS locations of chestnut removed this year, we were able to see that the sites that were most heavily infested were the same sites that had been heavily infested in previous years.

In some ways, this was good news since our crew did not find new infestations in remote areas of the refuge, where access is limited in most years. However, the increase in sites where control work is done annually is troubling. This is especially true given there were some sites where chestnut had not been found for several years and we had hoped we were leaning towards the "controlled" category of infestation. Perhaps this shouldn't be a surprise since water chestnut seeds can stay dormant for 12 years. The bottom line is that invasive species control is an ever-present problem and without consistent management, species like water chestnut could quickly become a significant problem impacting refuge habitats.

### **FRIENDS OF MISSISQUOI NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE**

#### **BI-MONTHLY BOARD MEETINGS**

Wednesday, January 10th, 2024 at 6:30 PM via Zoom

Wednesday, March 13th, 2024 at 6:30 PM via Zoom

email [info@friendsofmissisquoi.org](mailto:info@friendsofmissisquoi.org) if you'd like to attend via Zoom

Members are always welcome & encouraged to attend.

**Q.** Why am I seeing robins in the winter?

**A.** Almost every winter, someone excitedly reports to me that they saw some robins. They're surprised to see them here in winter and sometimes ask whether it's due to climate change.

Even though robins have been the traditional "sign of spring," the truth is that at least some robins are typically present all winter in northern Vermont, especially in the Champlain Valley. The American Robin is considered a short-distance migrant, moving only 300 to 700 miles from their breeding grounds to wintering locations. By contrast, long-distance (or Neotropical) migrants can travel a thousand miles or more from their breeding grounds in the United States and Canada to Mexico, Central and South America, and the Caribbean islands. Some examples of long-distance migrants are shorebirds, hummingbirds, most warblers, orioles, and tanagers.

The American Robin lives up to its scientific name of *Turdus migratorius*, where "migratorius" means not only "migratory" but also "wandering." While there can be a general southward push of robins in the fall, they don't have the massive migratory flights of the long-distance migrants. And while the movement of long-distance migrants is triggered by day length, robins respond more to food availability and weather conditions. So if we're having a mild winter without deep snow, more robins will stick around. But if they deplete their food supply in one area or weather conditions worsen, they will move on.

So what about the effects of climate change? If average winter temperatures are milder than they used to be and snow cover is less than it used to be, it only makes sense that conditions could now favor more robins staying longer in the winter. But climate change isn't the whole story since a

quick search of eBird shows at least some robin reports in January prior to the arbitrary year of 1990.

Some other examples of short-distance migrants that we see in our area in winter are Blue Jays, Song Sparrows, American Crows, and Cedar Waxwings. In the case of Blue Jays, some individuals can stay in our area year-round, but in general, they move southward, sometimes in huge flocks. Likewise, some Song Sparrows stay in northwestern Vermont year-round, while most migrate to the mid-Atlantic and southern U.S. The northernmost American Crows in Canada all migrate southward, but many in our area are permanent residents and don't migrate at all. Cedar Waxwings all migrate, but Vermont is in an area where their summer and winter ranges overlap.

As we can see from the various scenarios above, it's not easy to determine why a given species is present here in the winter. Of course, we also have permanent residents that don't migrate at all, including Black-capped Chickadee, Northern Cardinal, and Hairy and Downy Woodpeckers, and there are migrants from the north that we see only in winter, such as American Tree Sparrow and Snow Bunting. To make things more confusing, some species migrate altitudinally, such as the Dark-eyed Junco, which is considered a perennial resident in Vermont but is rarely seen in lower elevations in the summer. And to make things even more confusing, we have the "irruptive" species such as Common Redpoll and Pine Siskin that show up in abundance some winters and not at all in others. But that's for another article!



## **Distinguished Visitors at the Refuge**

National Wildlife Refuge Week occurs annually during the second week in October. It is a week-long celebration highlighting our country's National Wildlife Refuge System. Its stated mission is to administer a national network of lands and waters for the conservation, management, and where appropriate, restoration of the fish, wildlife, and plant resources and their habitats within the United States. Each individual refuge organizes its own events to bring attention to their refuge.

At Missisquoi, the Friends sent an invitation out to our Vermont congressional delegation to come and pay a visit. We were thrilled to learn that both Senator Welch and Thomas Renner, a member of the staff of Representative Becca Balint, were available to accept our invitation.

On Friday, October 6th, a day ahead of NWR Week, Senator Peter Welch and Thomas Renner paid their very first visits to Missisquoi. After brief introductions to a few of the Friends board members at the headquarters, the visitors embarked on boat tour of the refuge, including a stop at Cranberry Pool on their way out to the delta.



**Refuge Manager, Ken Sturm, discusses water quality with Sen. Welch during a boat tour of the refuge.**

Refuge Manager, Ken Sturm, served as tour guide and explained the unique habitats and wildlife of the refuge as well as some of the ongoing problems such as water quality and invasive plants. The boat tour, along with the views it allowed, were enjoyed by all, and both visitors appreciated learning firsthand the details about the refuge.



