

Photographing Long Island | Adirondack Plane Crash | European Hare

NEW YORK STATE

# Conservationist

DECEMBER 2013



New York's  
River Otter



Dear Reader,

Whether you enjoy strolling through piles of leaves in a park, joining in a winter owl prowl, or taking an exhilarating cross-country ski trip on freshly fallen snow, you'll find numerous places to enjoy your favorite outdoor pursuit in the great state of New York.

You probably believe, as I do, that outdoor recreation is good for the body and for the soul. But did you know that recreation on public parks and lands also contributes to the health of our economy? New Yorkers and visitors spend millions of dollars every year in pursuit of outdoor experiences, whether it's on gas, groceries or gear, providing a boost to regional economies. This spending helps grow businesses and create jobs in communities across the state.

In addition to being good for business, outdoor recreation is also good for the environment. That's because the more people connect with nature, the more they value and support conservation and stewardship of our natural resources.

Our goal is to raise public awareness of New York's diverse recreational opportunities and to ensure people get the most from their outdoor experiences. Governor Cuomo recently directed DEC to enhance public access to New York's amazing bounty of public parks, parklands and waterways. All across this great Empire State, we are rebuilding trail bridges and boat launches, increasing parking spaces, improving signage and enhancing access for people of all abilities.

We want you to enjoy the public lands that have been enjoyed by generations. Under Governor Cuomo's vision, we're making critical investments in open space and stewardship programs that build on New York's outdoor heritage.

Regards,  
Commissioner Joe Martens

NEW YORK STATE  
**Conservationist** 

Volume 68, Number 3 | December 2013  
Andrew M. Cuomo, Governor of New York State

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The *Conservationist* (ISSN0010-650X), © 2013 by NYSDEC, is an official publication of the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation published bimonthly at 625 Broadway, 4th Floor, Albany, NY 12233-4502. Telephone: (518) 402-8047

Manuscripts, photographs and artwork will be accepted if accompanied by SASE. Please write to the above address with an author's query or to request a Contributor's Guide. The publisher assumes no responsibility for loss or damage of unsolicited materials.

TO SUBSCRIBE:

\$18 per year, \$24 for two years, \$30 for three years. Outside the U.S., add \$27 per year with a check drawn on a U.S. bank. All orders must be prepaid.

Please allow 6 to 8 weeks for new subscriptions or changes of address. Periodical postage paid at Albany, NY, and additional mailing offices.

Send check or money order payable to:

*Conservationist*  
NYSDEC  
625 Broadway  
Albany, NY 12233-4502

or call: **1-800-678-6399**

Visit the Department's website at:  
**[www.dec.ny.gov](http://www.dec.ny.gov)**

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POSTMASTER: Send address changes to:

*Conservationist*  
NYSDEC  
625 Broadway  
Albany, NY 12233-4502

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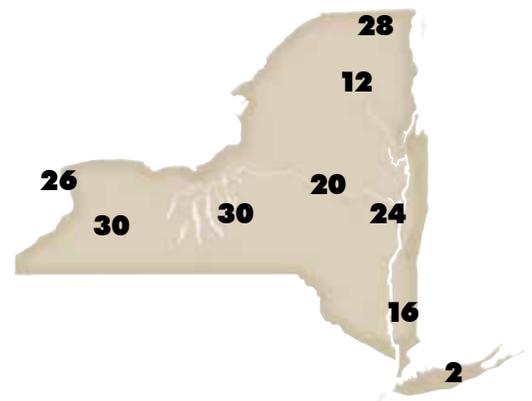
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# CAPTURING LONG ISLAND

*—through the photography of Clifford Dayton*

Photography has always been a passion of mine, helping to clear my mind of everyday stresses. My interest in the hobby was initially sparked in my early teens when my grandfather passed down his 35mm SLR, along with a variety of lenses. Being self-taught, my photography skills primarily came from reading about the topic and applying what I had read to the field. I learn from trial and error, and I continue to hone my skills during each outing. As time and technology progressed, I upgraded several times, and eventually entered the world of digital photography.

## Icy Montauk

Montauk is my favorite place on Long Island, so I try to visit often and during all weather conditions. Every time I go, I end up with something different. The sun was rising on this cold January morning. The single-digit temps helped create the ice and frozen rocks seen in the foreground. Driving out to the point took me nearly two hours since the roads were unplowed. What's more, I only shot for about 20 minutes before I was freezing and had to stop.

As a native Long Islander who connected with nature at an early age, I grew up loving the area's well-known beaches that provide ample opportunities for landscape photography. If one knows when and where to look, Long Island is also rich in wildlife possibilities.

I think to be a successful wildlife photographer, one must have a great deal of patience, timing, creativity and, in many cases, luck. Achieving the "perfect" shot not only requires experimentation using various types of equipment and techniques, it includes understanding the wildlife you are pursuing.



## Deer in Fresh Snow

My favorite time to go afield is immediately after a snowstorm. The woods are freshly covered, and wildlife is coming out to resume daily habits. While walking along a hiking trail on the east end of Long Island, I happened to walk up on this young deer. It totally caught me off-guard, and it took me a few seconds to change some settings and position myself for the shot.



### **An Icy Jetty**

Sometimes you have to take a risk to get that special shot, and this was the case on this very cold winter morning. While carefully crawling out on the jetty, I remember praying that I would not slip and damage my expensive equipment.



### **“My Dock” on a Calm Morning**

I have photographed this dock using numerous techniques, at various times of the day throughout the year. I spend so much time at this dock that my friend jokes that I should call it “my dock.” It is located in such a serene place that it is very special to me. During December, the sun sets directly at the end, making for some beautiful captures. As long as it remains standing, I will continue to return to this magical place.



## Icy Rocks in Montauk

The South Fork of Long Island has some of the most beautiful beaches on the east coast. For this photo, I used a longer exposure. The moving water creates the milky effect. A tripod is also a must for photos like these. I personally like the frozen rocks sticking out of the water.

## Snowy Owl

Infrequent visitors to Long Island, snowy owls are highly sought after by wildlife photographers. For me, the opportunity to photograph the elusive snowy owl was an amazing experience. I spotted this one sitting in the dunes, far-off in the distance. I spent nearly an hour crawling on my belly to get this rare shot.





### **Snowy Back Road**

To me, a benefit of living in a small town is that it takes a while for the snowplows to fully clear the roads after a snowstorm. While looking for winter photographic opportunities, I noticed the yellow center road lines peeking through the slushy mix. Sometimes a common, everyday scene like this tells a different story when looking at it from a new perspective.



## Short-eared Owl on Post

Some people ask, “How long does it take you to get that perfect shot?” As a wildlife photographer, I always imagine that “perfect” shot in my head, but it may take years, or even a lifetime, to capture. I was photographing this short-eared owl all winter—on the ground, in the brush, flying, and even perched in trees—but I still wanted that one shot that said “wow.” Finally, I was able to sneak up while in my pickup truck, and took this from my driver’s seat. I personally love the clean background, and that this owl’s eyes are fully open.



