On-Line Programs

In order to comply with the current need to maintain proper social distances, we have cancelled many in-person programs and activities.

However, we are continuing to provide informative and entertaining programs via on-line webinars.

If you wish to participate in any of our on-line programs, send an email to hrasbirder@gmail.com requesting access and sign-in information.

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Identifying Migrating Hawks

Wednesday, Sept 9
7:00 p.m.

Whether you are a beginner or long-time hawk watcher; Michael Bochnik will give a refresher course on how to identify hawks in flight. He will focus on species that regularly pass by our Lenoir Hawk Watch in Yonkers and also tell you, why, how and when they migrate. Then join him and others at the Lenoir Hawk Watch on Saturday and Sundays for some real hawk watching.

If you wish to participate email to: hrasbirder@gmail.com requesting access and sign-in information.

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Ants of Van Cortlandt Park

Wednesday, Sept. 23rd
7:30 p.m.

Alex Byrne, Field Scientist and Research Coordinator for Van Cortlandt Park Alliance, will discuss insects, particularly ants, and their effect on birds and other species, as well as on their landscape with an emphasis on habitat selection, morphology and behavior, especially ants that interact with birds.

For the last 8 years, Mr. Byrne, who previously spent years studying frogs, dragonflies, and water quality, has focused on insects and ants.

Join us to learn about the tiny creatures that run the world – the Ants.

hrasbirder@gmail.com requesting access and sign-in information.

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Central Park Nature

Wednesday, October 28th
7:30 p.m.

Ken Chaya, an Instructor for the New York Botanical Gardens, is a highly skilled urban naturalist and designer, who co-founded the Central Park Nature Associates.

Ken’s presentation will focus on the Central Park Nature program, mapping out all aspects of the bird and wildlife available at our doorstep.

Ken has also used his artistic ability to design an excellent, fully comprehensible map of Central Park, very helpful to visitors.

hrasbirder@gmail.com requesting access and sign-in information.
Of course I will talk about COVID-19 and how Hudson River Audubon is dealing with it. It’s a public health crisis none of us have experienced before.

Some have lived through the emergence of other new diseased – AIDS, or the fear around large outbreaks of polio before Salk’s vaccine. But we haven’t experienced a wide shut down of transportation, offices and stores, places of close contact because of a communicable disease.

In March, in the absence of guidelines and wishing to be cautious, we cancelled and postponed activities. Some of our programs migrated to Zoom. We had fewer walks and those required pre-registration, social distancing, masks and limited participation. Overnight trips were cancelled.

We will continue, under guidelines. Our monthly programs – in September and October – will be Zoom webinars; our walks will have restrictions. We’ll send out emails and post on www.hras.org.

Hawk Watch started in August; socially distanced, masks required and no sharing of scopes (sorry). James Eyring will be flying his raptors on Hawk Day at Lenoir, outdoors, Saturday, October 3, 1 PM, unless the reopening of schools produces a spike in COVID-19 infection rates and guidelines change.

I expected that after lockdown, lives would return to normal. It has turned out that emerging from lockdown is trickier than going in. Coronavirus is embedded in our population. Until there’s a reliable vaccine (a refrain) we will be weighing our actions on the scale of low to high risk.

Much worries me about this pandemic: its rapid spread world-wide, our chaotic national response, and the sensationalism of media coverage. It could have – should have – been a chance for a conversation about the scientific method. It’s misunderstood by too many non-scientists and even worse, unknown to many others. Even in the responsible press, I didn’t hear or read much about the how the work of researchers proceeds. The attempts to explain how theories were explored and facts ascertained was drowned out by the noise of COVID-19’s fearsome effects. Nationally, scientists were shuffled off center stage and politicians claimed the spotlight.

We heard more about the death threats Dr. Fauci received, whether he is in or out of favor with the Administration, than how researchers are sorting through observations, how they are testing their theories against what they observe. This chance to educate Americans about how science proceeds from theory to fact was drowned in the noise of politically driven discourse. In an assessment of math, science and reading achievement among 15-year olds in developed countries, American students ranked 25th out of 43 countries (below Slovenia but above Greece). Too many Americans don’t recognize magical thinking. It’s handicapped our national response.

