

The Rivertown Naturalist

NEWSLETTER OF THE HUDSON RIVER AUDUBON SOCIETY OF WESTCHESTER



May 2010, vol. 37, no.7

Hudson River Audubon Society of Westchester, Inc. is a non-profit chapter of the National Audubon Society serving the communities of Ardsley, Dobbs Ferry, Hastings-on-Hudson, Irvington and Yonkers.

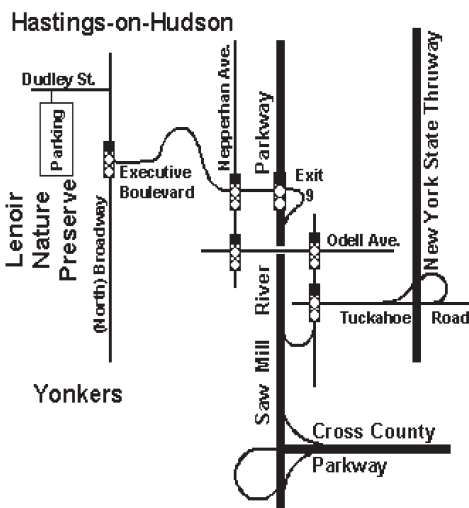
Our mission is to foster protection and appreciation of birds, other wildlife and habitats, and to be an advocate for a cleaner, healthier environment.

www.hras.org

DIRECTIONS TO LENOIR PRESERVE

Hudson River Audubon Society of Westchester, Inc. holds its meetings at Lenoir, a Westchester County Nature Preserve, on Dudley Street in Yonkers, New York (914) 968-5851.

By car: Take Saw Mill River Parkway to Exit 9, Executive Blvd. Take Executive Blvd. to its end at North Broadway and turn right. Go ¼ mile on North Broadway and turn left onto Dudley Street. Parking lot is on the left.



Costa Rican Ecology: Our Coffee & Cars A Naturalist's Travels and Musings in Central America WEDNESDAY, MAY 26 ~ 7:00 PM ~ LENOIR NATURE CENTER

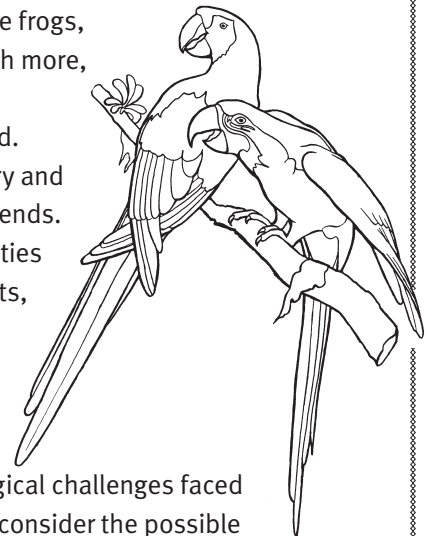
Join us as Ted Gilman, naturalist and education specialist at Audubon Greenwich, shares a program which will take us to a wide variety of Costa Rica's habitats from north to south to the continental divide.

With spectacular Scarlet Macaws, tree frogs, monkeys, bats, snakes, orchids, and much more, Costa Rica's amazing biological diversity attracts ecotourists from around the world. Ted was fortunate to travel there in January and February of 2008 with a small group of friends.

We'll meet some of the amazing varieties of birds, snakes, monkeys, spiders, insects, flowers, frogs, and wonderful people who call Costa Rica home, as well as neotropical migrant birds which we share with that country.

Ted will also share some of the ecological challenges faced by Costa Rica's biota, and ask all of us to consider the possible links between our everyday lifestyle choices and their potential impacts in faraway places such as Costa Rica.

This program will take place Wednesday, May 26 at 7:30 pm (refreshments served at 7:00 pm) at the Lenoir Preserve Nature Center. Program is free and open to the public.



Congratulations to our Greenie Awards winners!

Two board members were recognized for their greenness at the 3rd annual Greenies Awards sponsored by the Yonkers Green Policy Task Force. Walter Chadwick won for his educational work for school groups and Mary Harrington won for her work on the Lenoir Preserve Butterfly Garden. The Oscar ceremony spin-off recognizes local citizens who have made efforts within their personal and professional lives to preserve the environment.