**Clifford Dayton** was born and raised in Manorville, Long Island. Visit his website at [www.cliffcaptures.com](http://www.cliffcaptures.com) and follow him on Facebook at [www.facebook.com/cliffcaptures](https://www.facebook.com/cliffcaptures)



# THE RIVER OTTER

## —*Surprising Little Clown*

by **John Razzano**

photos by Eric Dresser unless otherwise noted

Known for its playful nature and comic antics, the North American river otter (*Lontra canadensis*) is one of the most entertaining wild animals to call New York State home. This semi-aquatic mammal is a member of the weasel family (Mustelids), and people lucky enough to spot one in the wild are often captivated by its clown-like actions.

Otters have been around for a long time. Paleontologists unearthed fossils of otter-like animals that inhabited the earth 30 million years ago. From these ancestors, thirteen known distinct species have evolved worldwide. The largest is the sea otter, weighing up to 100 pounds; the smallest is the Asian short-clawed otter, weighing less than 10 pounds. New York's river otters average between 10 and 30 pounds, and measure three to four feet long.

Intelligent and appealingly gregarious, river otters are bundles of energy that make their homes alongside streams, wetlands, bogs, lakes and, of course,

ivers. They eat primarily fish, but are opportunistic feeders and so will also eat amphibians, crustaceans, turtles, and even small mammals and birds. Remnants from these meals, including bits of shells or scales, are sometimes the only evidence that indicate otters are in the area.

Otters are what wildlife biologists call “apex predators,” meaning they’re at the top of the food chain. They have few enemies in the wild. This may seem unusual when you consider that otters aren’t very big as far as top predators go. But what they lack in size, they more than make up for in feistiness against attackers.



Fish make up the bulk of an otter's diet.



River otters often travel together as a family group.

However, otters do occasionally fall prey to bobcats, eagles, coyotes and domestic dogs, usually while traveling over land.

Having long, muscular bodies, thick, tapered tails and webbed feet, otters are swift and graceful swimmers. Their bodies are so flexible that they can bend forward or backward into a circle, touching nose to tail from either direction. Their dense, lustrous coats range from light-brown to black above, and pale grayish-brown to silver underneath.

Otters' eyes, ears and noses are set close to the top of their broad, flat heads. This allows them to see, hear and smell while largely submerged, skimming the water's surface in stealth mode. Otters have keen eyesight, even underwater, and they can tightly close their small ears and nostrils as they dive for food. Long stiff whiskers, called vibrissae, are used for sensing prey in the mud or finding the underwater opening to a burrow in murky water.

Active year-round, otters can be spotted playing or foraging during the day, especially in winter. They will pop through openings on the margins of ice-covered water bodies to breathe, or

will catch a breath from pockets of air under the ice. Otters have been known to remain underwater for as long as eight minutes while diving in search of fish. Their sharp, formidable teeth are designed to grip and hold their catch. If an otter feels threatened, it won't hesitate to inflict a vicious bite on any creature that's hungry or foolish enough to harass it.

Though much more at home in the water, otters can actually bound along quite well on land. One way they get around is by sliding on their bellies. If the ground is fairly flat, they alternate running and sliding. Otherwise, a fast belly slide down a muddy or snowy bank into the water is a favorite otter pastime.

Family groups of otters will occasionally be seen sliding and splashing





An otter's flat head helps it course through the water with great speed.

with apparent abandon. It may appear that they're just having a good time, but, as with most animal behavior, this is fun with a purpose. Sliding teaches important survival skills for escaping predators. Otters can be quite vocal, making sounds described as chuffing as well as squeaks, squeals and grunts.

Otters "borrow" the unused burrows of other critters rather than digging their own. Abandoned beaver lodges and muskrat dens, as well as hollow logs and under large roots all make good otter homes.

Mating occurs from late winter through spring. Females have the ability to delay fertilization for several months after mating, which means that from the time otters mate until the female gives birth can be as little as 60 days or as long as a year. In the spring, pregnant females retreat to their dens to give birth. Though litters of five are not uncommon, otters typically have one to three furry, blind, toothless pups.

Pups are weaned after 9 or 10 weeks, at which time they're ready for their first swimming lesson. Yes, surprisingly, these masters of the water must be taught to swim! Using her mouth, a mother otter will pick up her pups by the scruff of their necks and drop or drag them into the water to give them a crash course in swimming. Females may also use the ride-and-dive technique, where she gives her youngster a ride on her back and then dives, leaving her pup to fend briefly for itself until it gets used to treading water. It only takes a few lessons before the pups are swimming with nearly as much confidence as their parents.

Females bring food to their young for up to 40 weeks and stay with them for as long as a year before the yearlings strike out on

their own. Males take no part in raising the young. An otter that survives mishaps and diseases will usually live an average of eight or nine years in the wild.

Sitting atop the food chain, otters accumulate pollutants like PCBs, DDT and heavy metals in their bodies. Biologists are concerned that pollutants shorten otters' lives or hamper their ability to reproduce. Because otters seem sensitive to pollution, some biologists consider them an "indicator species," either sounding the alarm that a former habitat is seriously degraded when they disappear, or indicating that conditions have significantly improved when they reappear.

Through the years, otter populations have had their ups and downs. When European colonists first arrived in what is now New York State, the surrounding land teemed with dozens of fur-bearing mammals (including otter) which were immediately identified as potential sources of wealth. Beaver were the first to suffer overharvesting as countless pelts were shipped overseas to satisfy the European fad of beaver felt hats. Otter were also exploited for their pelts and expanding settlements gobbled up their habitat as wetlands were drained and forests cleared. By the early 1900s, otter populations were largely limited to remote wilderness areas like the Adirondack and Catskill mountains. Fortunately, these populations, as well as additional populations in the Hudson and St. Lawrence River valleys, have remained healthy, even to today.

In 1995, business, government and non-profit groups came together to conduct the New York River Otter Project to restore otters to Central and Western New York where water pollution

and loss of habitat drove them out. (See February, 2001 *Conservationist*.) Grade school children, a big utility company, environmentalists and trappers raised more than \$300,000 to capture otters from the Adirondacks and Catskills and then care for them before they were released. During the five years the restoration project was conducted, 279 otters were successfully released throughout the region. The positive results of the project generated inquiries from European countries also interested in otter restoration.

DEC Senior Wildlife Biologist Andy MacDuff is conducting a study to determine the status of otter populations in the Mohawk River Valley, and to develop survey methods to monitor otters in Central and Western New York where they were reintroduced. The study consists of intense “sign surveys,” whereby he repeatedly visits certain sites to look for otter tracks, scat, snow-slide furrows, etc. He’ll compare these results to data he’s collected in the St. Lawrence River Valley, where otter are known to thrive. If his results verify that the otter populations in the Mohawk River

Valley are secure, DEC may reopen the otter trapping season there, which was closed more than a decade ago.

