

FEBRUARY 15-28, 2015 NATURAL HISTORY NOTES FOR EASTVIEW
By Dick Harlow



Snowy Owl, *Bubo scandiacus*
Photo © Dick Harlow

We were fortunate in December 2014 to have a Snowy Owl visit our field off South Street. Fortunately, we have had a few Snowy Owls visit Addison County so far this year, but, unfortunately, they are not in the numbers of last year and they have not revisited our viewing area here on South Street. But, we can always hope!

I have been asked, what do Snowy Owls eat while here in Vermont? They will feed on voles, mice, rabbits, or squirrels. Unlike the Snowy Owls that visit the Atlantic shore, these inland owls that are observed around farmlands are not opposed to taking a bird or duck, but probably are more favorably inclined towards rodents.

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FISHER



Fisher, *Martes pennant*
Photo © Mass Audubon

I saw my first Fisher tracks in the snow on our driveway in Milton, Vermont. I have to admit I had a heart thump when I realized what I was looking at. I have a lot of respect for this animal and its persistence in moving back into Vermont after being extirpated, or trapped, out of Vermont for its fur. Isn't it great to be able to see these native animals coming back to Vermont?

Fisher, *Martes pennant*, or Fisher cat as it is known in Vermont, is a member of the weasel family of mustelids. It is larger than our American Martin, *Martes americana*, and lives in the woods including the boreal forests of the US and Canada. The boreal forest is represented by the coniferous forest made up of spruce, fir, larch and pines, also called the Taiga (from Turkic) that is found around the world in the northern hemisphere.

Fisher males tend to weigh between 9-14 pounds, about the same as a large cat. However, it is a hunter with the ferocity and reputation of the weasel family and will take down a house cat if the cat is out in the woods at night or strays into a Fisher's territory. Generally, a Fisher is omnivorous, but its preferred food is rabbit, especially Snowshoe Hare. However, they have been known to successfully flip over a Porcupine and attack its vulnerable underbelly. The name Fisher cat suggests that it has feline characteristics. Not necessarily so. Fishers are NOT related to cats and do not eat fish, although they can climb trees. Probably the name came from the fact that they are stealthy like a cat, can jump like a cat and can climb trees. Their ferocity toward their prey has been likened to the ferocity of a Wolverine, a cousin from the same taxonomic family.

Their preference is to hunt on the ground, especially around blow-downs where the forest trees have been blown over from wind and rot, and litter the landscape. With all this cover rodents and other animals use these blow downs for cover and denning.

This secretive and elusive mammal is slowly returning to our landscape, since it was trapped out of Vermont in the early part of the 20th century. Although it has been known to kill house cats, it tends to stay away from humans and will not den under houses or sheds. Yet

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obviously, it will travel through human property looking for prey. About the only way we see them is if they leave tracks in the snow or mud or if someone is lucky enough to see one while walking in the woods.

Red-winged Blackbird



Red-winged Blackbird, *Agelaius phoeniceus*, Male
Photo © Dick Harlow

This blackbird is a well-named bird! The male has a red shoulder on its wing highlighted by a yellow-white bar under the red and a jet-black body. The male is a very visible presence in our meadow in the spring vying for female attention and sparring with other males as it calls from the top of a cattail, bird box or any projection that will give them a view of their surroundings. You can't miss them here at EastView as they go about their daily business in our meadow, or on top of or beside our birdhouses.

Being the end of February, and dependent on the weather, we could begin to see Red-wing Blackbirds the end of the second week in March. They are very territorial and older birds that were successful the previous year will remember their area, come back early, weather permitting, and try to defend that spot before a rival might gain an advantage. A definite advantage comes to the first male to be in an area of choice.

The Red-winged Blackbird is NOT monogamous; it is a polygamous species. Polygamy has two types in bird populations: **polygyny**, where a dominant male mates with several females, and **polyandry**, where a dominant female mates with several males. The difference is who is the dominant gender, whether the male is the aggressor in search of females to mate with or whether the female is dominant in search of males.

Polygyny is more common in bird species than polyandry and is prevalent in Red-winged Blackbird populations. Male Red-winged Blackbirds are fiercely defensive of their territories. This is the reason we see their jousting, chasing and raucous activity in our fields and meadows in the spring. A single male will try to impress as many females as he can so they will nest in his territory and he may very well have several females nesting at different stages in his territory.

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You might ask, why would a female, who depends on a male for help with food procurement, accept less attention because he is looking after additional females? Ornithologists still are not sure why, but have come up with a plausible explanation. By choosing a male with the best territory she as well as the other females are assured of food and protection. Although that is plausible, it seems to me to be more of an evolutionary behavioral trait. Those males that have the best territories and abundance of food, allows for greater survival of their young over time. Therefore, over the long run, many thousands of years, this would lead to female behavior not needing more attention from a single male and accepting his territory with other females as the best alternative.



