

Natural Selections

Newsletter of the Penobscot Valley Chapter of Maine Audubon



Nature Notes:

December - February 2021

What to Look For in December, January and February

BY GLORIA VOLLMERS

In the sky: First: with a smart phone or iPad, consider downloading SkyView – a terrific application for observing what's up there. Find constellations, space junk (spent rocket sections), the international space station, the planets, the moon, the sun – ANY time, anywhere. It's midnight – where's the sun? It'll show you. Second: check out In-The-Sky.org, a calendar of astronomical events. Great web page! Here are some highlights:

- Late on December 14-15, the Geminid meteor shower is most visible, with 60-120 meteors per hour. Bundle up and head out anytime after 10 p.m. The peak will come around 2 a.m. It will radiate out of the constellation Gemini (between Orion and the Big Dipper), about 78° above the horizon. That's almost straight up, so plan to lie on your back on an air mattress or reclining chair. No moon issues.

- December 21, Jupiter and Saturn will be very close to one another (it's called a conjunction). They're very bright, and visible by eye. From Bangor, the pair will become visible around 4:18 p.m. as the sky darkens, 15° above the southwestern horizon. They will gradually sink toward the horizon and set at 6:19 p.m. 15° is quite low in the sky, so you'll need to find an unobstructed view of the southwest horizon, like an open field or a hill. You'll need binoculars to distinguish them as two objects rather than one – that's how close together they will be. Look for Saturn's rings, and maybe some moons of Jupiter.

- Another good meteor shower is the Quadrantid. It's at peak on January 3, around 11:00 p.m. Expect about 100 meteors per hour. It radiates out of the constellation Boötes, located in the northwest sky to the left of the Big Dipper. Boötes is about 75° above horizon, so it's

high – no need to find an open field. Just lie back, and look up. Moonlight shouldn't be much of a problem.

- Full moon dates for this quarter: 12/29, 1/28, 2/27.

Plants: When walking near woods this summer, you may have seen a super-abundance of bracken ferns. They emerge on a single stem (called a stalk or stipe) and their three blades are triangular.



Woodfern

However, at first frost they all curled up and died (or more precisely, they went to sleep) – they are gone now. Unlike bracken, several of our native ferns are evergreen. Woodferns are lovely plants, with several fronds radiating out from a central point.

The blades are Christmas-tree shaped with many leaflets (Pinna) and many subleaflets (Pinnules) on each pinna. They are graceful, lacelike plants.

You may find Christmas ferns as well, so-named because someone thought that their pinnas look like Santa's boots. Their pinnas do not have pinnules. This is not a lacey fern.

Familiar to all, by sight anyway, is the Winterberry - the beautiful fire-engine red berry bush. Many use its berry-

laden branches for wreaths or holiday decorations. It lasts all winter, and contrasts beautifully with snow.

Bugs: Springtails, also known as snow fleas, appear in irregular abundance. Sprinkled across the snow, you may think they are just specks of dirt. But under closer examination, the dirt specks move. We have two species of snow fleas. The most common ones are black, and the others are rusty red. They emerge in swarms, but they are not dangerous and do not bite.

Birds: I'll leave the finer details to Bob Duchesne, but what you're seeing now in your backyard and neighborhood is what you will continue seeing: crows, goldfinches, nuthatches (white- and red-breasted), woodpeckers, tufted titmice, various sparrows, cardinals, jays, mockingbirds (a few, where they can find food and shelter through the winter), doves, pigeons, and our state bird – the black-capped chickadee. And, if you see a robin in February, don't think this is a harbinger of an early spring. We have them here year-round in varying numbers. This looks to be a good winter for irruptive species such as pine siskins, pine grosbeaks, crossbills and such. There are plenty more of course, AND you can go either to the coast to see shorebirds and seabirds, or out the Golden Road to see boreal species and finches. Just be sure to dress warmly.

Another great smart phone download is iNaturalist. If you don't know what you're looking at (plant, butterfly, tree, mushroom, bird), take a picture and you will either be told what it is, or be given likely suggestions. This app gets its information from users like you.



Christmas fern

(fern photos by Gloria Vollmers)

New masthead photo,
Ruby-crowned Kinglet by Ellen Campbell

MAINE AUDUBON

Penobscot Valley Chapter

Natural Selections

Natural Selections is published four times a year by the Penobscot Valley Chapter of Maine Audubon. Maine Audubon members living in the Penobscot Valley region automatically become chapter members and receive Natural Selections at no additional charge. Membership in Maine Audubon costs per year:

\$50 household; \$40 individual

\$30 senior/volunteer

Membership benefits include a discount on programs and purchases at all Maine Audubon stores as well as a subscription to the quarterly periodical *Habitat*.