In a similar vein, SUNY College of Environmental Science and Forestry graduate student Elaina Burns has been studying river otter in the Finger Lakes region. Elaina’s work centers on estimating otter populations in this area using non-invasive genetic sampling gathered from otter scat as well as monitoring otter activity at latrine sites using trail cameras. Both Andy’s and Elaina’s work will help DEC develop a larger study to fully assess the outcome of the reintroduction effort of the late 1990s.

New York is fortunate to have healthy otter populations in a number of areas across the state. In fact, small numbers of otters have recently been seen on congested Long Island, a hopeful sign that otter populations are expanding to other parts of the state.

I’ve never seen an otter in the wild, but I hope to. And when I do, I’ll remember what Andy said to me: “If you’re lucky enough to see otters in the wild, just sit back and enjoy the show.”

**John Razzano** is a contributing editor to *Conservationist*.

The Wild Center



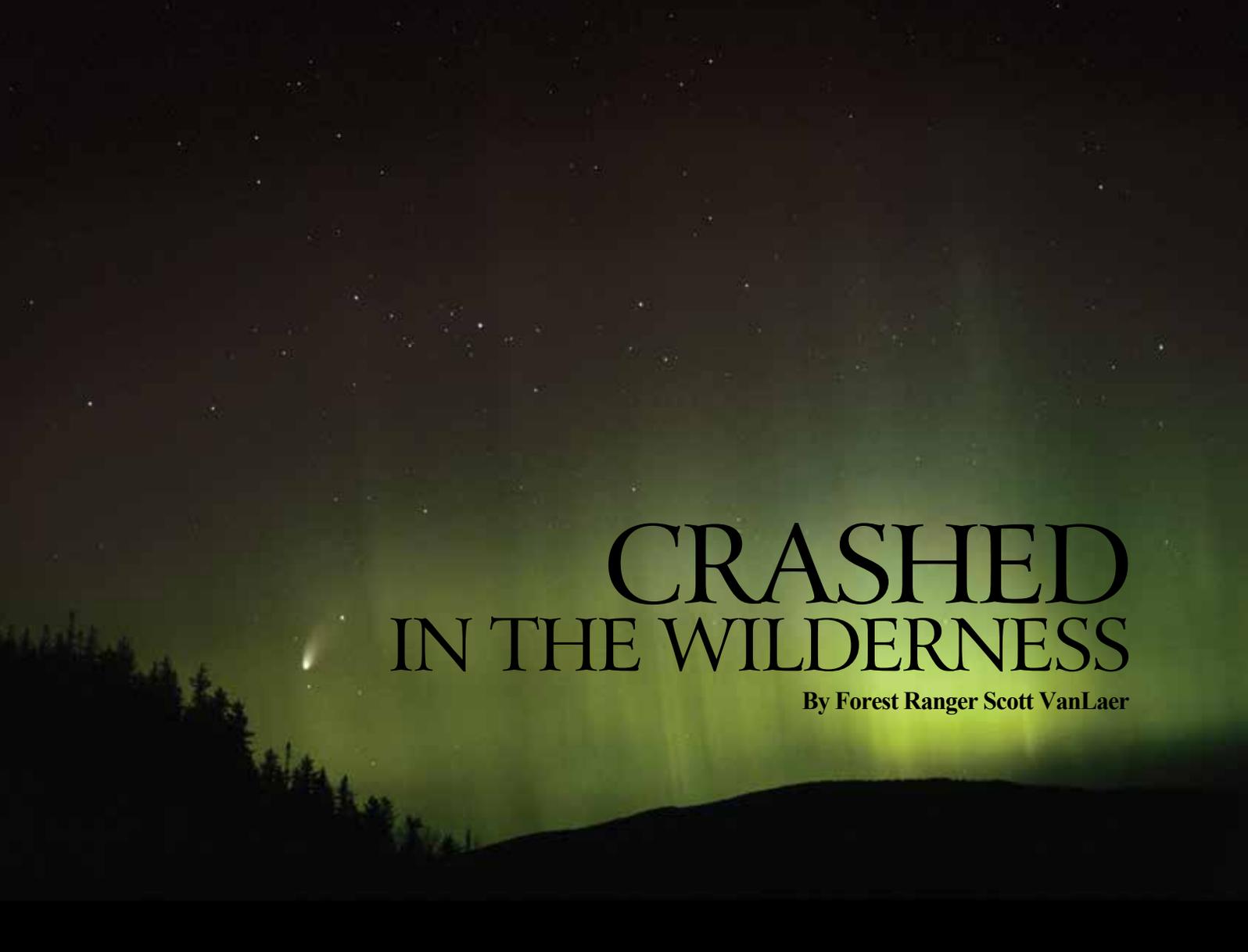
Susan Shafer



## WHERE TO SEE OTTERS

Although otters’ shy nature and preference for wilder habitat can make them difficult to spot in the wild, there are a number of locations where visitors may be treated to the sight of these playful, elusive critters. Check out DEC’s web page “Watchable Wildlife: River Otter” at [www.dec.ny.gov/animals/6962.html](http://www.dec.ny.gov/animals/6962.html) for several suggested places.

At The Wild Center in Tupper Lake, you can see a display of four live otters in a glass-enclosed miniature habitat. The otters either came from zoos or were rescued by animal rehabilitators and have “imprinted” on people, so they cannot be returned to the wild. Shameless hams, they love to play to their “public” and are one of the Center’s most popular attractions. For more information, see the October 2013 *Conservationist*, or visit the Center’s website at [www.wildcenter.org](http://www.wildcenter.org).



# CRASHED IN THE WILDERNESS

By Forest Ranger Scott VanLaer

Carl Heilman II

I was sitting at my desk on the evening of February 21<sup>st</sup>, when I received a call from DEC's Ray Brook dispatcher. "There is a plane crash near Lake Placid, can you respond?" I couldn't believe it. I was just going through our archives of Adirondack plane crashes, and so I thought maybe I had heard wrong. "Are you serious?" I asked. But this was real, and it was very real for the three people on the plane that had crashed just minutes earlier.

Amazingly, all three aboard the plane were unhurt. Still, it was February in the Adirondacks, and the pilot and passengers were stranded on the side of a mountain; they remained in incredible danger. Temperatures were already in the single digits and would probably be below zero at higher elevations as the night wore on. Fortunately, they had been in cell-phone contact with us, and gave coordinates that put the crash site on Nye Mountain in the High Peaks, the same location of another crash in 1978.

