



# WINGBEATS

Audubon Society of the Capital Region

## Adirondack Snowmobile Plan Can't Get Traction

by David Gibson



More than two years after a draft Adirondack Snowmobile Plan was pulled back for its unpopularity, questionable legality and lack of information, DEC released a final plan in mid-October, which now includes a comprehensive literature search, a bit more environmental information about impacts from snowmobiling (gleaned from Yellowstone National Park), and additional economic studies. With this plan comes a year of work by DEC to map existing lawful snowmobile trails using Geographic Information Systems (GIS) technology. So what's not to like?

In general, the plan's goals are not well reflected in its recommendations. Its stated goals are to remove many snowmobiles from the Forest Preserve and relocate them to private lands or to preserve lands near roads and highways. But it makes no specific recommendations for trail closures in the preserve, offers no specific financial or legal arrangements to encourage the trail connections to move onto private lands - for example, on former paper company land through temporary leases or term conservation easements - and fails to do a feasibility study of whether snowmobiles could ride

within 500 feet of most Adirondack highways. Even hundreds of miles of trails on private land and on municipal lands, such as the popular Old Forge-Inlet Trail system, are not described or mapped in the plan.

DEC trail mapping and measuring leaves me skeptical. In 2001, DEC Forest Rangers had used GPS technology to walk snowmobile trails on the Forest Preserve and had come up with approximately 1200 miles of such trails (on trails and roads through the Forest Preserve). In spring, 2006 DEC called a meeting to announce the precise mileage of all lawful trails on the preserve: 1,429. The very next day that figure was rejected for a final tally of 850 miles. The difference was explained as a software error. 850 miles happens to be the same mileage that DEC had roughly estimated to exist back in the pre-computer age, and used by the APA as the figure much beyond which would constitute a material increase in snowmobile trails. The State Land Master Plan prohibits a material increase in the mileage of roads and trails open to public motorized use. So, 850 miles appear to me a "convenient" number and not necessarily a correct number.

As the old saying goes, how can you plan for where you are going if you don't know where you are? That characterizes one fundamental problem with DEC's snowmobile planning efforts. Mapping and measuring trails over such a large area is not easy, but DEC has had since 2001.

Failing to accurately describe and map (and measure) what trails exist (on whatever land ownership), the plan authorizes a new motor vehicle use on Forest Preserve trails - the tracked groomer. Many snowmobilers need these heavy vehicles to precede their use, packing and extending the life of the snow.

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## Audubon Society of the Capital Region



**Cordially Invites You To Attend Our  
Year 2007 Programs & Field Trips**



### Audubon Programs

**All Programs To Be Held At:**

*William K. Sanford  
Colonie Town Library*

**Thursday, January 11, 2007, 7:00-9:00 pm  
Wildlife from the Adirondacks to Albany**

**Speaker: Angie Berchielli**

Many wildlife species traditionally considered North Country critters have undergone range expansions in recent years and are thriving in the Capital Region. Otter, fisher, bear and bobcat, to name a few, have even been showing up in suburban locales. Join us as wildlife biologist Angie Berchielli presents a new look at some old friends.

A former DEC Environmental Educator, Angie Berchielli is a Cornell-educated wildlife biologist with considerable experience in the North Country as a hunter, trapper and wildlife photographer. She was the northeastern representative for the National Wildlife Federation before becoming an independent wildlife photographer. For over 25 years she has been active in the NYS Trapper's Association, and is one of the founders of New York's Becoming An Outdoors Woman Program.

**Thursday, February 8, 2007, 7:00-9:00 pm**

**The Solitary Group Life of The Kinkajou**

**Speaker: Dr. Roland Kays**

The kinkajou is a fruit-eating tropical mammal odd enough to puzzle scientists for centuries, and cute enough to warm a New York auditorium in winter. Join us as Dr. Roland Kays untangles the kinkajou puzzle by weaving together results from his field research with pictures taken by a collaborating photographer from National Geographic

*Refreshments will be served. As always, we encourage you to bring your friends and family. For directions or details, call Greg Rucinski at the Colonie Library at (518) 458-9274.*

Magazine.

