



The Call

Spring 2021

President's Perch MMA's "Project Bluebirds" offers these avians a chance to thrive

As we start our second Spring under the cloud of this COVID pandemic, we are encouraged by the rapid production of vaccines, and the positive response of our citizens. We have been patient, helpful to each other, and eager to get back to a more normal life.

Our MMA board has been meeting (via Zoom) and discussing activities we can do safely. We do miss leading our Field Trips and organizing our public speaker programs for your enjoyment.

Presently, we do not feel ready to offer field trips or public meetings because we do not believe that COVID protocols or limited participation would benefit our supporters.

Our scholarship committee is working hard to get our youth applicants into the Audubon summer nature camps as we have done for years. Fortunately, all three Audubon camps are reopening, within CDC protocols, but still promise great learning experiences and lots of fun!

Recently, I have noticed, and heard about, people seeking out several local nature trails, preserves, and sanctuaries in numbers exceeding past counts. I encourage all of you who can get out to visit any of the beautiful nature trails operated by our local land trusts (KELT, BTLT, HHLT) and towns. A few examples are: Maine Audubon, Gilsland Farm in Falmouth; Reid State Park, Georgetown; Hamilton Sanctuary, West Bath; Evergreen Cemetary, Portland; Josephine Newman Sanctuary, Georgetown; Otter Brook Preserve, Harpswell; and Curtis Farm

It's hard not to love bluebirds. Being fairly common residents in the southern part of Maine, most people are familiar with their bright colors, cheery song, and insatiable appetite for mealworms at backyard feeding stations.

Three species of bluebirds exist in North America, though only one—the Eastern Bluebird (*Sialia sialis*)—calls Maine it's home. The bluebird is somewhat of a misfit within its taxonomic family, *Turdidae*, commonly called thrushes. Usually when we hear the name "thrush" we think of a brown,



speckled forest-dweller with a flutey song and secretive behavior. While bluebirds share some structural similarities with other members of their family, they could hardly be more different in their colors, foraging behaviors, and nesting habits.

Eastern Bluebirds prefer areas with open grassy fields or clearings, where they perch along fences, powerlines, and low tree branches scouting for insects or fruit, depending on the seasons. Their food hunting techniques comprise the best of both flycatchers (aerial pursuers of flying insects) and the more "typical" thrushes (ground hunters).

Perhaps what makes the bluebird stand out most from its relatives is its choice of a nesting site. These birds are cavity nesters, choosing a safe hole rather than an open, woven-cup nest to raise their young. Historically, bluebirds nested exclusively in naturally-occurring tree cavities, but with the decline of available natural habitats (due to adverse human interference and increased competition from aggressive, non-native cavity nesters like the House Sparrow and European Starling), bluebirds are now using human-made nestboxes strategically placed in the bird's preferred habitats. These networks of nestboxes are known as "bluebird trails" and are routinely monitored by volunteers or scientists. Boxes are installed in pairs to accommodate Tree Swallows (another cavity nester) that may also use them for nesting, while still leaving space for the bluebirds' nesting needs. These pairs of boxes must be placed a specific distance apart, as bluebirds will not tolerate another pair of their species living within 300 feet of their nest.

Nestboxes have proven a major benefit to the Eastern Bluebirds, which experienced a serious decline in the early-to-mid twentieth century, and came dangerously close to disappearing forever. Eastern Bluebird numbers have rebounded dramatically and are a common sight throughout southern Maine.