**Thomas Renner and Senator Welch listen as Ken Sturm shares the history and habitat of Cranberry Pool .**

“We’re blessed to live in Vermont and be surrounded by the natural beauty of our state. We need to do everything in our power to protect it; not only for those who enjoy it today, like the wildlife enthusiasts, the hikers, the anglers, the photographers, and the folks who just cherish the great outdoors, but also for the next generation of Vermonters,” said Sen. Welch. “I want to know my grandkids will get to see the meadowlark fly overhead, and the soft-shelled turtle crawl around this marsh. If we don’t take meaningful action on climate change, they might not get that opportunity.”

# **Happy 80th Birthday Missisquoi NWR!**

It's easy to take places and things for granted. Even though most readers are quite familiar with Missisquoi NWR, perhaps many of us take it somewhat for granted. On Oct. 26, Sens. Peter Welch (D-Vt.) and Bernie Sanders (I-Vt.) introduced an official non-binding resolution commemorating the refuge's 80 years in northern Vermont. Read through the resolution and appreciate what an incredible refuge it is.

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## **RESOLUTION**

Commemorating the 80th anniversary of the establishment of the Missisquoi National Wildlife Refuge.

Whereas the Missisquoi National Wildlife Refuge (referred to in this preamble as the "Refuge") was established in 1943 under the authority of the Migratory Bird Conservation Act for the protection and management of migratory birds;

Whereas the Refuge is located on land sacred to the tribes of the Western Abenaki;

Whereas the Refuge encompasses 6,729 acres of protected land in Franklin County, Vermont;

Whereas more than half of this acreage is protected as an inviolate sanctuary, preserving pristine habitats for wildlife and native plant species to thrive;

Whereas the Refuge is part of the Atlantic Flyway system of National Wildlife Refuges connecting the northern breeding grounds and southern wintering areas of migratory birds;

Whereas the Refuge was designated as a RAMSAR Wetland of International Importance in 2013, 1 of just 41 national wildlife refuges in the United States so designated;

Whereas the Refuge is recognized as an Important Bird Area by the National Audubon Society;

Whereas habitats found in the Refuge include flood plain forests, wetlands, shrublands, bogs, grasslands, and upland areas;

Whereas the natural environment of the Refuge is essential to the ecosystems of Lake Champlain, supporting wildlife and preserving clean water resources;

Whereas these ecosystems mitigate climate change by sequestering carbon and strengthening the resilience of neighboring communities;

Whereas the 900-acre Maquam bog located in the Refuge is designated as a Research Natural Area and is the only pitch pine woodland bog in New England;

Whereas the Refuge is home to vital feeding, resting, and breeding habitats for birds, which have supported more than 200 bird species;

Whereas the Refuge is home to the largest concentration of waterfowl in the Champlain Valley and hosts more than 20,000 ducks during their fall migration, including wood ducks, mallards, green-winged teal, and ring-neck ducks;

Whereas the grassland habitats of the Refuge are home to bobolink, meadowlark, and savannah sparrows;

Whereas the wetland habitats of the Refuge are populated by reptiles, fish, and amphibians;

Whereas pollinators thrive in the shrublands and grasslands of the Refuge, including 13 species of bumblebees;

Whereas other species that call the Refuge home include raccoons, black bears, coyotes, skunks, beavers, red foxes, river otters, bobcats, porcupines, muskrats, and minks;

Whereas many of these animals are protected by the State of Vermont as threatened or endangered, such as the black tern and eastern sand darter;

Whereas more than 80,000 visitors travel to the Refuge annually to partake in hiking, birding, fishing, boating, and hunting;

Whereas visitors to the Refuge travel from all 50 states and multiple foreign countries to appreciate the beauty and biodiversity of the Refuge;

Whereas the Refuge provides a valuable educational and interpretive resource for visitors and neighboring communities;

Whereas the experience in nature while visiting the Refuge fosters a spiritual connection between people and the land they inhabit;

Whereas the Refuge and the natural environment of Vermont support a vibrant outdoor recreation industry that has contributed billions of dollars to the State's economy;

Whereas archaeologists have documented a cultural heritage in the Refuge dating back more than 5,000 years; and

Whereas the United States Fish and Wildlife Service and the Abenaki community work in partnership

to protect and maintain these cultural sites, preserving them for generations to come:

Now, therefore, be it Resolved, That the Senate—

- (1) commemorates the 80th anniversary of the establishment of the Missisquoi National Wildlife Refuge;
- (2) recognizes the importance of this protected land to biodiversity and fragile ecosystems in Vermont and the world; and
- (3) resolves to support the National Wildlife Refuge System, Including the Missisquoi National Wildlife Refuge, by providing the necessary financial and staffing resources to carry out its mission of conserving wildlife, protecting habitats, and providing access to outdoor recreational opportunities.

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## **Who's Out & About on the Refuge?**

Meet Annette Kalinoski, a very frequent visitor to the refuge trails and waterways in all seasons. One might find her, binoculars in hand, scanning the fields and forests for beloved avian treasures. In the warmer months, she is also a frequent paddler on the Missisquoi. It is also possible that one could encounter her on the Discovery Trail laying prone on her back on the boardwalk taking in the sights and sounds of the birds above her head.