Co-author of The Mammals Of North America, Dr. Kays is the Curator of Mammals at the NYS Museum, where his research addresses a broad array of behavioral, ecological, and evolutionary questions with mammals, primarily carnivores. He is currently pursuing projects in Albany's Pine Bush Preserve, the Adirondacks, Kenya and Panama.

**Thursday, March 8, 2007, 7:00-9:00 pm**

**Global Climate Change:  
More Than Just Hot Air**

**Speaker: Dr. Michael Burger**

In spite of persistent views to the contrary, the scientific community is convinced that Global Climate Change is real, is already here, and will have far-ranging impacts on natural systems worldwide. Come hear more about climate change from Audubon's perspective, including an overview of implications for wildlife, and, most importantly, what we can do to help protect birds, other wildlife, and their habitats.

Dr. Burger has been Audubon New York's Director of Bird Conservation for the past seven years. Based at the Cornell Lab of Ornithology, he oversees Audubon's Important Bird Areas, grassland bird, and forestry and wildlife programs, in addition to being actively involved in regional conservation planning, creating an international conservation fund, and wind power.

### Audubon Field Trips

**Saturday, February 17, 2007, 9:00-10:00 am**

**Great Backyard Bird Count (GBBC)**

**Location: 5 Rivers Environmental Ctr.**

This weekend, birders all over North America will count birds in their yard or local park as part of the Great Backyard Bird Count. Sponsored by the National Audubon Society in cooperation with the Cornell Laboratory of Ornithology, the GBBC tracks the distribution and abundance of winter birds. Join ASCR president Craig Thompson to monitor activity at Five Rivers' bird feeders from the comfort of the bird watching window. We'll apply the fun and simple GBBC protocols that you too can use to participate in the GBBC at home!



## Environmental Announcements

### Spring Audubon Council Meeting

ASCR members are cordially invited to participate in the Spring Audubon Council of New York State meeting, which will take place Friday, March 23 - Sunday, March 25 at the Gideon Putnam in Saratoga Springs. For more info, contact Audubon NY at (518) 869-9731 or [www.ny.audubon.org](http://www.ny.audubon.org)

### ASCR Annual Report Available On-line!

What has the chapter been up to lately? Check out [www.capitalregionaudubon.org](http://www.capitalregionaudubon.org) to review ASCR's ambitious 2006-07 Annual Plan, a recap of last year's achievements in ASCR's 2005-06 Annual Report, and other chapter-related info.

### Chapter Networker now On Line

Log on to Audubon's Chapter Networker at [www.audubon.org/local/cn/networker.html](http://www.audubon.org/local/cn/networker.html) to check out what's happening throughout the Audubon network. This free quarterly e-newsletter is chock full of information and announcements of interest to Audubon movers and shakers.

### eBird Takes Wing

Audubon New York and the NYS Ornithological Association are pleased to announce the launching of NY eBird, a state-specific project which provides a simple way for birders to keep track of their observations in the state while simultaneously contributing important information to a growing database of bird records. The eBird database can be used by birdwatchers, scientists, conservationists and educators who want to know more about the distribution and movement patterns of birds in New York State.

The free NY eBird program is designed for fast and easy data entry, and allows birders to define their regular birding locations, as well as suggest public birding areas as \*hot spots\*. Best of all, eBirders can export their data in a variety of ways, including ABA and AOU area lists, weekly, monthly or yearly lists, or location lists. To learn more about NY eBird and to sign up to participate, visit [www.eBird.org/NY](http://www.eBird.org/NY)