Within a few minutes, I dressed in fleece layers and Gore-Tex<sup>®</sup> and filled my extra-large pack with two sleeping bags, sleeping pads, a tent, a stove and food: standard emergency gear for a DEC ranger on a winter rescue. Studying a map, I noticed that it appeared the crash was three miles from a road high up the

mountain. So, we devised a plan whereby Ranger Jim Giglinto and I would locate the crash, do a medical assessment, and bring enough gear to keep the victims comfortable or if possible, walk them out that night.

Even though we each carried 45 pounds, we made very good time going up the mountain. I occasionally glanced at the GPS, keeping tabs on our navigation and progress. When the GPS indicated we were within 1,000 feet of the victims' anticipated location, we yelled for the subjects. Our voices carried well through the valleys below, but we heard no response. When we were within 200 feet of the coordinates, we became concerned. "They should hear us," we said to each other. Just then Ranger Joe LaPierre—the Incident Commander who had been directing the search-and-rescue response from below—radioed us that the



To keep warm, the plane crash victims huddled together under a tarp (bottom right of photo).

coordinates were wrong: the plane wasn't on Nye, it was on Big Burn Mountain, six miles away.

GPS units have dozens of options for coordinates; the pilot relayed the coordinates for the crash site from a hand-held GPS in one format, but these were mistakenly re-plotted in a different format. It was an unfortunate miscommunication, but a perfect example of the importance of remembering to relay the format and datum your unit uses.

Thankfully, we recognized the error and quickly refocused the search-and-rescue operation to the new area. As Ranger Giglinto and I were still deep in the backcountry, this required sending out new personnel. Fortunately the correct location of the crash was not as remote, and Rangers Kevin Burns, Chris Kostoss, Pete Evans and Dave Russell were able to use snowmobiles to get partway there. From that point, they used snowshoes to break trail through three feet of deep powder snow.

I made it to the new command post just in time to hear the radio transmission of the rangers closing in on the crash site. In order to find the exact site, the rangers needed to make voice

contact with the subjects, yelling back and forth to hone in on them. Finally, at 2 a.m., the rangers reached the victims, providing them with much-needed extra layers for warmth and snowshoes to wear on the hike out.

For six hours, the three men had been huddling together attempting to stay warm, sitting on gear and spruce bows to keep themselves off the snow, and draping a tarp over their heads for warmth. "We were just cold," pilot Frank Drombroski said later of the ordeal. "You can't bundle up enough in that temperature for that long without the cold having its way with you."

Although they still had a little more than a mile to hike, their spirits were lifted by the arrival of the rescue team and their body temperatures rose with the physical activity. At 3:30 a.m., they were roadside and evaluated by staff from the Lake Placid Volunteer Ambulance Service.

Later that day I led FAA investigators into the crash site. The daylight revealed just how lucky the men were. The plane had nosed into the ground, but the trees slowed and softened the impact. The tail section was suspended in the air ten feet off



The rangers took this image of the victims in their tarp shelter.

the ground. The wings took most of the impact. There was smaller debris scattered about and the tops of trees were sheared off in a line, revealing the flight path. If the men had not been wearing safety harnesses, they might have been ejected from the plane.

On March 9<sup>th</sup>, the wreckage was removed by a salvage company based in Delaware. The plane was rigged and long-lined out to the helipad at the Ray Brook office by a Sikorsky helicopter. From there, the FAA was able to get a further inspection of the wreckage to aid in the preparation of their report on the cause of the accident.

As a DEC ranger, I found it extremely interesting to be involved in a crash incident from start to finish. From my experience on the job and recent research, I already knew that numerous aircraft have crashed in the Adirondack wilderness throughout the years. In incidents like this one, where the plane hit near a mountain summit, in that topography, there is usually a fatality. It was remarkable that all three men were able to walk out with barely a scratch.

**Scott VanLaer** is a DEC forest ranger working out of DEC's Ray Brook office in the Adirondacks.





# ADK Plane Crashes

Since the early 1900s, there have been nearly 200 documented significant plane crashes in the Adirondacks. DEC rangers maintain a database of these wreckages. Occasionally a hiker or hunter will stumble upon one of the many old crashes scattered throughout the park and report it. When this happens, it's important to determine if the wreckage is from a documented crash or one that has not been recorded.

The first recorded collision in the Adirondacks was of an early Wright biplane that crashed on Raquette Lake in 1912. Since then, there have been crashes of gliders, gyrocopters, helicopters and even a massive B-52.

In fairly recent history, hikers have come across two previously undiscovered plane crashes. In 1979, hikers in the Five Ponds Wilderness Area, wandering off trail near

the Robinson River, caught a glimpse of an aircraft partially submerged in mud and water in a beaver meadow. While it obviously had been there a long time, the hikers reported the sighting anyway. Thankfully they did because the plane was a missing piper cub that was last seen departing Massena on December 4th, 1954. At the time, the plane and the pilot had been the subjects of a massive search, but no trace of them had been found. For a quarter of a century, the plane lay hidden by water and mud until a beaver dam released, revealing the aircraft.

In 1990, hikers climbing Boreas Mountain uncovered the wreckage of a plane near the summit. The skeletal remains of the pilot were an obvious sign it was an undiscovered crash. That plane, a Cessna U206A, had crashed in 1984.



(Above, clockwise) crash of Grumman Goose plane, 1/8/1957

William Weckesser's great uncle Carl Weckesser and his grandfather Louis, of Rhinebeck, Dutchess County, after a successful hare hunt. Photo taken in the early 1900s.





# EUROPEAN HARES

## *of Upstate New York*

By Dave Nelson

### Editor's Note:

This summer we heard from William Weckesser of Middlefield, CT, a 74-year-old gent who waxed poetic about bygone days. In his letter, he asked a question that piqued our interest. A few phone calls and e-mails took us back to earlier times and brought forth an interesting short story worth retelling: that of the European hares of upstate N.Y.

Mr Weckesser writes, “When I was a boy, my grandfather would tell me stories of getting in a horse-drawn wagon and going out to Millbrook to hunt what he called ‘jack rabbits.’ I found out later that they were actually European hares that were brought to eastern Dutchess County and released. The ‘game guide’ (as we called the hunting regulations booklet back then) used to list them as a huntable species in Dutchess County, but it no longer does. I often wonder what became of the hares.

I’ve included a picture of my great uncle and grandfather after a successful hunt. The hounds in the picture appear to me to be Walker fox hounds. It is only conjecture on my part, but I’m thinking that these hares run such a large circle that the hunters wanted a fast dog to bring the hares around more quickly.

Thinking back on my own 60 years of hunting in Dutchess County, I’m thankful for all the great outdoor expe-

riences I’ve enjoyed. Still, there is one thing I wish I could do: I’d trade a lot for the ability to go back in time to the 1920s for just one day. I’d spend it with Grandpa Lou and Uncle Carl, hunting for those big ‘jack rabbits.’