The chapter offers a weekly email service to remind members about upcoming events in our region plus electronic delivery of this newsletter upon request. Please email Jim Zeman, kjzeman@hotmail.com to sign up for these services.

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Programs & Field Trips.....Ellen Campbell
Communications & Education.....Gloria Vollmers
Advocacy.....Sandi Duchesne, Tim Conmee
Stewardship.....Tim Conmee

Natural Selections

Editor.....Sandi McRae Duchesne
Design & Layout.....Donne Sinderson
Webmaster.....Bob Duchesne
Facebook Coordinator.....Jane Rosinski

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 <https://pvc.maineaudubon.org>
www.facebook.com/penobscotvalleyaudubon

FIELDS POND JOURNAL

BY DAVID LAMON, FPAC MANAGER
FIELDS POND AUDUBON CENTER

As we transition from fall to winter, I want to encourage all the members of our community who have been using the property at Fields Pond, spending much-needed time in nature, to continue this practice during the winter months. Winter is a fantastic time to be outdoors! The stillness of a landscape blanketed in snow is a great antidote to a stressful and busy life. Each little detail becomes heightened to our senses. Bare trees no longer provide as much cover for elusive wildlife, making chance encounters on a leisurely stroll more likely. Being outdoors in the winter is also beneficial to our physical health. It increases our Vitamin D level, which helps protect us against disease.

As I write this, the L. Robert Rolde Nature Center at Fields Pond remains closed for public use due to the COVID-19 pandemic. But the good news is that the trails and property remain open! Families with children who participate in our "Explorers Club" can check out backpacks filled with fun, age-appropriate outdoor activities that are suited to the season. When the snow gets deep, we have snowshoes available to rent, or you can bring your own to use on our extensive trail system. Please consider joining us for one or both of our winter moonlight snowshoe walks.

However you choose to do it, keep getting outdoors this winter. Bundle up, and stay safe!

One final note: the bears are all dened up now, so it's prime-time for setting out bird feeders. Bird seed orders are available for socially-distanced pickup outside the Nature Center at Fields Pond. You can order through the Nature Store at Gilsland Farm for pick-up at Fields Pond; call 207-781-2330, x201.

Thanks to Nancy Swanson (pictured above), John DeBlois, and Bunny DeBlois who all participated in this fall's volunteer Stewardship Day event. With their help, we were able to install several signposts for the Beechwood Trail, connecting the ridgeline to the shoreline! If you would like to join the volunteer stewardship corps at Fields Pond, please contact David Lamon at 989-2591 or email fieldspnd@maineaudubon.org.



Lotsa Redpolls, photo credit Bob Duchesne

Welcome to PVC New and Rejoining Members!

Liam Berrigan, Orono
Robert & Maureen Clark, Orrington
Matthew D'Angelo, Old Town
Timothy Dunlea, Bangor
John Hwalek, Bangor
Nancy MacKnight, Orono
Cathy Moison, Lincoln
Judy & Jim Oreskovich, Orrington
Julie Oreskovich, Orrington
Deej Patterson, Winterport
Elizabeth Payne, Orono
Donne Sinderson, Orrington
Susan Warner, Carmel
Debra West, Orrington
Sharon Wilson-Barker, Dixmont





BOB TALKS BIRDS: Winter Visitors by Bob Duchesne

I wrote this column in early November. By now, you should know if my predictions were correct. As this issue of *Natural Selections* was going to press, all signs pointed to an invasion of finches this winter. Canadian forests produced less natural food than normal, due to drought and other climate factors. Whenever that happens, northern seed-eating birds often head south to improve their chances of surviving through the winter.

Even in late summer, many red-breasted nuthatches fled southward. Finches soon followed. American goldfinches, pine siskins, and common redpolls are similar in size and behavior, eating small seeds and cones. Goldfinches and siskins nest in Maine. Redpolls nest across northern Canada. By October, many of Maine's goldfinches started migrating south, followed by a huge movement of siskins. Redpolls entered the state earlier than usual, showing up before Halloween.

Evening grosbeaks began mobbing Maine feeders in early November. Like all finches, evening grosbeaks have heavy, seed-crunching bills. But they are also fond of spruce budworms, and their populations rise and fall with budworm outbreaks. The combination of an outbreak in Québec, followed by a poor seed crop this fall, triggered one of the biggest evening grosbeak movements in decades. Long absent from Maine feeders, they have recently started chowing down on sunflower seeds with reckless abandon throughout New England.