Other winners familiar to Audubon included Terry Nagai who received the River Rat Award and Francis Bowen for his work with bees. Each winner received an artistic "Greenie" made from recycled materials by students from the Yonkers environmental magnet school, Riverside High. The awards were given out at a gala held at the Park Hill Racquet Club.

Dragons & Damsels at Lenoir Nature Center

SATURDAY, JUNE 19 ~ 11:00 AM ~ LENOIR NATURE CENTER

Winged wonders, aerial acrobats, dragonflies have been around since before the dinosaurs. Their flight is studied by the United States military and NASA. They come in a variety of colors from muted browns to brilliant blues and greens, bright reds and neon, they sparkle like dazzling jewels.

Join us on June 19, 2010 at 11:00 AM at Lenoir for an introductory program to learn about their lifestyle, the different species in our area, followed by a field session as we attempt to capture and observe these fleet flyers.



Birdathon!

Hudson River Audubon's BIRD-A-THON will be held Saturday, May 15th (rain date May 16th) to raise money for the chapter. You can help by making your pledge today. A BIRD-A-THON is like a walk-a-thon, bike-a-thon or any other "thon" in that we ask people to pledge X amount of money per lap, mile, or as in our case, bird species seen, within a 24 hour period. The combined list for the teams should be between 100 to 150 species. Pledges can be given for a flat rate such as \$25.00 or you can pledge per species such as 25 cents/bird. If we see 120 species your pledge will come to \$30.00. We will send out reminders after the bird-a-thon on how much you pledged. Thank you for your generous support!

National Audubon Birdathon Pledge Card

- I am happy to pledge \$ _____ per species in support of your bird-a-thon.
- I prefer to pledge the enclosed gift of \$ _____ .
- I will give you an additional \$ _____ if the _____ team spots a _____ (bird species).

Name _____

Address _____

City _____

State _____

Zip Code _____

Telephone _____

Send to: Hudson River Audubon Society, P.O. BOX 616, Yonkers, New York 10703

Make Donations Payable to HUDSON RIVER AUDUBON SOCIETY.

Remember, if you're not participating, please pledge to the Bird-a-thon to make our efforts worth it.

Science Watch: Pigeons in Flight Follow the Leader



“It is the first study demonstrating hierarchal decision-making in a group of free-flying birds.” —T. Vicsek

SAUL SCHEINBACH

Anyone watching the coordinated flight of a flock of birds has probably

marveled at their ability to rapidly change direction as one. How they manage to shift direction in synchrony has been a mystery until now. Writing in the April 8, 2010 issue of *Nature*, a team led by biophysicist, Tamás Vicsek, Eötvös University, Budapest, Hungary, shows that homing pigeons (*Columba livia*) do it by using a hierarchal “follow-the-leader” pattern.

The scientists outfitted 13 pigeons with tiny GPS data logger backpacks weighing just 16 grams (0.56 oz), which recorded each bird’s flight path every 0.2 seconds. They then released up to 10 birds at a time either in “free flights” near the home loft or “homing flights” a distance of ~15km (~9 mi) from the loft. Using the GPS they could follow each bird in the flock and look for “leading events”—when a bird’s direction of motion was copied by another bird but delayed in time.

They found that such follow-the-leader events occurred in a pair-wise fashion, i.e. each bird consistently tended to copy directional changes of another, resulting in a pecking order during flight. The hierarchical leadership pattern occurred during both free flights and homing flights and is different from other collective behavior, like that seen in schools of migrating fish, where control of the group’s movements is distributed among its members.

The average time it took each bird to copy the directional change of its leader was 0.37 seconds, considerably longer than reflex responses, and probably was the time it took for the follower to decide that its leader had actually changed direction. Although, birds that were flock leaders tended to be somewhat better navigators when

tested in solo flights, the team found that leadership of the flock was not set in stone. While the same bird was the leader in eight of the 15 observed flights, other birds took over during the remaining ones.

Vicsek believes this flexibility arises because the birds are familiar with each other’s ability. “These birds know each other. They know which is the smartest. The fastest bird will even follow the slower one who knows the way home the best,” he says. The same bird did not always lead during a particular flight, perhaps says Vicsek, because it got tired.