Unfortunately, life doesn’t work that way. I’ll just have to do it in my dreams.”

Not knowing anything about European hares myself, I thought I should do a little research, and what better place to start than with the *Conservationist* magazine itself?

European hares made several appearances in the *Conservationist* over the years, most notably in a February 1957 feature article aptly titled “The European Hare in New York.” The article, which was also reproduced as an information leaflet, was written by the then Conservation Department’s rabbit specialist, Game Research Investigator, Joe Dell.

Although I met him on several occasions, I can’t say I knew Joe well as he had retired by the time I started my DEC career as a wildlife biologist. But like so many biologists “bitten by the bug,” Joe had a hard time making a clean break from work; he continued to visit friends and colleagues in the office, even years after he retired. And it was then and there that I came to know him. Joe passed on recently, so I didn’t have the luxury of asking him in person about the hares.



Nearly twice as long as cottontails, European hares weigh as much as ten pounds.

No matter; Joe’s article on the history of European hares in New York is very informative. I’d encourage you to read it yourself at a local library, or perhaps we can post it online if enough folks are interested. In the article, Joe tells of how the hares were introduced from Hungary beginning about 1893, onto a wealthy landowner’s estate in Dutchess County.

With messages that should be heeded today, the article goes on to explain that even a nine-mile-long fence couldn’t contain the hares, and they expanded their range outward, first into neighboring counties, then into Connecticut and up the Hudson Valley. Dell’s article reported that in a series of severe winters in the early 1900s, the hares damaged Dutchess

County orchards, so the county paid a bounty of 25 cents a piece on 12,000 hares between 1912 and 1917. That's equal to nearly \$6 in today's money! For you small game hunters out there needing no additional incentive to pursue your pastime, can you imagine being paid to hunt hares?

Next, I called and e-mailed a number of older colleagues and recent DEC retirees, asking if they knew about the hares. Around here, retirees become a sort of institutional memory, mined when necessary, such as in this case. It's a little alarming to me, how many times I am taking on just such a role now!

In turn, colleagues pointed me to former wildlife technician and later conservation officer Collin Bursey, who, like Joe, retired just before I began my career. Collin worked on hares for a couple of years after being discharged from the service in 1955. He spoke of the hares once reaching as far north as Washington County, and as far west as Cherry Valley.

Sometime in the 1930s, European hare populations began a dramatic decline which continued for decades. According to Bursey, the hares liked large expanses of open area. Abandonment of farms during and after the Great Depression, and resulting landscape-level habitat change from open fields to brushlots to young forest stands certainly aided in the hare's demise.

As far as Bursey, or any of my colleagues knows, European hares (not to be confused with snowshoe hares) are no longer found in the wild. Although who knows—maybe an astute *Conservationist* reader can demonstrate otherwise!

In today's busy, rush-rush world of 100 e-mails a day, and tweets of no more than 140 characters, it's important once in a while to take a deep breath, power down the computer, read a handwritten letter, and enjoy a conversation with an elder. Someone who was there, well before we were.

Someone who can tell a story.

**Dave Nelson** is editor of *Conservationist*.



AS I SIT HERE WRITING THIS AT AGE 74 AND THINKING BACK ON MY OWN 60 YEARS OF HUNTING IN DUTCHESS COUNTY, I CAN'T HELP BUT WISH THAT I COULD GO BACK IN TIME TO THE 1920'S FOR JUST ONE DAY AND HUNT WITH GRANDPA LOU AND UNCLE CARL FOR THOSE BIG "JACK RABBITS". UNFORTUNATELY LIFE DOES NOT WORK THAT WAY AND I'LL JUST HAVE TO DO IT IN MY DREAMS.

VERY TRULY YOURS,  
WILLIAM G. WECKESSER

An excerpt from the letter

LIFELONG DUTCHESS COUNTY HUNTER



Above and below: Working with hounds is an enjoyable part of rabbit hunting.

# On Patrol

*Real stories from Conservation Officers and Forest Rangers in the field*

Carl Heilman II

Contributed by ECO Lt. Liza Bobseine and Forest Ranger Capt. Stephen Scherry



## Got Carrots?—Franklin County

Following up on a tip, Ranger Jeffrey Balerno, Ranger Kevin Burns, and ECO James Cranker scouted an area of state land near the hamlet of Loon Lake. There, they located numerous ATV trails which led to illegal tree stands, large bait piles and cut trees (to create clear shooting lanes). The rangers and ECO tracked the trail system to the back of a nearby hunting camp. On opening day of deer season, the rangers and ECO approached the three stands simultaneously just before dusk, and discovered two of the three stands were occupied with individuals hunting over very large bait piles of carrots and corn. The subjects were escorted back to camp, ticketed for several offenses (including failure to carry a hunting license, hunting over bait, and illegal use of ATVs on state land), and released for a later court date.

## The K-9 Nose Knows—Sullivan County

ECO Scott Steingart and K-9 Buck were called to assist ECO Ricky Wood in locating a shotgun shell after a man allegedly fired a gun from St. Joseph's Road in Forestburg, killing a turkey. K-9 Buck located the shell casing where it had ejected near the road and also the wad from the shell.



The Brooklyn man ultimately confessed to the illegal taking and remarked, "You can't fool a dog's nose!" ECO Wood took him for arraignment in the Town of Forestburg, where he pled guilty and paid a \$450 fine.

## Even the Kitchen Sink—Delaware County

ECO Nathan Doig was on patrol on a back road in the Town of Masonville when he saw heavy smoke from a distance. He responded to the source of the smoke, and the resident stated that he was "just burning a little bit of brush." ECO Doig and the individual walked to where the fire blazed, and the officer observed that the "little bit of brush" included a large kitchen sink. As it turned out, the resident also was burning household garbage, insulation, construction and demolition debris, plastic, and several other types of material. He was unable to extinguish the fire, so ECO Doig contacted the Masonville Fire Department. The individual was charged under New York State's Open Fire Regulations, prohibiting the burning of the type of household waste found in the fire.

## Turtle Power—Queens County

Marine Unit ECOs Kevin Thomas and Brent Wilson were patrolling the Rockaway shoreline when they stopped in front of a breakwall to check an angler who had parked his car along the road and was arranging his gear. ECO Thomas noticed something moving on the floor of the car and discovered a diamondback terrapin, a protected native marine turtle. The angler claimed he had found it along the rocks by the water (which required hopping over a restricted-access wall) and decided to "help" the turtle by transporting it a few miles down the road to throw it off a 15-foot wall into the water. The ECOs, skeptical of the man's supposed good intentions, discovered an undersized summer flounder in his possession as well. The man was issued summonses for possession of undersized summer flounder and for taking diamondback terrapin out of season. The turtle was (gently) released, unharmed, back into the state's water.