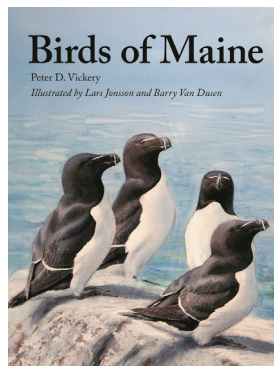
Once the movement starts, it's anybody's guess as to where it will end. Some of our winter visitors will fly all the way down to Dixie, while others will go no farther than Dixmont. Watching the birds is fun, but knowing the story behind what you're watching makes it fascinating. Every winter, our mix of seasonal visitors is different - and now you know why. Take notice of which bird species visit your feeder, count the numbers of each species, and record when they come and go. Did my predictions come true for you?

Birds of Maine is Now Available for Purchase!

The first comprehensive overview of Maine's incredibly rich birdlife in more than seven decades, *Birds of Maine* is a detailed account of all 464 species recorded in the Pine Tree State. Written by the late Peter Vickery in cooperation with a team of leading Maine ornithologists, this guide offers a detailed look at the state's dynamic avifauna—from the Wild Turkey to the Arctic Tern—with information on migration patterns and timing, current status and changes in bird abundance and distribution, and how Maine's geography and shifting climate mold its birdlife. It delves into the conservation status for Maine's birds, as well as the state's unusually textured ornithological history.

Peter Vickery passed away in 2017. Completion of the project fell to co-editors Barbara Vickery and Scott Weidensaul. As Scott says, "Peter worked on this book literally up to his final days in February 2017. He had written more than 300 species accounts, and had assembled the data for another 100-plus. The editors, co-authors Charles Duncan, Bill Sheehan, and Jeff Wells, and several others had quite a few species accounts to complete (including new species that kept showing up in the state, like Great Black Hawk), as well as the task of updating many that Peter had drafted, getting all of these peer reviewed and then drafting the four extensive introductory chapters Peter had envisioned. Bill Hancock produced almost 130 maps—range maps, migration maps, location maps for each area of the state as well as special topics like seabird nesting islands. Lars Jonsson produced 15 stunning, specially commissioned paintings, and Barry Van Dusen supplied more than 100 ink drawings."

Birds of Maine is now available for socially-distanced pickup at Fields Pond. Proceeds from the book will go to the Birds of Maine Conservation Fund at Maine Audubon. To order, call the Nature Store in Falmouth at 207-781-2330, x201.



PRESIDENT'S COLUMN: Staying in Touch

BY GORDON RUSSELL, PRESIDENT
PENOBSCOT VALLEY CHAPTER OF MAINE
AUDUBON

Since Spring we've had to avoid, or be extremely cautious about, any close personal contact due to the continuing coronavirus pandemic. This includes gatherings with close friends and family, as well as group activities with Maine Audubon and other favorite organizations. While it's necessary that we protect each other, it's also kept us awfully isolated. At Penobscot Valley Audubon, we've tried to be creative with virtual programs and limited-participant outings. But it's been difficult to connect with people as we ordinarily do, with our bird walks, field trips, and free monthly programs at Fields Pond Audubon Center.

In short, staying in touch with you, our chapter members, has become more challenging during the pandemic. We've expanded our quarterly newsletter, *Natural Selections*, to provide more photos and helpful content. We've also started doing more with our Facebook page to help with bird identification and other nature-related questions, and to provide an interactive forum for members to participate. We hope that you'll consider contributing to our newsletter, or reach out to us on Facebook with one of your favorite photos or nature experiences.

We will eventually get through these difficult times. We look forward to resuming our in-person bird walks and programs, and catching up with you at the PVC Annual Meeting, which had to be cancelled this past May. Until then, we hope you will still get outside and enjoy nature whenever and wherever you can. Share your experiences, pose your questions, and remember that we're still here to serve you and fulfill our mission, working to protect the wildlife and diverse habitats that make Penobscot Valley so special. Please let us know what's on your mind. Email your thoughts and comments to penobscotvalleyaudubon@gmail.com.

TRENDING: Our Facebook Page Got a Facelift!

This newsletter provides a quarterly summary of upcoming Penobscot Valley Chapter events and other items of interest to our membership. For updates, reminders, and breaking news, many chapter members have also come to rely on our email alerts and Facebook posts. If you're not on our email alert list, just contact the chapter webmaster, Bob Duchesne: duchesne@midmaine.com. Find us on Facebook at www.facebook.com/penobscotvalleyaudubon.

