



Volume 2
=====
Issue 4
=====
Summer, 2011



A project of
North Branch Nature Center

Vermont's Youth Birding Program

Feather Questers has partnered with middle school students in central Vermont to revitalize the nesting habitat of the Common Nighthawk. Once a common sight to people in Vermont cities, nighthawks used to swoop and dive across the sky at dusk, collecting insects as they went. Their preference to nest in large, open spaces may once have precluded Vermont from possible breeding locations, but since at least the late 1800's Common Nighthawks have made use of gravel rooftops to raise their young.



Note the long wings and bold white wing patches on the flying Nighthawk.

Unfortunately, the Common Nighthawk is in steep decline throughout its breeding range and has not been seen breeding in Montpelier (or other Vermont locales) in recent years. One cause of their decline is loss of habitat: both natural and artificial. Conversion of gravel rooftops to other substrates is believed to be one cause for their disappearance from urban areas. In 2007, New Hampshire Audubon began a research initiative to install gravel "nest patches" on rooftops in order to create the nighthawk's preferred gravel nesting sites. Students from U-32 Middle/High School (Montpelier) and Crossett Brook Middle School (Waterbury), in partnership with NBNC's Youth Birding Program, have replicated the efforts of NH Audubon by installing Vermont's first nest patches.

The patches, which were installed on the rooftops of each school, measure 9X9 ft of gravel and include shade structures for the nighthawks to use for their young. Over the winter, students

researched nighthawks, built models, and wrote reports and articles for the school paper, all in preparation for our nest patch installation this spring. Installing the patches themselves was no easy



U-32 students pose for a picture with their freshly installed nest patch.

task. It took teams of students working together to transport a ton of gravel up onto the roofs. At Crossett Brook, students were aided by a cherry-picker as the only way onto the roof was by a ladder.

This Nighthawk revitalization project is still in its experimental phase and so success is uncertain, but over the next few months we will begin the "monitoring phase" of the project. Common Nighthawks face other pressures such as reduction of insects (their food source) due to pesticides and habitat loss on their wintering grounds, but central Vermont students have taken action where they can, and nighthawks now have more places to build their nests. As nighthawks return from their winter in South America and establish nesting sites in New England, we'll be watching to see if our nest patches are used by a lucky nighthawk family.



The Nighthawk's cryptic pattern makes it hard to spot when not in flight

Quiz: *Head First*

It doesn't take more than a glance at a friend or family member's face to recognize them instantly. Let's see if you can do the same for these birds:

1



Taken in May at Winooski, VT

2



Taken in March at Montpelier, VT

3



Taken in March at Winooski, VT

4



Taken in November at Shelburne, VT

5



Taken in October at Addison, VT

6



Taken in May at Ferrisburg, VT

All Photos by Larry Clarfeld

Last Issue's Answers: 1. Song Sparrow, 2. Winter Wren, 3. Savannah Sparrow

Trip Report: World Series of Birding



Another year; another great trip to New Jersey for the World Series of Birding... a 24-hour birding marathon in which 80 teams scoured the garden state for every bird species they could find. While we saw plenty of Brown-headed Cowbirds, the "The Chocolate-headed Cowbirds (with sprinkles)" were quite elusive. This mysterious creature, which celebrates the support we received from a grant made by Ben & Jerry's, is featured on our website under "youth birding". Whether we were searching the 10,000+ shorebirds at Heislerville, peering through the canopy to see the Acadian Flycatcher at Belleplain, or whistling to Eastern Screech-Owls just before dawn, our mixed-aged team enjoyed every minute of the trip.

Weather plays a major role in what birds we see during the competition and this year was no different. Migrating warblers were wholly absent and raptors were sparse. We often needed to visit 2-3 locations to find particular birds species that were found easily the day before. While some birds proved very difficult to find, we had great luck with seabirds. Amongst the ocean-faring birds we saw were Common Loon, Northern Gannet, Black Scoter, Surf Scoter, and a total of 3 Parasitic Jaegers! Another highlight was the huge abundance of shorebirds at Heislerville. While we missed the rare Culew Sandpiper that hid amongst the thousands of shorebirds, we did manage to find 18 species of shorebirds during the big day including a banded and color-marked Semipalmated Sandpiper (pictured above).



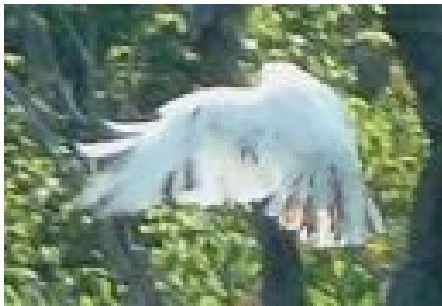
The Northern Flicker that flew over the van on our trip back raised our total species count for the trip to 150, with 139 species seen during the competition. A complete list of birds seen during our big day is available online.

Leucistic Red-tailed Hawk Returns

For the past several years, travelers along Vermont Route 12 between Worcester and Elmore have reported such miraculous birds as Snowy Owl and Gyrfalcon. In the end, all of these rarities were determined to be to a single bird: the leucistic (or partially albino) Red-tailed Hawk that resides in a swampy area not far from Elmore State Park. This bird's color (or lack-of) makes it easy to spot as you drive by. Thanks to John Bollard for sharing these photos with us!



Note that in the photo below of the hawk landing, you can still see some red tail feathers amongst the white.



Become a Member!

It's easy to become a member of Feather Questers and receive your member bird checklist. You can join one of three ways:

1. By Phone - just call us at (802) 229-6206 and we can get you registered and chat about birds.
2. By (e)Mail - log onto our website and you can find a registration form to be either emailed or snail-mailed back.
3. In Person - Stop into the Center any time we're open, take a look at the critter room, browse our birding library and register in person.

Upcoming Programs

All summer programs are free to members (unless otherwise noted), but please register at least one week in advance.

Avian Wonders (camp full, waitlist only)

Dates: Monday to Friday, June 27th to July 1st

Hours: 9:00 am to 4:00 pm

For: Children entering 4th to 7th grade

Cost: \$230 member, \$250 nonmember

Birds have captivated people for generations. From egrets to eagles, hawks to hummingbirds, come search alongside experienced birders for many birds that share our backyards. You can even complete a research project or start your own birdwatching journal along the way. Whether you are a passionate 'birder' or just getting started, this camp is for you!

Peregrine Falcon Foray

Wednesday, July 6, 8:30 a.m. to 1:30 p.m.

The Peregrine Falcon, once absent from the east coast, was recently removed from the Endangered Species List. However, Peregrines still face numerous challenges and are monitored at their breeding sites on sheer cliffs in Vermont. Join us as we monitor the pair at Marshfield Mountain.

Bird Banding Demonstration

Saturday, July 16, 7:00 am - 11:00 am

This spring, North Branch Nature Center started banding birds as part of a long-term study to learn more about avian productivity and survivorship. One of hundreds of similar stations around the continent, NBNC is participating in the MAPS program, which "provides critical information relating to the ecology, conservation, and management of North American landbird populations, and the factors responsible for changes in their populations." Join us anytime from 7:00am - 11:00 am to see how we catch live birds, band them, record information about them, and release them.

Impromptu Bird Trips

Nobody can predict when a rare bird will show up in Vermont, but we can certainly react when they do! Join our email list to receive updates about these last-minute trips to chase down rare birds by visiting our webpage (link below) or by calling us at 229-6206. With a Hawk Owl and a Varied Thrush already seen this year, who knows what will pop up next!



One of two Snowy Owls seen on an impromptu youth trip in 2008.