# INDOOR NATURE WALK

— *Herkimer County Community College's Natural History Museum*

**By Ronald P. Carvin**  
photos provided by author

I wake up this clear, winter morning, only to be greeted by an outside temperature of -12°F.

In spite of the cold, I get ready and head into work at Herkimer County Community College (HCCC), where I have been teaching biology for 33 years. Considering the day's weather, one of the last

things most people would want to do is go on a nature walk, but that is exactly what is on the Biology lab schedule for the afternoon.

The purpose of this particular lab activity is to observe and learn about the organisms that the students and I may encounter during our journey. As

we discover different creatures, I will talk about the way to identify them, the type of habitat they live in, and maybe something about their natural history including their behavior, or their interrelationships with other organisms.

Now, I know what you are thinking... Can I really expect to find a large number



HCCC students take an up-close look at an osprey mount.

of organisms outside while the temperature is below zero and there's a foot of snow on the ground? How many insects, amphibians, reptiles and ground-inhabiting plants can we hope to find?

Well, the answers may surprise you. I expect to see hundreds, maybe thousands of specimens. Because rather than leading

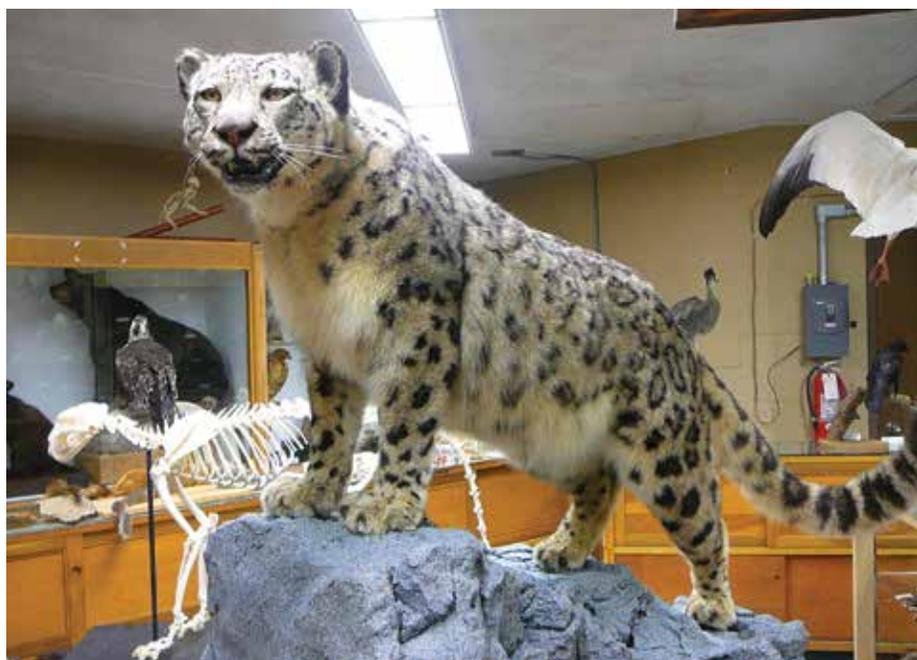
students on a tour of the college's Interpretive Trail through our 55-acre outdoor Nature Center, I plan to take them to visit our natural history museum.

The HCCC Natural History Museum is currently tucked away in a quiet corner of the science building, Johnson Hall. We've been adding to the museum's collections

since its creation almost 35 years ago so now our current inventory includes more than 10,000 specimens. In addition to taxidermy mounts of birds and mammals, we also have an extensive collection of properly prepared plant presses, a modest fungal fruiting-body collection, woody plant cones and fruits, a geology collection, and an amazing insect collection. We also have an extensive inventory of photographs including everything from mosses to mushrooms; from nuts to nuthatches. The vast majority of the specimens are indigenous to New York State either as residents or migrants, so visiting the museum will give the students a good representative sampling of what's out there.

After meeting the students in the lab, we proceed to the museum. As soon as we pass through the door and begin our "nature walk," the students are greeted by the very intimidating glare of a cougar (also called mountain lion, painter, panther and cat-amount). However, the students are not frightened; in fact they all get an uncontrollable urge to...pet him. Not only did the cougar not send them running to the hills, but neither did our black bear, bobcat, coyote or even the beautiful and majestic full-body mount of a snow leopard. In fact, most of the students, who come from cities, are actually overwhelmed with curiosity. To them, this is the highlight of a natural experience—quite the opposite of feeding pigeons in a small park with just a few trees and trampled grass.

As the students explore the museum, it's interesting to see their faces while, at the same time, listening to their comments: "Wow, I thought a red fox was bigger than that!"; "That's what a muskrat looks like?"; "I never realized gray squirrels can also be black and even pure white!"; "I have seen these things on TV but never in real life."



Most taxidermy mounts in the museum represent wildlife species currently found in NY. Other specimens, like the mountain lion (top) are indicative of species that have disappeared from the state. Although the snow leopard (bottom) is native to Central Asia, the mount represents a rare species and is an important part of the collection.

I quickly get overwhelmed with questions, the most common being, “What’s this?” My answers have to be fast and furious just to keep up: “fisher, woodcock, ermine, osprey, turkey eggs, giant puffball, porcupine scat, redwood cone, male monarch butterfly,” and so on. Sometimes I will have enough time to talk about something more interesting than just a name: “Take a look at how intricate this oriole nest is.”; “This is a morel (*Morchella*)—simple to identify, and delicious to eat.”; “Look at the way this osprey carries the fish it just caught.”

The students are especially interested in the prepared skull collection. Here I have the opportunity to point out interesting bone and dental characteristics, and how they have been adapted to specific feeding habits. The students are always amazed at the number of teeth an opossum has, along with such a tiny brain. Opossums are literally (what I call) “dumb eating machines,” unlike river otters which are considered more intelligent due to their larger brains. This may be a reason why the animal has a seemingly playful and carefree attitude. (Editor’s note: For more information about river otters, see page 8.)

Moving around the museum, the students discover the plant herbarium. Over the past forty years, HCCC ecology, dendrology, conservation and environmental science students have collected, identified, and preserved hundreds of plant specimens—all properly labeled and mounted on herbarium paper. The specimens come from a multitude of natural communities and ecosystems found in New York State.

It doesn’t take long before the students ask another common question: “How did you get all these specimens?” The answer is as diverse as the specimens themselves. A few, like the mountain lion and black bear, were confiscated by Environmental Conservation Officers because private individuals were trying to illegally



If the large mountain lion taxidermy mount somehow hasn’t piqued students’ interest by this part of the museum tour, it is by the time students reach the skull and insect collections!



sell them on the internet, or because they were killed out of the regulated hunting season. Other specimens were donated by private organizations or individuals. For example, the owl and hawk collections were provided by the George Cogar Foundation. (A Herkimer businessman, Cogar was an inventor of an early precursor to modern personal computers.) Our beautiful insect collection was contributed by Professor Leroy Stegeman, retired from SUNY College of Environ-

mental Science and Forestry in Syracuse. We have also acquired a large number of specimens from wildlife rehabilitators like Cindy Page of the Page Wildlife Center in Manlius. (By the way, Cindy has thrilled us several times by presenting her live raptors program—always standing room only.)