New York State was an exception. Widespread testing, social distancing and mask wearing regulations brought the COVID-19 infection rate, as of this writing, to hover around 1%. If the rate goes up, NY knows what to do.

At Hudson River Audubon Society we like to think we play a part in promoting scientific learning by encouraging the careful observation of nature. That was how modern science began. I hope that scientific, not magical thinking, will help us find our way out of this pandemic.

Oh, yes, and a vaccine.

- Fran Greenberg
Many of us bird by ear, i.e., we depend on birdsongs to identify species heard but not seen. Birding by ear assumes that the song males use to defend territory and attract mates remains fairly constant. Males of many species learn their song by listening to other males and perfecting it as they mature. But during this process they sometimes introduce a mistake, creating a variant of the original, an “accent” that spreads regionally and becomes a local “dialect.”

A common example is the white-crowned sparrow (Zonotrichia leucophrys). Juvenile males learn to sing by listening to older males in the neighborhood, and they typically breed close to where they were raised. As a result they exhibit regional dialects according to where they breed in the western US and across Canada. These geographical differences remain fairly constant, so much so that different dialects have become associated with five regional subspecies of white-crowned sparrows that also differ slightly in appearance.

But for a close cousin, the white-throated sparrow (Z. albicollis), a completely unexpected finding has emerged. Researchers have found that a new song, first sung by white-throated sparrows in western Canada, has rapidly expanded across the country. In the August 17, 2020 issue of Current Contents, a team led by Ken Otter, an ornithologist at the University of Northern British Columbia, Canada, and Scott Ramsay, follow the path of the new song as it spreads from Canada’s westernmost province, British Columbia (B.C.), throughout the country. First observed 20 years ago it has usurped the original and is considered the first example of the cultural advancement of a birdsong across a continent.

In 2000 Ramsey, a behavioral ecologist at Wilfrid Laurier University, Ontario, Canada, noticed that white-throated sparrows in B.C. weren’t singing the typical “Old Sam Peabody, Peabody, Peabody.” he heard back east in Ontario. Instead of ending in three triplets, the new song ended in three doublets, sounding like, “Old Sam Peabuh, Peabuh, Peabuh.”* Over the next few years he realized the doublet song was moving eastward and he and his team decided to study its progress. Listening to over 1,700 recordings from throughout Canada, the team was able to track its movement.

For example, in 2004 half the recorded males in Alberta, just east of B.C., still sang the old triplet-ending song. By 2014 virtually all the males in Alberta and the more easterly provinces of Saskatchewan and Manitoba had shifted to the new doublet-ending song. The new song continued to sweep across Canada, reaching Ontario by 2015, and the eastern province of Quebec by 2019, a distance of 3,300 km (2,050 mi.).

The team suspected the unprecedented rapid spread was fueled by eastern and western birds mingling on shared wintering grounds where singing is commonly heard. In 2013 they attached geolocators to male sparrows breeding in Prince George, B.C. and found that the birds migrate to two distinct wintering grounds. One is in coastal California and the other over the Rocky Mountains and into plains states like Kansas and Arkansas where birds from eastern provinces also winter. This strongly suggests that common wintering grounds provide a cultural milieu for eastern birds to hear and adopt the new song, facilitating its spread across the country.

It’s not a good idea for males to sing a new song that females may reject. However, in this case it appears that at least for now, females prefer the Texas two-step over the three-step Austrian waltz. But culture can quickly evolve; Otter et al. are already seeing a new variant of the doublet song popping up in B.C.

Saul Scheibach

Both songs can be heard at https://www.nytimes.com/2020/07/02/science/sparrow-bird-song.html

It looks like these sparrows may prefer to adopt slightly novel song variants rather than the common song. However, it does seem to have to match some kind of template, as you occasionally encounter males singing variants that aren’t doublets or triplets, but these variants don’t seem to catch on. So there must be some constraints as to what they will accept,” said Otter.
Bird Name Change

The push to remove the names of Confederate officers from buildings, schools, and army bases, as protests against racial injustice has entered the world of birds.

