

October - December 2007



# WINGBEATS

Audubon Society of the Capital Region



## Silence of the Songbirds by Bridget Stutchbury

a Book Review by David Gibson



Many of us who have grown up with Rachel Carson's 1962 classic *Silent Spring* have been waiting for a kind of sequel that reflects the realities of the unraveling of the earth's life support systems that we know is happening and to which birds are exquisitely sensitive. In its global scope, scientific rigor and message that humans hold in their hands the future of a vast migratory birdlife, *Silence of the Songbirds* is a most worthy candidate as a sequel.

The losses of migratory birds from the widespread introduction of pesticides after World War II documented by Carson have been completely eclipsed by the rapid declines across dozens of bird species due to a combination of massive tropical deforestation and pesticide use, and rapid changes in North American and boreal forests due to habitat fragmentation, introduction of new bird and nest predators and of thousands of new radio, television, wind and cellular phone towers which kill birds in migration. Stutchbury not only explains and catalogues these lethal and sub-lethal hazards, but reminds us what we can do about them – that the choices we make in our purchasing, energy and lighting, development, agriculture and management of our beloved pets are very important if birds which survive over-wintering and migratory hazards are to successfully

raise their nestlings to adulthood.

A bird ecologist who has closely studied bird natural history in the tropics of South and Central America, United States and Canada, she shows her intimacy with mountains of new data about how and where particular bird species migrate, live out of their lives, socialize and sort out habitats on their wintering grounds and breeding grounds of North America. She chronicles the miracles of the communication and social behavior of, for example, the hooded and kentucky warbler on their North American breeding grounds as well as her study sites in Central America. While the kentucky warbler's southerly breeding range makes it unfamiliar to many of us in upstate New York, the flutelike song of our beloved wood thrush is no longer heard in many upstate New York woodlands because it faces the same massive change in wintering habitat. As she writes, "Kentucky warblers and wood thrush are both forest birds that have declined dramatically in the past few decades. Their entire wintering range in Central America has undergone extreme deforestation during this same period. Both species are territorial, so they cannot simply crowd into remaining forest and share what little habitat is left."

Stutchbury clearly communicates for the lay reader the complexities of how "our songbirds" are forced to over-winter in small, scrubby patches of the former vast forests of South and Central America, where she estimates 750 million acres of tropical forests were lost during the 20<sup>th</sup> century for lumber, cattle, coffee, cacao and other plantations. While birds may survive in these scrub patches, they do not thrive due to their level of stress. We all relate to heightened hormonal levels released under stressful situations, like our daily work commutes in an automobile. The author cites heightened stress hormones in over-wintering birds living in lousy habitats, "chronically short of food, living under the constant threat of predation, or frequently chased and harassed by other birds." These birds tend to be underweight as they begin their long northward migration and less successful as breeders if they survive their long journey.

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## Audubon Society of the Capital Region



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



### Audubon Programs

**Unless Otherwise Specified,  
Programs To Be Held At:**  
*William K. Sanford  
Colonie Town Library*

**NYS Breeding Bird Atlas Project**  
**Thursday, October 11, 2007 @ 7:00p.m.**  
**Speaker: Kim Corwin**

Join us as DEC's Kim Corwin presents the results of the now-completed Breeding Bird Atlas project. There has been a significant amount of change in bird breeding status since NY's first Breeding Bird Atlas was published twenty years ago. Ms. Corwin will focus on some of the most surprising changes and the overall trends in the state's breeding birds.

Kim Corwin is the job captain for the Breeding Bird Atlas project. She has been a wildlife biologist in NYS DEC's Division of Fish and Wildlife since 1982. Publication of the Atlas is expected in summer 2008.

**IBAs, BCAs, and the CCC**  
**Thursday, November 8 @ 7:00p.m.**  
**Speaker: Craig Thompson**

FDR's Civilian Conservation Corps initiative (1933-42) did much to advance the stewardship of our New York's state parks, forests and wildlife refuges, and did even more to improve the profound socio-economic plight of the "greatest generation". Join us for a celebration of the CCC program in New York State, which, with over 200 camps, was the largest CCC program in the country.

Craig Thompson is ASCR's President by night, and by day the Director of NYS DEC's Five Rivers Environmental Education Center, the site of CCC Camp S-72 (1933-36).

**The Canadian Atlantic**  
**Thursday, December 13 @ 7:00p.m.**  
**Speaker: Scott and Denise Stoner**

From the gannets of Bonaventure Island, to the tides of Fundy, the sandy beaches and flowers of Prince Edward Island, and the Highlands of Cape Breton; across the sea to the fjords, bogs and icebergs of Newfoundland and Labrador, Atlantic Canada is a land of spectacular scenery and wildlife. Join local bird experts Scott and Denise Stoner for an eye-popping pictorial as they recount their fabulous adventures to this special place.

Scott and Denise Stoner have served ASCR and the Hudson Mohawk Bird Club in several key capacities for many years. Inveterate eco-travelers, together they have visited most of America's National Parks and Wildlife Refuges, and a good deal more.

## Audubon Field Trips

**Birding Vischer Ferry**  
**Sunday, October 7 @ 9:00 a.m.**

Join chapter president Craig Thompson on a field survey of fall migrants at Vischer Ferry Preserve, one of the Capital District's premier birding destinations. Suitable for the birding novice, this "citizen science" outing will continue our chapter's "Adopt An IBA" initiative at this site. In the event of inclement weather, this program will be cancelled. Please call 371-6667 to register or for more information.