See **PRESIDENT'S PERCH**, page 3

See **BLUEBIRDS**, page 3

Merrymeeting Audubon Chapter

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PHOTO ATTRIBUTIONS:

SUMMER CAMP PHOTOS: MMA PHOTO FILES; THE EASTERN BLUE-BIRD, THE BALTIMORE ORIOLE, AND THE BRANDT GOOSE: DONNA SALKO; THE EVENING GROSBEAK: SHUTTERSTOCK; NESTBOXES: GEORGE SERGEANT; BLUEBIRD EGGS: SUSAN FENN

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*In those vernal seasons
of the year, when the air is
calm and pleasant, it were
an injury and sullenness
against Nature not to go
out and see her riches, and
partake in her rejoicing with
heaven and earth.* ”

JOHN MILTON

Audubon summer camps reopen! MMA scholarship recipients eager to attend

Once COVID-19 invaded and well-established itself, the fallout was devastating nationwide. Barraged with masks and quarantining, businesses of all kinds closed and hunkered down for what seemed like forever.

Last year, before the country shut down, we had a full list of eager MMA scholarship recipients ready to attend their respective Audubon summer camps. Alas, you know the rest of the story. . . .

But as the saying goes, there **is** a light at the end of the tunnel! This year all of the camps are re-opening, with CDC modifications, to the delight of last year's recipients and new ones from this year.

Many of you already know about Merrymeeting Audubon's Scholarship Fund. For a number of years, we've invited our membership to support this fund which sends students and educators to three Maine camps: National Audubon's Hog Island in Bremen, ME for high school students and educators; Bryant Pond in Bryant Pond, ME for students ages 10 to 13; and Tanglewood in Lincolnville, ME for students ages 8 to 14. These last two camps are University of Maine Cooperative Extension 4H camps.

We also want you to know that we have accepted applications for 2021, but donations to the Fund are our only means of offering the scholarships to students and educators. To date, we have enjoyed a generous membership. If you have not donated to the Fund, this would be a great year to do so. We complete the "loop" between donors and recipients by publishing feedback from the attendees in **The CALL**, following the end of the camps' season. We can proudly say that this Scholarship Fund has opened up new worlds and changed the lives of its recipients! No donation is too small because it contributes to a greater good.

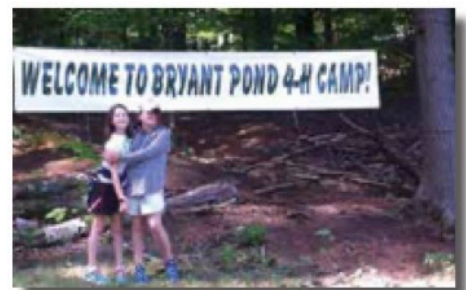
Please send your donation to: **Sue Sergeant** at 84 Harding Road, Brunswick, ME 04011. Make your check payable to: **Maine Audubon**, and on the memo line write **Merrymeeting Audubon Scholarship Fund**.

We have dedicated this Fund to the late Chuck Huntington, a beloved ornithology professor at Bowdoin College, and founding member of our Chapter. We take great pleasure thinking about the nature adventures and learning opportunities we can provide, *with your help*, to students and educators in our catchment area. Please join us in offering these incredible opportunities to our youth and educators. Thank you!

*Bronda Niese and Sue Sergeant,
co-chairs of the Scholarship Committee*



Students attending the National Audubon camp at Hog Island in Bremen, ME are enjoying an educational boat trip to neighboring islands to observe puffins and other wildlife.



Bryant Pond 4H camp is a great place for pre-teens to forge new friendships, learn new skills, and develop a sincere concern for the natural environment, as well as just having a super duper time! Kids often want to return because. . . well, just because!

The 2020 CBC took flight amidst a few differences

What do the Christmas Bird Count and the Postal Service have in common? Neither rain, sleet, snow, or COVID-19 will keep those birders from their appointed rounds!

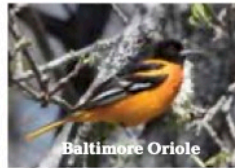
MMA, blessed with good weather (not too cold or windy), conducted the CBCs as scheduled—Bath/Boothbay, December 17th and Brunswick/Freeport, January 3rd. Most of the “regulars” attended amidst the expected necessary modifications, a la COVID—social distancing, no carpooling, no pre-count breakfast in private homes, no along-the-way stops at peoples’ homes for goodies and birding chit-chat, or the usual post-count pizza party to share special sightings.