McCrown’s longspur, a sparrow-like bird of the Great Plains is named for John Porter McCrown, a US Army officer involved in the forced relocation of Native Americans in the 1840’s who then served as a Confederate general during the Civil War.

Of the 1,000 bird species in the US about 150 bear the name of an obscure 18th century person, e.g., Wilson’s warbler, Bewick wren. Some scientific purists want to change all personal names in to proper Latin and scientific nomenclature.

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Birds Win One

U.S. District Court overturned the Trump administration’s reinterpretation of the century old Migratory Bird Treaty Act (MBTA) that had let industry polluters entirely off the hook for killing birds.

The administration argued the law only applied to intentional killing of birds and not to “incidental” killing from industrial activities, including oil spills, electrocutions on power lines, development, and other activities that kill millions of birds every year.

If the Trump administration’s policy been in place at the time of the Deepwater Horizon oil spill in 2010, British Petroleum would have avoided paying more than $100 million in fines to support wetland and migratory bird conservation to compensate for more than a million birds the accident was estimated to have killed.

This is a victory for birds over big business.
Other Programs & Activities

Live HawkWatch
Weekends, 10:00 a.m.

Every Saturday and Sunday through mid-November we meet on the lawn behind the Lenoir Mansion with a clear view overlooking the meadow, the river and the Palisades to count and watch hawks, eagles and other raptors on their annual southern migration.

You never know what we will see. The typical migration season may tally a dozen or more species of raptors. One magical day in 2018 we counted 2,300 Broadwing Hawks pass overhead in less than one hour.

Bring a mask, binoculars, and a chair. Coffee and snacks are optional. We can watch the skies together. There is enough room to keep our distance.

For more information see our web page or email Michael Bochnik at bochnikm@cs.com

Virtual Guided Tour Audubon Murals
Tuesday, Oct 6th
7:00-8:30 p.m.

The Audubon Bird Mural Project consists of murals of over 300 N.A. birds in the Washington Heights of NYC, where John James Audubon lived the last ten years of his life.

Since all of the birds painted are threatened by climate change, the Project is designed not only to display the birds’ beauty, but also to make us aware of the challenges they face.

Each artist had license to represent the birds in any way that they choose, there is tremendous variation in the styles of painting. The 40 murals we will see range from lovely panels that fill in size from a window to spectacular murals covering the entire side of a 5-story building.

Our guide will be Leigh Hallingby, a licensed New York City tour guide.

Register online for Zoom connection info at www.sawmillriveraudubon.org/register/murals

Annual Hawk Day
Saturday, Oct 3rd
1:00 p.m.

Lenoir Nature Preserve
19 Dudley St. Yonkers

Live Hawk Program featuring Jim Eyring, Falconer, with all his hawks. Learn hawk facts. See them up close.

Watch them soar high into the sky and then marvel as they come swooping down only inches over your head.

A great event for children and adults of all ages
A Stop Along the Pollinator Pathway
by Deb Dolan

I recently visited my sister Kathie at her home in Garrison, N.Y., located in the town of Philipstown, in the western part of Putnam County. On the approach, a sign invites you to join the Pollinator Pathway and states that her property is on it, with native, pesticide-free plants. She has established a gorgeous two-acre pollinator-friendly habitat and food sources for bees, butterflies, hummingbirds and other pollinating insects and wildlife.

The aim of the Philipstown Pollinator Pathway Initiative is to nurture pollinators and reverse the decline of insect species responsible for more than 30% of the food we eat and 80% of all flowering plants. By using education and outreach, residents and neighbors are encouraged to support pollinators by establishing pesticide-free habitat and providing food sources, including native flowers, shrubs and trees.