By far, most of the individual specimens have come from the general public who know about the museum and think of us when they find something



The owl collection is popular with the students, as they get to see these largely nocturnal birds up-close.



that we don't have. I announce to my students that if they find something interesting, they should put it in a plastic bag in the freezer, and contact us as quickly as possible. Some of the birds that we don't have, but hope to someday acquire by donation or on loan from another collection, include a bald eagle and many species of waterfowl, shorebirds and wading birds.

The lab class is almost over and our nature walk must come to an end; the students have to get to other classes. But, before they leave there are always a few final comments and questions: "I never knew this was here." and "Is this open all the time?" The answer is "yes" but mostly by appointment. In fact tomorrow, Bill Newman from Poland Central School is making his annual visit with a bus full of his conservation students.

As we leave the museum, I feel a warming sense of satisfaction because I was able to teach the students a great deal about natural history during a relatively short visit. They understand more about many of the organisms that can be found in our Nature Center as well as the rest of the state, and it was accomplished without getting frostbite!

The museum is a fantastic educational experience which makes long-lasting impressions on my students. Unfortu-

nately, its rapid growth over the past few years has brought us to the point of almost bursting through our walls. But that's not going to hinder us from our ongoing collecting because with continued support from the college, as well as the community, someday we should be able to provide enough space where the specimens—and students—can spread their wings.

Professor **Ronald P. Carvin** graduated from HCCC in 1976 and returned as a teacher after completing his degrees at SUNY College of Environmental Science and Forestry in 1980. He has always been committed to maintaining HCCC's Nature Center and the Natural History Museum.

## WILDLIFE HEALTH CORNER:

### A Look at DEC's Wildlife Health Program

By Dr. Krysten Schuler; DEC photos

Each year, concerned New Yorkers come across sick, injured, or dead wildlife and wonder what, if anything, they should do. In some mortality cases, animals are sent to DEC's Wildlife Health Unit in Delmar to determine the cause of death. Using the latest laboratory and diagnostic techniques, biologists begin to unravel the mysteries of what happened to these animals, how and why, and what can be done about it.

New York State has long been involved in wildlife disease investigation. In fact, DEC was one of the earliest state agencies to study wildlife health, beginning in the late 1930s. Since the outset, this work has been headquartered at DEC's Wildlife Resource Center in Delmar. Staff there have made important contributions to our knowledge of infectious and parasitic wildlife diseases, and have been in the forefront nationwide in identifying threats to wildlife posed by pesticides, lead and environmental pollution.

Due in large part to the region's important role in global trade, New York is recognized as an epicenter for the emergence of wildlife diseases. During the last two decades, New York State was "ground zero" for North American outbreaks of both West Nile virus in birds, and white-nose syndrome in bats. In addition, New York has experienced an invasion of a raccoon-adapted strain of rabies, dealt with a detection of chronic wasting disease in deer, and seen the re-emergence of type E botulism in the Great Lakes with the subsequent death of thousands of diving waterbirds along Lake Erie and Lake Ontario shorelines. (See June, 2002 *Conservationist*.)

As you can see, there's plenty to monitor and study when it comes to wildlife diseases and health! And some



DEC Wildlife Biologist Kevin Hynes demonstrates proper necropsy techniques to DEC field staff. (Bottom) Hynes performs a necropsy on an American crow, a known carrier of West Nile Disease. Tissue samples are collected and sent to labs for analysis.



diseases are transmittable to humans as well. This is the case with the West Nile virus, a blood-borne disease carried by mosquitoes that commonly affects crows and jays, that can also affect horses and threaten human health. West Nile is an excellent example of a disease that intertwines wildlife, domestic animal and human health issues.

Biologists in DEC's Wildlife Health Program (WHP) examine sick and dead wildlife from around the state to identify a disease or determine the cause of death. WHP handles only free-ranging wildlife (not farm animals or pets), and attempts to reduce the effects of wildlife diseases on people and domestic animals. The goals are to identify and monitor infectious and non-infectious wildlife diseases, to use that information in making wildlife management decisions, and to intervene when necessary to ensure healthy wildlife populations for generations to come.

Additional testing for investigations on dead wildlife are completed at Cornell's Animal Health Diagnostic Center in Ithaca. This may include looking for bacterial infections, viruses, fungal infections, or the effects of poisoning. Cornell staff will also perform necropsies on wildlife specimens to support the WHP. DEC analytical laboratories in Gloversville and Rensselaer can test for organochlorine pesticides like DDT and anticoagulant rodenticides in wildlife.

Last year, WHP handled more than 800 cases, which ranged from tiny tadpoles to bears and moose. Most of these cases



This coyote was submitted to DEC's WHP for examination. It was found to have an infestation of lice.

began with an observation or report from the public. Notable findings included a resurgence of West Nile virus (WNV) in birds, late winter outbreaks of salmonellosis in redpolls at bird feeders, eagles killing other eagles, several cases of rabies in deer, and multiple poisonings of red-tailed hawks with anticoagulant rodenticides in New York City.

This year we have identified winter starvation in barred owls, an unusual outbreak of salmonellosis in Long Island wading birds, more rabid deer, collisions between trains and bald eagles, mange in red foxes on Long Island, and unsolved raccoon and bird poisonings in New York City.

In addition to analyzing dead or dying animals, WHP staff participate in ongoing research projects, like examining a tumor-

producing virus in wild turkeys, the prevalence of *Salmonella* in backyard feeder birds, and snake fungal disease.

While disease and death are part of a balanced ecosystem, stressors like the introduction of invasive species, new and emerging diseases, climate change, habitat destruction and human development can alter that balance. Through New York's surveillance program, wildlife diseases can be identified early, before they impact the wildlife population or become a danger to other animals or humans.

**Dr. Krysten Schuler** is a wildlife disease ecologist at Cornell's Animal Health Diagnostic Center in Ithaca.



## What to do if you find sick or injured wildlife:

If you find wildlife that appears to be sick or diseased, or an animal that died under questionable circumstances, don't put yourself at risk. Instead, contact your regional DEC office.