She continues to find magic on each and every excursion, noticing not only birds, but all of nature's curiosities. Over her decade of visiting, she has countless memories attached to each trail in every season. Walking the trails, Annette recalls vivid memories of the exact locations of birds she's spotted over the years, from her very first White-crowned Sparrow seen hopping down the Old Railroad Passage to her first ever Red-bellied Woodpecker tapping in the trees right in the parking lot. Experience has taught her where to listen for the first Rusty Blackbirds and Northern Waterthrushes of the season, where to be enthralled by the babbling of Bobolinks on a spring

day, and where to observe a Northern Harrier scouring low for its lunch.

She frequently brings friends to the refuge to introduce them to birding. Annette rarely misses a Friend's monthly Bird Monitoring Walk and thoroughly delights in the chances for conversations with new people that come out to the refuge.





## **Big Sit 2023 Results**

More than 6000 blackbirds joined members of the Friends of Missisquoi for our 7<sup>th</sup> “Big Sit” event on Sunday, October 8<sup>th</sup>!

The Big Sit is an international event, sponsored by the New Haven (CT) bird club that’s held annually in early October. It’s been described as a “tailgate party for birders.” The idea is to identify as many species of birds as possible on a single day from within a 17-foot circle. As in years past, the location we’ve used is the observation deck at the Stephen J. Young Marsh.



Originally planned for Saturday, rainy weather prompted us to adjust to Sunday, which likely lowered the number of participants we had, but gave us a much more enjoyable day in the marsh. Over 12 hours, from 6:00 AM to 6:00 PM, we noted 32

Species seen in 2023:

- |                              |                       |                            |
|------------------------------|-----------------------|----------------------------|
| 1. American Crow             | 12. Gray Catbird      | 23. Red-tailed Hawk        |
| 2. American Robin            | 13. Great Blue Heron  | 24. Red-winged Blackbird   |
| 3. American Woodcock         | 14. Great Egret       | 25. Rusty Blackbird        |
| 4. Bald Eagle                | 15. Green-winged Teal | 26. Song Sparrow           |
| 5. Belted Kingfisher         | 16. Mallard           | 27. Swamp Sparrow          |
| 6. Black-capped Chickadee    | 17. Merlin            | 28. Tree Swallow           |
| 7. Blue Jay                  | 18. Mourning Dove     | 29. Turkey Vulture         |
| 8. Canada Goose              | 19. Northern Cardinal | 30. White-throated Sparrow |
| 9. Common Raven              | 20. Northern Flicker  | 31. Wood Duck              |
| 10. Common Yellowthroat      | 21. Northern Harrier  | 32. Yellow-rumped Warbler  |
| 11. Double-crested Cormorant | 22. Peregrine Falcon  |                            |

species of birds. While this was a little lower than our average total, we added two new species to our lists – Tree Swallows and Common Yellowthroats. Other notable sightings included Bald Eagles, Rusty Blackbirds and a Peregrin Falcon. Over the 7 years we’ve held this event, we’ve recorded a total of 67 species.

Data from Big Sit circles around the world, including ours, is entered into eBird, an online database of bird observations run & maintained by Cornell University’s Lab of Ornithology. This data is available to scientists and researchers worldwide, providing information on migration patterns and bird distributions among other things.

If you’d like to get involved, our 8<sup>th</sup> annual event will tentatively be on Sat., Oct. 12<sup>th</sup>, 2024.



**Hard-core Big Sitters, L to R: Ken Copenhagen, Julie Filiberti, & Tom Hargy.**

**Friends of Missisquoi National Wildlife Refuge, Inc.**  
**29 Tabor Road**  
**Swanton, VT 05488**



Please tell us how to serve you better - The Friends of Missisquoi NWR Board is eager to know more about the kind of programs, outings, or activities you would like to have offered on or about the refuge. Please email your suggestions and comments to [info@friendsofmissisquoi.org](mailto:info@friendsofmissisquoi.org). Thanks!

**Yes!** I want to support the Friends of Missisquoi National Wildlife Refuge and its programs with my membership. My dues include a subscription to Missisquoi Matters and a 10% discount on items at the Friends Gift Shop. Enclosed is my contribution of:

**Membership Level**

- ☐ \$10 Student
- ☐ \$15 Individual
- ☐ \$20 Family / Classroom
- ☐ \$50 Supporting
- ☐ \$100 Steward
- ☐ \$250 Life / Business
- ☐ \$1000 Patron

Would you like to receive your newsletter by postal mail or by email? Please circle one:  
**Postal Mail      Email**

Date: \_\_\_\_\_ (membership begins the month you join)  
Name: \_\_\_\_\_  
Address: \_\_\_\_\_  
City: \_\_\_\_\_ State: \_\_\_\_\_ Zip: \_\_\_\_\_  
Phone: \_\_\_\_\_ E-mail: \_\_\_\_\_

(Your email address will not be shared with any other organization. We would like to be able to contact members regarding last minute changes to Friends activities and events.)