I was thrilled watching hummingbirds, goldfinches, butterflies, honeybees, and bumblebees gathering nectar from the rainbow array of native flowering plants in her garden. Plantings are in clusters, creating a 'target' for pollinators to find. She planted for continuous bloom throughout the growing season from spring to fall, so pollinators can always find nectar. Her plants are mostly perennial and butterfly attractants, including hyssop, bergamot, coneflowers, liatris, and Joe-Pye. A bonus is that these plants are also deer resistant. Milkweeds are of particular importance as they are the sole host plant for monarch butterflies, and their numbers have declined dramatically in recent years. Fennel, dill and rue host the Eastern Black Swallowtail butterflies.

A field of crimson clovers was planted, and a wildflower meadow area in addition to the more formal garden areas. A solar powered fountain in her birdbath attracted birds, butterflies and dragonflies. Shrubs in flower included several native oak leaf hydrangeas. Fruit trees in the landscape design are apple, persimmon, cherries, peach, and nectarine that were magnificent in blossom in the Spring, attracting early pollinators.

I’d be remiss not to mention that Kathie’s husband Gabriel is the steward of their extensive vegetable garden, also organically grown. Vegetables when in flower also provide nectar for the pollinators. A composting area is adjacent to their chicken coop.

I was sent home with a dozen organic, free-range and cage-free, multi-hued eggs with rich orange yolks, a swag of lavender tied up in a silver ribbon, six tomato varietals that were cloned from suckers, and two enormous bags of wood chip mulch. How lucky am I to have relatives along the Pollinator Pathway who live surrounded in beauty and bounty.

If you are interested in learning more about Pollinator Pathways or advice on establishment, plant choice, nurseries, etc. here are three good sources of information
- Hastings Pollinator Pathway Group: hastingspollinatorpathway@gmail.com
- The national organization: https://www.pollinator-pathway.org/
- Mary Harrington, HRAS Butterfly Garden Director: TCTallon@aol.com
HOW TO CATCH A SALAMANDER

By Judi Veder

First it must have rained that day
but it could have rained the night before
or just at dawn’s moment
when the air is wet, you know,
wet like a sponge, overwet
and there’s a curtain of raindrops
and the air smells of pine and wetwood.
It must be the silent time, when there are
only sounds from footfalls on the moss,
intimate sounds only the silence can understand.

You have to wear your boots
and tie back your hair,
and use bug spray.

And you have to have a jar, not just any jar
-wide-mouthed and gaping-
for soft moss and twigs and palm stones
to form a world inside a world.

There are rules to follow, signs to sort:
- catch no more than 10, better 6 and no babies,
- replace overturned stones, pat down upturned soil,
- never grab the tail (they drop their tails you know).

You chant and pray and stop
to count tree rings or watch a cloud look like a face;
you overturn earth, flip over stones,
hoping to find the squirming orange thing,
green spotted softest babybelly thing.
It will try to flee, to hide, to play dead.
But you are the hunter!
Diana would do no better in her quest.
This is where you want to be,
and the sun rising and salamander-sated

Later you will put them on the window in the jar,
eat your lunch and tell your tale.
You might go out with friends and maybe
skip down the path or
swim in the pond or
swing in the trees.

And even later when the edge of an evening breeze
is just enough to cause a shiver,
you let the salamanders go,
put away your things, and hope they find their own way home.
**Guided Nature Walks**

Debbi Dolan, our Conservation Chair, has recently led well-received guided nature walks at both Van Cortland Park and Lenoir Nature Center. She is willing to do more walks. Groups size is strictly limited and requires pre-registration. Times are flexible, to match your schedule. Contact Debbi if you are interested in participating:  **turlan@optonline.net**

**NYS Restore Mother Nature**

In this year’s NYS budget, the governor and legislature had agreed upon an historic $3 billion “Restore Mother Nature” Environmental Bond Act to invest in key environmental protection and mitigation measures.

Unfortunately, the governor and the Division of Budget determined, on July 30th that the “Restore Mother Nature” Environmental Bond Act would not be on this year’s November 3rd ballot, citing the state’s fiscal condition. However, in the same announcement, the governor did express support for a future environmental bond act, indicating he would likely work to advance new authorizing legislation in the near future. We need to encourage him in this cause.

Get the latest updates at our website: www.HRAS.org