We're also pleased to announce a new interactive Facebook group page, where members can post nature photos, ask questions, get bird identification assistance, share other stories about nature and wildlife - just about anything that relates to our mission. It's called PVC Field Notes. Please join and like us at www.facebook.com/penobscotvalleyaudubon/groups/, and start sharing!



NEW TRAIL NAMED AT FIELDS POND

Fields Pond Audubon Center has a new trail that creates several longer hiking loop options around the sanctuary, connecting the waterfront and Lake Shore trail to the interior of the property. Dedicated volunteers helped blaze the trail, and the Penobscot Valley Chapter recently held a trail-naming contest on Facebook to come up with a name. Members were asked to hike the trail for inspiration, and submit names for consideration.

FPAC Manager David Lamon is delighted to announce that the new trail name has been chosen: it's now the "Beechwood Trail." Thanks to the volunteers who helped to create the trail, and all those who entered the naming contest.

The person who won the naming contest (who wishes to remain anonymous) received a beautiful felted soft sculpture of a chickadee gleaned fluff from cattails (shown below), hand-crafted by PVC Vice President Ellen Campbell.



FIELDS POND AUDUBON CENTER PROGRAMS - WINTER 2020-21

NOTE: Some of these events are contingent on COVID-19 restrictions. Please call FPAC at 989-2591 for more information. To register, please go to www.maineaudubon.org.

Night Tree Story Walk

Date(s) of your choice, December 1-31; no pre-registration necessary, but please observe all current COVID-19 safety measures as recommended by Maine CDC.

You're warmly invited to bring a wildlife-friendly ornament to hang on our very own Night Tree at Fields Pond. Enjoy the classic children's book, *Night Tree*, by Eve Bunting on a book walk along the trail behind the Nature Center. Here are a few simple bird-feeder ornament suggestions, which you can also place on your own backyard Night Trees:

- Pine cones covered with peanut butter and birdseed
- Small suet balls or suet cakes in holiday shapes, or small mesh bags of suet.
- Strings of fruits such as apple, pear, or orange chunks, with raisins or cranberries
- Dried sunflower heads
- Stalks of dried millet or other grain

Fields Pond Explorers Club

Offered every Wednesday, with either a 10:30 a.m. or 1:30 p.m. backpack pick-up. If a weekly program cancels due to weather, it will be offered at the same pick-up time on Friday.

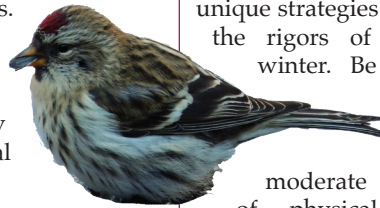
Looking for fun outdoor activities to do with your kids? The Fields Pond Explorers Club invites you to stop by the Fields Pond Audubon Center for a fun-filled time exploring nature. Each week there will be a different theme to explore, with activity instructions and materials provided by the education staff at Fields Pond. Participants will

explore the fields, wetlands and forests of Fields Pond, safely within their own "family pod," guided by the activities and materials developed by Maine Audubon educators. Activity kits will be picked up outside the Nature Center at the registered time (morning or afternoon) and may be used within the sanctuary for up to two hours before returning it. NOTE: Due to material preparation lead times, pre-registration is required prior to 9 a.m. on the day of the program. Materials are designed for children in Grades K-5, accompanied by a parent or guardian.

\$12 members.

\$15 non-members.

Price listed is for one family unit (four total individuals).



Full-Moon Snowshoe Hikes

Fields Pond Audubon Center
January 28, 4:30 pm (families); 6:30 pm (adults)
February 27, 5:30 pm (families); 7 pm (adults)

Join us for a peaceful winter's night hike. These special treks will be limited in group size with safe social distancing. A limited number of snowshoes are available by advance reservation only (additional \$2 fee).

\$6 for members/\$10 family members

\$8 for nonmembers/\$12 family nonmembers

Winter Survival for Maine Wildlife (Winter Ecology)

January 14, 7 p.m. (Online program via Zoom)

Did you ever wonder what happens to Maine's wildlife in winter? Doug Hitchcox,

staff naturalist for Maine Audubon, will explain the mystery of wildlife winter survival mechanisms and share some compelling stories. Pre-registration required to get Zoom link. Free for members, \$8 for non-members.