Although not always the first bird, the flock leader generally stayed in front, while followers tended to fly to the right of the leaders. According to the authors, this lateral bias stems from the fact that in pigeons the left eye (right brain) is better at recognizing individuals.

The scientists hope that this study will shed light on how leadership is determined in other animals. “We identified a clear hierarchical structure within the decision-making process,” says team member Dora Biro, University of Oxford, Oxford, UK. “The degree of coordination that flocks achieve is really impressive”. She says the next step is to find out “what airborne leaders are made of”.





Not only is the ostrich the only bird on the planet to have a urinary bladder and an eye that is bigger than its brain, it's also the largest known flightless bird, weighing in at over 300 pounds and standing up to 8 feet tall. It's also pretty nimble on its feet, having been clocked at speeds in excess of 55 mph.

Sandhill Cranes & Prairie Chickens

On last March 17th I went off with Saw Mill River Audubon to Nebraska to see the Sandhill Crane migration. We spent the first two days at the Switzer Ranch featured in the March–April issue of *Audubon Magazine*. It is a working cattle ranch that also does ecotourism.

The first morning, we were up before daylight to be driven out to the blinds (old school buses) at the Prairie Chicken lek. The buses are there year-round, so the birds are used to them. It dawned a beautiful morning and the birds put on a fabulous display with strutting and puffing and darting after the females. They would run right out of the lek area after a female.

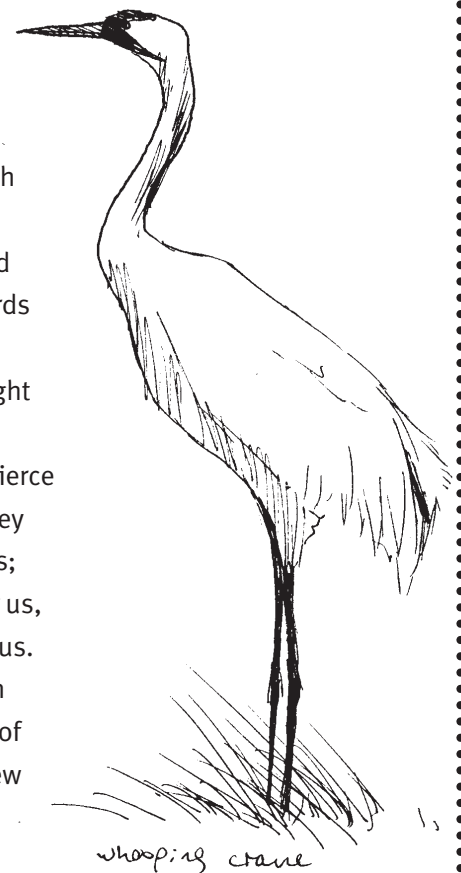
The next morning was a surprise. We awakened to snow on the ground and a fierce wind. That was our Sharp-tailed grouse morning. We saw them, but poor things they were just about being blown off the lekking grounds. They would dash a little ways; then hunker down. It was so cold in the bus, even with the quilts they provided for us, we didn't last long, and went back for a great ranch breakfast that was waiting for us.

We then drove on to Kearney and the Platte River to see the cranes. We were in the blind at the Rowe Audubon Center before the cranes began to fly in for a night of sleep on the sand bars in the river, safe from coyotes and other predators. They flew in by the hundreds and I loved the sound of their calls. After they settle down, it is like a murmur on the river.

We again were in the blind the next morning in the dark before they wake up to take off. That was my favorite spectacle, seeing them take off in mass, calling and flying over our heads, heading for the corn fields, where they eat the left over corn and fatten up for the rest of their flight up to the Arctic where they nest. They stay in the corn fields all day, and there are thousands of them.

Our other highlight was to see two Whooping Cranes feeding in a corn field and then take flight with those gorgeous white wings with black tips. They are the most endangered of the cranes and there are estimates of only three to four hundred in existence.