The birds must’ve gotten the memo, too. Participants said there were fewer

birds than in recent years, though they surmised the reason might possibly be fewer stops, social distancing, and fewer bird counters.

Doug Suito, our dedicated CBC data compiler, created a set of graphs, species-by-species, that dated back to the early 1980s. An amazing amount of information can be gleaned from this resource! I will share a couple of highlights from Doug’s compilation.

Special sightings from the 2020 count were: Northern Mockingbird, Pine Grosbeak, Baltimore Oriole, Woodcock, Snow Goose, Gray Catbird, Pine Warbler, Parestic Jaeger.



Baltimore Oriole

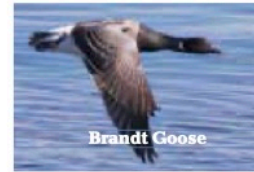
CBC birds seen less often during the last 20+ years:

Western Grebe (from early 1980s to 1993), King Eider (1993), Evening Grosbeaks (2000), Saw Whet Owl (2006).



Evening Grosbeaks

Another category pointed out one-time CBC rare sightings over the years. Keep in mind that some of these birds might be seen among your travels now, but they were rare during CBC events: Eastern Meadowlark (1987); Blue Grosbeak (2005); Brandt Goose (2015).



Brandt Goose

George Sergeant

BLUEBIRDS, from page 1

Working with landowners of prime bluebird habitats, Merrymeeting Audubon has recently begun installing bluebird boxes around the Topsham and Brunswick areas, enlisting the help of local birders who are assigned specific sites at which they will monitor the boxes. Bluebird box sites include Crystal Spring Farm in Brunswick, Bradley Pond and the Whatley Farm in Topsham, and the Topsham Ponds, known as the Big Eddy and Little Eddy ponds.

I bird the latter spot quite frequently and it has proven to be a wonderful habitat for breeding, migrating, and wintering species alike. Bobolinks nest in the fields, Indigo Buntings breed around the wooded edges, and many warblers and sparrows sing from the scrubby thickets and surrounding woods.

Last November I recorded every species of finch that regularly populates Maine just within that month, including two Hoary Redpolls, rare winter visitors from the Arctic. On most days I can find a pair or two of bluebirds hanging out by the edges of the fields.

Gordon Smith, a member of the Merrymeeting Audubon Chapter and birding expert, recognizing this excellent bluebird habitat, asked me if I would monitor some nestboxes there. So Gordon and I worked with the facility manager, Ed Caron, to figure out the best placement for the boxes. With Eastern Bluebirds already scouting nest sites, and some even beginning nest construction, we will hopefully install the boxes as soon as the still-frozen ground thaws enough.

During the nesting season, the other volunteers and I will regularly monitor our assigned boxes, ensuring they are clean and suitable for use, check on nest, egg, and nestling progress, and record data from the occupied boxes. I’m excited for what this season will bring, and can’t wait to start monitoring my nestboxes! (See photos, right, for examples of boxes and their benefits!)

Weston Barker

PRESIDENT’S PERCH, from page 1

Preserve, Harpswell. Of course there are scores of nature walks in the area to choose from. Don’t be shy! They are wonderful ways to enjoy nature!

Hopefully, by Fall, we will be able to offer our Field Trips again for the Fall migrations and resume our speaker programs. Thanks to all of you who have supported Audubon and our environment over the years. Keep up the good work.

George Sergeant



Nestboxes built by MMA Chapter member, Maurice Dauphin, for use by Weston Barker, Gordon Smith and other MMA volunteers to monitor the nesting habits of Bluebirds or other avians who might decide to “move in”!

Bluebirds aren’t waiting! Chapter member, Susan Fenn, took a photo of these newly-laid Bluebird eggs as of April 2021!





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