*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.*

## ASCR's Capital Cuckoos Complete Bird-A-Thon with Dignity

By Alison Van Keuren

ASCR board members John Hershey, Jane Graves and Alison Van Keuren along with local birder Larry Rowland comprised ASCR's 2007 Montezuma Muckrace bird-a-thon team. Team members scouted during the day on Friday in nearly tropical heat and humidity. We were able to lay out possible routes through the Montezuma Wetlands Complex to view target birds. The start time of 8PM Friday evening found us overlooking the Knox-Marcellus Marsh and right on time a Black-crowned Night-Heron called as it flew in for an evening of feeding. That was a good start. Then we attempted to hear owls later that Friday evening and did not find any. The resting place for the night was a charming hunting cabin. The only down side was that another team had also been invited to share the abode. The result was nine people attempting to bed down in a facility designed for about half that number!. To alleviate the crowding two of us utilized tents we brought along just in case.

With nine of us using the lone bathroom, the rising, breakfasting and departure was not the high point of the day. We greeted dawn on the South Spring Pool Trail that took us to Esker Brook Trail. We started our day list in fine style here with an Eastern Screech-Owl finally calling well after sunrise. One of the real treats of the day was observing shore birds from the tower at Tsache Pool. An American Golden-Plover in near breeding plumage was a treat for all and a life bird for one member of the team. Other observation locations included the Wildlife Drive, Towpath Road, and the Reccio Unit. Many birding teams took a lunch break at The Main Street Café in Savannah where a birders buffet was available. As there had been little rainfall in the past several weeks there was limited shore bird habitat available anywhere in the complex. The last stop of the day was at Montezuma Audubon Center with its two ponds and adjacent grassland.

Two youth teams, a low carbon foot print team and two teams with members from the Cornell University student body provided an inspiring flavor to the event. The young birders are expanding their horizons and gaining important experience that will help them continue a natural history and conservation oriented life. The winning team, *Wings over Ithaca*, with Cornell students finished in first place with 140 species. The two youth teams finished with 77 and 74 species respectively. The youth teams were abounding with enthusiasm. One added a species, Clay-colored Sparrow, new to the list of birds sighted over the eleven year history of this event. The ASCR team finished in the "with dignity" category at 100 species.

As this time the final amount of funds raised for the Friends of Montezuma Wetlands Complex is over \$6,000. The funds this year will go towards establishing an *e-Birds* kiosk at the Montezuma Audubon Center. There is still time to financially support your team. If you wish to do so please contact ASCR.

## Book Review Continued..

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Throughout, Stutchbury reminds us that we can make a difference. She devotes an entire chapter to coffee ecology: the stark differences in habitat between sun and shade-grown coffee and the big effect our coffee drinking choices can make. Shade-grown coffee trees mimic to some degree tropical forests in the degree of shelter and food they offer to a wide variety of bird species. Massive replacement of more traditional shade-grown coffee plantations to full sun-grown coffee may have resulted in some of the dramatic declines of songbird populations seen during the 1990s. Stutchbury makes a compelling case that buying shade-grown coffee is, truly, investing in habitats in which over-wintering birds can not just survive, but thrive.

In this very readable, dramatic story of the gauntlet which our beloved warblers, tanagers, vireos and other songbirds of forests and fields run, Stutchbury provides much food for thought about the impact our life choices have on bird survival. She also offers much for the serious student of birds as well. The final chapter focuses on why birds tend to prefer larger, unfragmented forests to smaller forest patches. For decades, it was thought that deep forest birds avoided patches because of their many edges. Forest birds avoided forest edges largely due to losses of eggs from edge-effect predators. In addition to these predatory impacts, Stutchbury explains another reason. She writes that it is their social behavior that drives so many forest birds to avoid forest fragments. The migratory songbirds we welcome back each spring require tightly packed bird neighborhoods of their own species because about half of migratory songbird females mate with more than one male. Promiscuity in songbirds, it turns out, is not antisocial but part of their North American survival strategy. Larger forests provide the critical and crowded habitats for bird society to play itself out during the brief breeding months before they turn, once again, to the dangerous migratory routes and an uncertain welcome and lengthy stay in the southern hemisphere.

*Silence of the Songbirds* will heighten awareness of birds and their critical ecological role in tree seed distribution and insect predation. Our forests depend on birds, and visa-versa. Their fate and our fate are intertwined, and very much in human hands. This book deserves to be in our hands to read and re-read.





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# Audubon News

## Thompson Tapped for Council Vice Chair

ASCR President Craig Thompson has been elected Vice Chairman of the Audubon Council of New York State. Thompson has been a Director of the Council since 2004 and has served in several Council capacities. Thompson noted "I am honored to have been entrusted with this exceptional opportunity to contribute to the Audubon cause, and look forward to working with chapter leaders throughout the state in advancing Audubon New York's ambitious agenda".



## Audubon Society of the Capital Region Annual Report available on line



What has your chapter been up to lately? You can check out ASCR's Annual Report on line at: [www.capitalregionaudubon.org](http://www.capitalregionaudubon.org) for a recap of our 2006-07 achievements and our Annual Plan for 2007-08.



## ASCR New Website Design

In the next few weeks ASCR will roll out a newly designed website which is graphically more pleasing and more easy to navigate. Please come and view our new site online at : [www.capitalregionaudubon.org](http://www.capitalregionaudubon.org)

## 2007 NYSOA Annual Meeting

The 2007 annual meeting of the New York State Ornithological Association is scheduled for October 5-7 at the Holiday Inn in Batavia. The featured speakers will be California State University professor Dr. Jeff Price who will address the impact of climate change on avian communities. Also Marianne Hites and Judith Seiler of Messinger Woods Wildlife Care & Education Center will present All About Owls, with live specimens. For more information, go to the NYSOA website at <http://www.nybirds.org>.

**\*\*\* 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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