

DECEMBER 2018 NATURAL HISTORY NOTES

By Dick Harlow

SUMMARY OF 2018

This has been an interesting and at the same time a humdrum year. Our habitat is slowly changing. Trees that were planted in 2012 are getting larger and fuller. Gardens around cottages and the Inn are older with varied refinements. Therefore, we should see more bird species spending some time with us either during migration or nesting.



Snow scene at EastView, © Dick Harlow

But, the maturity and refinement of EastView's landscape is not necessarily an intriguing enticement to some bird species.

For example, the Killdeer pair that nested here in 2013, '14 and '15 have not been back. A pair has been seen each early spring flying through or temporarily stopping to investigate. The area where the female used to nest is now manicured and human interaction in the area is too close for bird comfort. The gravel path where a female Killdeer tried to nest is now a paved path, not a gravel path that is more enticing. The Alpine garden has too much human traffic to be of interest. So, one can see that not all human enhancements worked for this species. This is ultimately a place for humans to enjoy.

We still are a quiet place, although there is more resident traffic; however, not a great deal during the spring and summer months, so it still should be acceptable for birds to nest around our community. A Chipping Sparrow has nested in the top of a maple along Deer Meadow Drive, but few other nests have been observed. Maybe, our landscape hasn't matured enough. Whatever the case, what we have seen is a marked decrease in the number of species seen visiting our campus.

The regional natural history news in newspapers and magazines suggest a general decrease in bird species overall with the preponderance being birds that feed on flying insects, e.g. swallows and flycatchers.

Let's look at the data.

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Total Bird Species seen on/from EastView property-each year for 5 Years:

2014 - 81

2015 - 69

2016 - 73

2017 - 68

2018 - 57

As can be seen through this yearly five-year total, bird species sightings have generally decreased, markedly from 2014 to 2018.

The total avian species seen at EastView is 94 species.



Eastern Kingbird, © Dick Harlow

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It can be argued that the older we get the less observant we tend to be due to diminishing eyesight acuity. Or we could argue that this lowering in numbers is evidence of a general decrease in particular bird populations.

I would object to the first argument as an excuse for not giving credibility to age and experience. It doesn't take into account the possibilities that the observers are using binoculars and scopes rather than trusting eyesight alone. Obviously, the second argument, subscribed to by many wildlife biologists and bird observers seems more logical and real.



Snowy Owl © Dick Harlow

A couple of examples to prove my point. In the past we have observed at EastView at least 3-4 Warbler species usually during fall migration with two or three during spring migration. Not a single warbler was seen this year during either migration period. This does not mean there were no warblers; it simply implies that there were either fewer traveling through this area than in the past or they bypassed EastView entirely.

Since 2013 two or three flycatcher species, such as Eastern Kingbird, Eastern Wood-Pewee, Eastern Phoebe, and Great-crested Flycatcher were current residents during spring and fall migration, with some staying during the fall for two weeks or more.

This year Eastern Kingbird was the only flycatcher that stayed around for a day or two, while the Pewee was observed only once and the Phoebe or Great-crested were not seen at all. Within the ornithological community there is the observation that there are lower populations of large flying insect eating birds.

Can food supply, weather and migration have an effect on distribution. Of course! This is why five years of data can only represent an indication. It also suggests why more data is needed to analyze and give meaning to what is happening to our climate/environment and the cause and effect to wildlife, specifically to avian populations that share this planet with us.

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We are not alone in these observations, as other areas of the country are reporting fewer total birds as well as fewer species.

Have we had anything new visit our campus this year?

Yes, Great Egret, Virginia Rail, Skunk, Coywolf and Weasel. This is significant in one regard. Maybe the reason we see fewer rodents in our gardens is the appearance of both the Coywolf and Weasel into our environment. Being a very efficient predator, a weasel can limit the rodent population within the area it hunts. I'll talk about weasels in a future note.



Great Egret © Dick Harlow

The Great Egret picture was a great visit that lasted the whole day. It was first seen in the trees across the meadow, near Otter Creek. It ended up in South Pond. This was a first sighting for EastView.



Eastern Chipmunk © Dick Harlow

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The Weasel in November that was observed carrying a vole in its mouth, scurrying under our raised beds was by pure accident. I happened to be observing birds at our feeders when I noticed movement in the garden below the window – and there it was moving very quickly to take its prey under the raised bed!

The Coywolf was observed by residents living at the end of Deer Meadow Drive. It was seen early in the morning walking across their patio. As I was told, it looked like a wolf and they made sure they and their dog stayed inside.



Muskrat © Dick Harlow

What have we **NOT** seen this year, that we have seen in past years?

No **Bittern**.

No **Female Snapping Turtle** or her diggings in gardens.

Less animal tracks by South Pond

No **Chipmunks**, only two voles, few rodents generally.

No **Muskrats** in South Pond and rabbits seen only this past spring and early summer.

Generally, a lackluster year!

Is this disturbing? Yes!

But before we get caught up in being overly concerned, let's give us a few more years of collecting data.

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Weather Tidbits

Month of DECEMBER 1-31, 2018

[All Measurements taken at solar noon \(1230 EST\).](#)

PRECIPITATION

Total Precipitation: 40.0 mm or 1.6 inches. Normal is 3.5-4.0 inches for the month.

Even though we had light to heavy rain at times during this month we are still below normal for the month.

Overcast Days: 10

Characteristically, for the year, EastView and Middlebury was dryer during periods when fruit on trees were developing and ripening, which resulted in fruit that had poor wildlife food value. Also, increased precipitation at other times during the year helped forests, but became agriculturally inconsequential.