Red-winged Blackbird, *Agelaius phoeniceus*, Female
Photo © Dick Harlow

The image of the above female gives you a good idea how different the plumage is for the female compared to the male. Her cryptic coloration and wariness is very apparent from this image of her through a Ninebark shrub.

Although males and some females feed side by side during winter, males are usually the first to come back to prospective breeding territories in the spring. Females come back about a week later. Because males are territorially obsessive, it could be dangerous for females to be here at the same time.

Sometimes when driving along the roads and byways in Vermont you will see a lone male calling from dead cattails stalks and wonder what kind of territory is he trying to defend. But, as spring progresses and the cattails and other vegetation grows his territory becomes more visibly viable. However, it should be said that redwings don't only nest in cattails; they will also nest in tall Canary Grass or thick wet meadows, like here at EastView.

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BLUEBIRD CONCERN



Eastern Bluebird, *Sialia sialis*, Male
Photo © Dick Harlow



Eastern Bluebird, *Sialia sialis*, Female
Photo © Dick Harlow

I am sure you have all watched the TV coverage of snowstorm after snowstorm hitting New England and especially the Boston area and Massachusetts north and south coasts. And, have heard that the Northeast has had so much snow that it is now a record winter. We here in Vermont have had our share of snow, but it doesn't compare to the coastal storms that have decimated the New England coast from Connecticut, Rhode Island, Massachusetts and Maine. We, in New England, are not the only ones that have been hit hard by this year's severe winter. We need to be cognizant of the fact, that as we are affected by these severe storms, so too are wildlife.

The wintering range of the Eastern Bluebird extends throughout most of the northern states from Minnesota to the Atlantic coast and overlaps with the Western Bluebird west of Minnesota and Texas. In past years the advent of warmer winters has allowed species such as the Mockingbird, Eastern Bluebird and Carolina Wren as well as the Red-bellied Woodpecker to extend their range further north to include northern New England habitats in winter. Insect and berry eaters are now at risk of starving to death this winter. The poor 2014 berry crop, the extra demand on the meager food supply

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by Canadian species that have arrived this winter, all put a strain on these new native species that are trying to survive. I suspect that this winter will, like the winter of '75 to '78, effect the breeding populations of these native species, especially the Eastern Bluebird here in Vermont. The constant heavy snow, roller coaster temperatures going to above normal to way below normal will have a serious effect on the breeding capability of bluebirds this coming spring.

A thaw in January or February, as is traditional, would have helped the bluebirds and other species in our area; but this winter has not been traditional. A day or two of sunny weather along with our thick snow cover and a brief warm-up is not enough to produce insect subsistence for birds.

The only positive sign I have been able to observe this month is that in the last week of February, five bluebirds one day and six bluebirds on another day were moving around the Inn at EastView and cottage back yards. Several reports from residents have been submitted to me about their sightings of bluebirds, noting the bright blue of the males. Some birds were berry picking on winterberry bushes, feeding on what few berries were left. I had six bluebirds, 3 males and 3 females feeding on our small berry laden bushes in our front yard on the 22nd.

I am not suggesting there is much we can do, since bluebirds are not seedeaters, other than be aware of the trials that all birds must endure. The best we can do is keep our bird feeders full, put some variety in their diet, e.g. thistle, sunflower hearts, fruit, suet, etc., and hope they will find a way to survive.

Note: Two of our cottage residents observed what looked like a Cooper's Hawk take down a pigeon (Rock Pigeon) and begin to pluck it; when the hawk got disturbed, and with difficulty, it flew off with its prey to finish its meal.

Weather Tidbits

All Measurements taken at solar noon (1230 EST).

FEBRUARY PRECIPITATION

February 2015 Total Precipitation: 59.4 mm or 2.3 inches

Precipitation includes rain and snow melt.

Snow Days: 14

Snowfall for February 2015: 800 mm or 31.5 inches

February Overcast Days: 10

FEBRUARY WIND

Highest wind gust: 40 MPH, Feb. 15 Direction: North

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Average Wind speed for February 2015: 3.8 mph,

Dominate Wind Direction: North

Days w/wind gusts 20-30 MPH: 11 Days w/wind gusts >30 MPH: 3

FEBRUARY TEMPERATURE

Mean Temp: -12.7 C⁰ 9.1 °F

High Temp: 1.6 C⁰ 34.8 °F

Low Temp: -31.4 C⁰ -24.5 °F

FEBRUARY DAY NUMBERS FOR:

Min. Temp: 0.0 C⁰/32°F: 28 days

Min. Temp: -18 C⁰/-0.4F: 17 days

Max. Temp: 0.0 C⁰/32°F: 26 days