Ann Swain organized a fantastic trip. If you ever get the chance to go to Nebraska to see the Sandhill Crane migration, do it—spectacular! — YVONNE LYNN



Hudson River Audubon Field Trips

Hudson River Audubon Society field trips are free. Bring binoculars and field guides if you have them. Some are available for loan for those who need them. Dress appropriately for the weather. For more information call Michael Bochnik at (914) 237-9331 or e-mail at Bochnikm@cs.com

Additional information with maps and directions to each location is available on our web site at www.hras.org

Evening Bird Walk at Tibbetts Brook Park Friday, May 7, 2010

MEET AT 6:00 **PM** AT FLAGPOLE
(OFF MIDLAND AVENUE BETWEEN YONKERS AND
MCLEAN AVENUES)

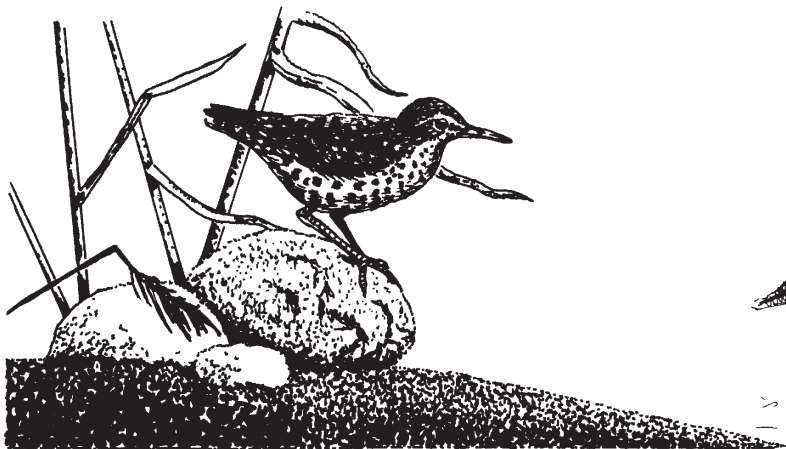
Relaxing evening bird walk at Tibbetts Brook Park. Enjoy nature after a long week at work. Spring migration is underway and we'll search for colorful spring warblers, Orioles, Spotted Sandpipers and more.

Mother's Day Warbler Walk Sunday, May 9, 2010

MEET AT 8:00 **AM** AT THE LENOIR NATURE PRESERVE

Our traditional walk around Lenoir Nature Preserve is one of our most popular events of the year. The walk should yield colorful migrants such as Rose-breasted Grosbeak, Scarlet Tanager, Indigo Bunting and spring warblers.

Afterwards joins us for some coffee, bagels and other delights. Binoculars are available for loan so bring mom and other family members!



Evening Bird Walk along the Bronx River at Crestwood Lake Friday, May 14, 2010

MEET AT 6:00 **PM** AT THE SMALL PARKING LOT
ON THE SOUTHBOUND SIDE OF THE
CRESTWOOD TRAIN STATION

Wood Ducks, Eastern Kingbirds, Baltimore and Orchard Orioles and more!

Sterling Forest Sunday, June 6, 2010

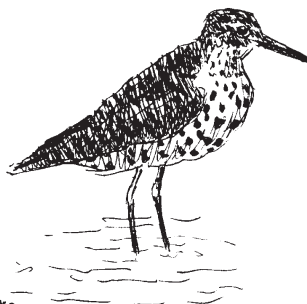
MEET AT 7:00 **AM** AT THE END OF IRONWOOD ROAD

We will look for Golden-winged Warblers as well as many other species at this well-known Orange County location.

For directions please visit our web site at www.hras.org/wtobird/sterlingforest.html

White Mountains, Kancamangus Scenic Byway and Pondicherry Wildlife Refuge Friday–Sunday, late June or early July, 2010

A look for breeding warblers, boreal species and moose!
Details to come.



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Join The Hudson River Audubon Society of Westchester!

Every membership supports Audubon's vital efforts to protect birds, other wildlife and natural habitats. Membership includes a subscription to *Audubon* magazine and affiliation with National Audubon. As a member, you will also receive our chapter newsletter, *The Rivertown Naturalist*, and an open invitation to all our guest lectures, field trips and events.

**SIGN ME UP AS A NEW MEMBER.
ONE YEAR FOR \$20.**

Name _____

Address _____

City _____

State _____ Zip Code _____

Telephone _____

CHAPTER NO C9ZR200Z

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