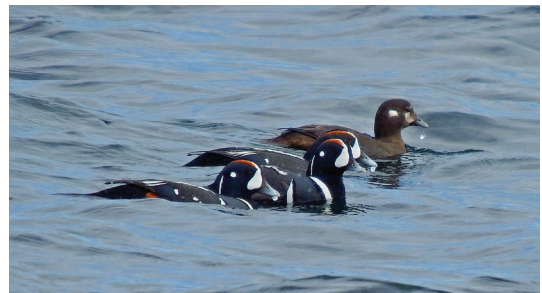
Winter Ecology Hike at Fields Pond

January 16 and February 20, 10 a.m. – Noon (same program on each date)

Join Maine Audubon staff for outdoors learning about winter ecology. Plants and animals have developed unique strategies to survive the rigors of a Maine winter. Be prepared for a

moderate amount of physical activity, and dress appropriately for the weather of the day. If conditions allow, bring snowshoes (we have a limited supply for rent if you need a pair; please call ahead to reserve). Group size is strictly limited to 12 participants total, with safe social distancing and in accordance with COVID-19 guidance from Maine CDC. Pre-registration is required. \$8 for members, \$12 for non-members.

Redpoll and Harlequin Ducks
Photo credit Bob Duchesne



FIELDS POND BOOK GROUP

The Fields Pond Book Group meets monthly on Thursday nights at 6:30 p.m. At press time, all meetings were still being conducted via Zoom, facilitated by professional librarian Joyce Rumery. Please contact Joyce directly at rumeryj9@gmail.com to be added to the mailing list for the Zoom meeting links and any in-person meeting updates. Here is the title and synopsis for February. The group will not meet in December or January.

February 11, 2021

McIntyre, Rick. *The Rise of Wolf 8: Witnessing the Triumph of Yellowstone's Underdog*. 2019. 304 pages.

Yellowstone National Park was once home to an abundance of wild wolves—but park rangers killed the last in the 1920s. Decades later, the rangers brought them back, with the first wolves arriving from Canada in 1995. This is the story of one of those wolves. Wolf 8 struggles at first, he is smaller than the other pups, and often bullied, but soon he bonds with an alpha female whose mate was shot. An unusually young alpha male, barely a teenager in human years, Wolf 8 rises to the occasion, hunting skillfully, and even defending his family from the wolf who killed his father. But soon he faces a new opponent: his adopted son, who mates with a violent alpha female. Can Wolf 8 protect his valley without harming his protégé?

MAINE AUDUBON

Penobscot Valley Chapter

c/o Fields Pond Audubon Center
216 Fields Pond Road
Holden, Maine 04429

Mission of the Penobscot Valley Chapter:
*Conserving wildlife and wildlife habitat by
connecting people to our regional natural heritage,
through enjoyable and meaningful activities
that educate and promote greater environmental
awareness.*

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PENOBSCOT VALLEY CHAPTER PROGRAMS AND FIELD TRIPS, WINTER 2020- 21

Due to the continuing COVID-19 crisis, the Penobscot Valley Chapter has placed a moratorium on in-person presentations and field trips. A socially-distanced field trip to Hothole Pond in the fall, led by Gordon Russell and Jane Rosinski, attracted just two participants - so we know that many of you are still avoiding any unnecessary public contact, until a vaccine or effective treatment is widely available. Many PVC presenters and field trip leaders feel the same way. So for now, we encourage you to explore the outdoors on your own this winter, using our website and previous newsletters - all available at www.pvc.maineaudubon.org - for inspiration on good spots to check out for birding and general outdoor recreation, both within the Penobscot Valley and elsewhere in Maine.

We are offering just one chapter program this winter, an online webinar by Bob Duchesne.

Bird Identification Made Easy Friday, February 19, 7 p.m.

(Online webinar via Zoom)

Ever wonder how an expert birder can quickly identify a female American Redstart, while you're still trying to figure out if it's a warbler? You've got plenty of company! Experts automatically look for certain visual clues that are easy to learn and simple to remember. Join Bob Duchesne for an online tutorial on how to identify some of our Maine birds more quickly and accurately. Like all of our chapter programs, it's FREE - but pre registration is required to receive the Zoom link. Send an email to penobscotvalleyaudubon@gmail.com to sign up and get the link.

Please check out the Maine Audubon events page, www.maineaudubon.org/events for more Zoom presentations and webinars that will appeal to all

Maine environmentalists. Many are free or low-cost, and you can always trust Maine Audubon to provide you with science-based perspectives on issues that affect Maine's native wildlife and wildlife habitat.

Stay safe out there! We will all get through this, together!

Next year we hope to be doing this again! Photo credit: Bob Duchesne.

