

Marsh is more than meets the eye
By Kathy Doyle, Correspondent
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It is 7 o'clock on a glorious morning, April 19 and about 20 people have gathered in the Price Chopper parking lot in West Rutland. The group is ready to walk the loop around West Rutland Marsh to tally all the birds seen or heard. While most of the group are newcomers, this is the 81st monthly monitoring effort for our leader, Roy Pilcher, co-President of the Rutland County Audubon. His efforts as an advocate for West Rutland Marsh are well known. The monitoring walks, one example of his leadership, have taken place each month, despite the weather since August 2001.

For the past three decades, members of Rutland County Audubon and others have paid close attention to West Rutland Marsh. These enthusiasts have been focusing their binoculars, spotting scopes and their magnifying glasses on the wonders that exist and revealing secrets that casual observers miss. Fortunately, they have not just been keeping their knowledge and enthusiasm for the marsh to themselves.

Over the years Rutland County Audubon has joined forces with other community partners to increase appreciation for and to preserve it for future generations. Mary Ann Goulette, the town manager of West Rutland, is enthusiastic about the marsh. She explains. "The town is very committed to promoting the marsh and we'll be more active in that role".

Pilcher points out that everything we do for the marsh -- the bird monitoring walks, construction of the boardwalk, picking up trash, creating the interpretive trail and teacher's guide, educational programs for school groups and the public -- is aimed at "increasing awareness and appreciation and ultimately protecting the marsh". "It has been a nice partnership", says Sally Eugair of the USDA, who has worked with the town and other groups to acquire funds for land protection in the marsh and for the construction of the boardwalk.

Unique birding Spot

Arriving at the marsh, we park our cars near the kiosk and boardwalk on Marble Street Extension and immediately are greeted by the song and calls of red-wing black birds and song sparrows, two of the more common birds at this time of year. Spreading out in front of us along the channel of the Castleton River is the extensive cattail marsh -- one of the largest in the state. The Marsh has long been known to birdwatchers as a premier birding spot in the eastern U.S. In 1998, West Rutland Marsh received the distinction of "Vermont Important Bird Area", recognized by the National Audubon Society for its habitat for some of the state's rarest breeding birds. The kiosk near the boardwalk displays a beautiful photograph taken by David Jenne of a Virginia rail and describes the area as a "breeding sanctuary for the American bittern, the least bittern, sora, and

Virginia rail” – all species that depend on marshes for breeding. Other state rare species that have been observed at West Rutland Marsh include pied-billed grebes, common moorhen, blue-winged warbler and sedge wren. Thanks to the careful monthly records kept by Rutland County Audubon, we know that 136 different bird species have been observed in the variety of habitats in and around the cattail marsh.

Despite its significance, West Rutland Marsh has not always been treated with respect. In fact, the wetlands we value today were formed inadvertently more than 70 years ago, when sand slurry, a by-product of the marble industry, were dumped into the Castleton River. This caused flooding of the fields, which created the conditions for the cattail marsh and other types of vegetation to establish.

Even though it's a product of human actions, the marsh is according to Pilcher “a jewel” that warrants our attention...People need to “come out and help preserve it.... the birds and plants can’t do it.” Yet Pilcher acknowledges some challenges. He mentions that the marsh has long been used as a “dumping ground for trash and deer carcasses”. Another major ecological threat to the cattail marsh is the invasion of common reed (also known as *Phragmites*). Unlike cattail-dominated wetlands, the *Phragmites*-dominated habitat is not as beneficial for birds and other wildlife.

Keeping Records

As the group of bird watchers makes their way around the marsh, Pilcher encourages everyone to ask questions. Roy clearly is passionate about birds, and is eager to share his enthusiasm and knowledge with others. This day, Pilcher is keeping the tally of birds seen or heard, a role usually played by Rutland County Audubon Secretary Sue Elliott. This long-term record has a lot of scientific value, but it is clear that the numbers don’t begin to tell the whole story of connections and memories that he and the others glean from their monthly outings. Roy recounts seeing an adult Virginia rail enter into the road in front of a group: the Virginia rail crossed 1/3 of the way then back, and then ½ of the way and back, before eventually making its way across the road. Four chicks trailed the bird, followed in turn by the second parent.

Near a farm house down the road, Roy notes that birds are habitat specific. “In a place like this (at this time of year) you are almost guaranteed that there will be phoebe”. Sure enough we are soon focusing on a gray and white bird, bobbing its tail as it perches singing its characteristic “phoe-be”.

Indeed the variety of habitats and vegetation types around the cattail marsh contribute to the diversity of birds present and also provide botanical and ecological interest. In recognition of this connection and wanting to provide more information for visitors, four years ago the local Audubon chapter envisioned a “bridge to bridge interpretive trail”. After discussing the idea with Pilcher in 2005, I agreed to write the text for a trail guide and a teacher’s manual. A year and a half later, the first trail guides were produced and this past February, the new teacher’s guide became available this past February. Both

are enhanced by the fine graphics and layout provided by Rutland County Audubon Director and graphic artist, David Jenne. The teacher's guide and interpretive brochure aim to serve as a starting point for visitors to the marsh, providing background information on the variety of natural communities including the cattail marsh, sedge meadows, shrub swamps, hardwood swamp and Northern White Cedar swamps. The stations highlight plants and animals that might be encountered. The guide encourages visitors to ask questions, make connections and notice changes over the seasons.

Rutland County Audubon hopes that the teacher's manual and interpretive guide will encourage more groups to visit the marsh. West Rutland High biology teacher, Michael Caliguiri describes how he has been visiting the marsh with his students for field observation "for 28 – 30 years". Rutland High School student and Rutland County Audubon member, Henry Wilton, used the new trail guide to introduce fellow students to the different habitats at West Rutland Marsh as part of a year-end field study. At Community College of Vermont, Joe Pryzpek has taken two classes out to the marsh this school year. Both times the invasive species *Phragmites* "sparked a lot of discussion" and helped the students understand the "function of wetlands" and "engaged them in addressing a real issue". Home schooling parent Julia Riell of Poultney who is enrolled in the Audubon Adventures Program received a copy of the new teacher's manual from Rutland County Audubon Director Marsha Booker and "looks forward to taking her daughters out to the marsh".

The group of birders makes their way to the bridge on Pleasant Street -- the stopping point for about half of the group. Before continuing on, we enjoy the call of the Wilson's Snipe and the sounds of wood frogs and spring peepers. As we complete the loop, we continue to add a number of birds to the day's list. At one point, overlooking the marsh, we hear what sounds to me like castanets "kidick, kidick"; it's the Virginia rail. The trip ends back at the boardwalk. Before leaving, the group watches a hawk, perhaps a Cooper's hawk, flying far overhead. I am struck with the thought that every trip to the marsh has the potential for the unexpected. But it also seems clear that regular year-round visits build intimate familiarity from which comes insight on what to expect, when to expect it and where to look for what otherwise might remain hidden.

You can join some of the year round opportunities to explore West Rutland Marsh. To learn more about Rutland County Audubon events, visit the website www.rutlandcountyaudubon.org. To help with the annual trash clean up at the marsh on Green Up Day, May 3, meet at the West Rutland town office at 9 a.m.

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