## Adirondack Snowmobile Plan

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But adding more motor vehicles in the Forest Preserve degrades its wild forest character. The very use of these groomers requires that rocks be plucked from the trails. Their turning radii requires that trails have shoulders and be widened to 9 feet, which this plan authorizes for some (unspecified) trail connections. The result is a flatter, wider, faster surface on "forever wild" Forest Preserve trails whose treads should be kept natural, rough, narrow and which legally must have the character of a foot trail. Snowmobilers (and DEC's plan) claim these wider, flatter trails will be safer because they allow two-way riding. What if by their altered dimensions and higher speed they prove more dangerous? Regardless, the Forest Preserve ought not to be managed to adapt to mechanized technology, but that is what this plan is authorizing. Why can't DEC market Adirondack snowmobile trails for the unique "natural experience" of narrow, meandering, slow (and yes, rocky) trails? Apparently, the state can't quite imagine that. What about global climate change? Well, snowmobilers will argue that use of tracked groomers becomes even more important when the snow starts to disappear in mid-February.

To conclude, the Pataki Adirondack snowmobile plan places far too much emphasis on expanded mechanized uses of the constitutionally protected, public Forest Preserve and lends too little attention to how to move snowmobile trail connections onto private or municipal trail systems (although its goal is laudable). Fundamentally, the "forever wild" clause of the NYS Constitution should not permit more motors and more trees to be cut down for wider, faster mechanized trails. A classic Court of Appeals decision (1930) says the Forest Preserve is intended as a wilderness, and is no place for high-speed mechanized use. DEC cites, but does not truly honor that court decision. The snowmobile plan should be scrapped by the next Governor and replaced by a complete map and description of all motorized trails on all land ownerships in the Adirondacks, and a serious plan and set of incentives for moving more of those motorized uses onto private lands where such uses are allowed via a conservation easement or lease. Eventually, all motorized uses – including snowmobiling – should be removed from the "forever wild" Adirondack and Catskill Forest Preserve.

David Gibson is conservation chair of the Audubon Society of the Capital Region and executive director of the Association for the Protection of the Adirondacks..

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## Short Eared Owl Survey



Because of concerns about the adequacy of the avian impact assessment for a wind power project in southern Herkimer County, volunteers are needed to search for short-eared owls at the project site. The area, located between Jordanville and Van Hornesville, is outside the membership area of any bird clubs and is woefully under-reported. There has been a dearth of Kingbird reports from the area, and no Atlas data from the 7 local survey blocks were submitted by a resident. Short-eared owls have been found many times during the winter very close to the project site. The habitat between Jordanville and Van Hornesville may well be a wintering area for these birds.

Volunteers can work alone or as teams any time from mid-December to January 7. Searches should take place during the last 2 or 3 hours of daylight, right up until total dark. On Sunday, January 7, 2007, as many people as possible will cover the whole area to tally as many owls as possible in one day. If you are interested in helping, please contact Tom Salo at [tomsalo@localnet.com](mailto:tomsalo@localnet.com) or 607-965-8232. You can read the DOAS comments on the Jordanville project at <http://www.doas.us/>

## Christmas Bird Counts

Again this year, ASCR sponsored 2 Christmas bird counts within the Capital Region. The Saratoga County Count was held on Saturday, December 16. For results, call Coordinator Larry Rowland at 377-3959. The Albany County Count was conducted on Sunday, December 17. For results, call Coordinator Alan Mapes at 439-4086. A citizen science initiative older than the Audubon Society itself, the Christmas Bird Count has, over the past 103 years, built an important scientific record entirely thru volunteer effort. Last year, counts were conducted in all 50 states and many US territories. For information on Christmas Bird Counts in New York State, go to <http://www.nybirds.org/ProjCBC.htm>

**\*\*\* For Programs, Field Trip, & Further General  
Environmental Information, Visit Us on the Internet at:  
[www.CapitalRegionAudubon.Org](http://www.CapitalRegionAudubon.Org)**



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of the Capital Region, Inc.  
c/o Five Rivers Environmental Education Ctr  
56 Game Farm Road  
Delmar, NY 12054

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US Postage  
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Permit # 881

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