For more information, visit DEC's website at: [www.dec.ny.gov/animals/261.html](http://www.dec.ny.gov/animals/261.html)

# Niagara Falls State Park

*A gull and waterfowl Mecca—size: more than 400 acres  
A premier watchable wildlife site*



Lois Elling

Created in 1885, Niagara Falls State Park is the oldest state park in the United States. While visitors may be drawn here by the immense power and beauty of Niagara’s world famous cataracts, the park also boasts a surprising diversity of birdlife. The falls are a magnet for both tourists and huge flocks of gulls. Looking down from the edge of Niagara Gorge in autumn or winter, the air above the turbulent waters is at times white with wheeling and diving gulls.

Niagara’s waters provide the gulls with a smorgasbord of small fish, which become stunned by the churning water. With its steep-walled gorge, the river

corridor also protects the gulls from severe winter storms that sweep across the Great Lakes. The result is a “gull Mecca,” with 19 species seen here—more than half the varieties native to North America. Large flocks of waterfowl also come for the bounty of fish, and several species of songbirds and wading birds are seasonal visitors to the park’s shorelines as well.

Due to its importance for migrating birds, the Niagara River corridor was the first site named as a globally significant Important Bird Area by the National Audubon Society in 1996. Forest and shrubland on the river’s shore are home to a variety of mammals, as well as birds.



ring-billed gull

Joe LeFevre

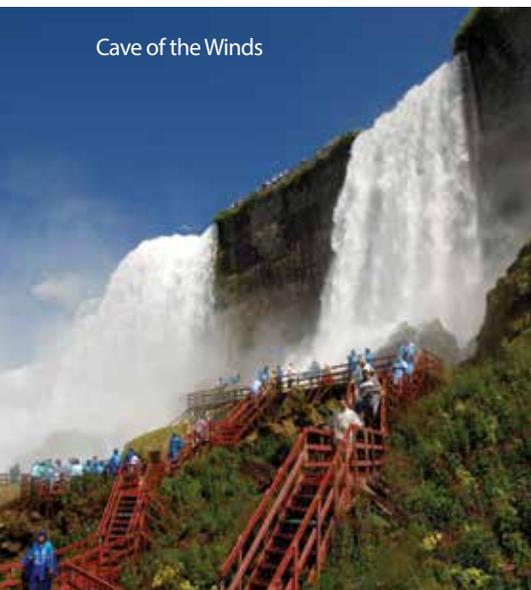
Common mergansers, female (left) and male (right).



## Wildlife to Watch

Bonaparte's, herring and ring-billed gulls arrive in the fall and stay through winter. In summer, a ring-billed gull breeding colony in the Cave of the Winds area is perhaps one of the largest in the region. Other gulls migrate to the falls from the far corners of North America and beyond. Glaucous, Thayer's, Iceland and Sabine's gulls fly in from the arctic; great black-backed gulls, laughing gulls and black-legged kittiwakes come from the east coast; California and Franklin's gulls arrive from the prairies and points

Cave of the Winds



farther west; and black-headed gulls migrate from Europe and the Canadian Maritimes. This past fall, sightings of a brown booby, a tropical species usually seen only off Mexico and Central America, created quite a stir among birdwatchers.

Globally significant populations of waterfowl, such as canvasbacks, common mergansers, common goldeneyes and other diving ducks, can also be seen here each winter.

While winter hosts the most spectacular bird gatherings in the park, spring and fall are excellent times to see many varieties of migrating warblers, including yellow, chestnut-sided, black-throated blue and black-throated green, Tennessee, Nashville, Kentucky, Cape May and blackburnian, among many others.

During spring and summer, visitors may see double-crested cormorants and wading birds like black-crowned night herons, green herons and great blue herons. Squirrel species are the predominant mammals seen in the park, including the familiar eastern chipmunk, gray squirrel (also in black and blonde phases), red squirrel, and the large fox squirrel (at the eastern edge of its range).



gray squirrel, black phase



## Site Features

**Site Notes:** The park and visitors center is open year-round, seven days a week. There is a vehicle entrance fee. Contact the park for hours and fees for other activities.

**Trails:** The park has a wide variety of attractions and amenities from which to choose. Roadway and pedestrian bridges connect the U.S. shore to Goat Island between the American and Horseshoe falls. Walking paths with scenic overlooks above the falls hug the shore. Interpretive signs describe the history and geology of the area, as well as plant and animal life found there.

A bridge connects to an observation tower with an elevator which provides a close-up view of the full length of the falls. Or you can follow the bridge down to the popular Maid of the Mist boats to view the falls from the river below. Stairways connect to the Crow's Nest and Cave of the Winds vantage points on both sides of the American Falls at the bottom of the gorge. Maid of the Mist and Cave of the Winds are open from early spring through mid-fall. Visit their websites at [www.maidofthemist.com](http://www.maidofthemist.com) and [www.niagarafallslive.com/cave\\_of\\_the\\_winds.htm](http://www.niagarafallslive.com/cave_of_the_winds.htm) for specific dates, as well as ticket prices.

**Accessibility:** This site has limited accessible features.

**Directions:** For directions and other information, visit [www.parks.ny.gov/parks/46](http://www.parks.ny.gov/parks/46) or call 716-278-1796





### Attention Campers!

DEC now offers Camping Gift Cards, just in time for the holiday season. A camping gift card makes the perfect gift for that hard-to-buy-for outdoor-enthusiast. The cards are redeemable for camping at all DEC Campgrounds, or when reserving a campsite through ReserveAmerica (online and via phone). Gift cards can be purchased for any dollar amount and can be reloaded after the initial purchase. Best of all, gifts at the \$50 rate entitle the buyer to a free one-year subscription to the *Conservationist*, or a one-year extension if they already subscribe! Call 518-457-2500 to purchase a gift card. To reserve a campsite, visit <http://newyorkstateparks.reserveamerica.com>.

### ALB in Babylon

The invasive Asian longhorned beetle (ALB) was recently confirmed in Babylon, Long Island. This is the first detection of the beetle outside of the existing Suffolk County regulated area. An ALB eradication program is underway; infested trees have been removed, and personnel are carrying out tree survey inspections and placing pheromone traps in neighborhoods to aid

in early detection. ALB was first discovered in Brooklyn in 1996; the beetle attacks 13 types of trees including maple, willow, birch and elm. Signs of infestation include round exit holes (3/8 to 1/2" diameter); frass (wood shavings and coarse saw dust); and pockmarks on tree trunks and branches where females deposit eggs. Check your trees regularly and report any signs of ALB by calling the NYS ALB Eradication Program at 1-866-265-0301



Asian longhorned beetle

## BRIEFLY

(or 1-877-STOP-ALB), or online at [www.asianlonghorned-beetle.com](http://www.asianlonghorned-beetle.com). For more information about ALB, visit: [www.dec.ny.gov/animals/7255.html](http://www.dec.ny.gov/animals/7255.html), [www.agriculture.ny.gov](http://www.agriculture.ny.gov), or [www.aphis.usda.gov](http://www.aphis.usda.gov).

Susan Shafer



### New Easement Lands

The public can now enjoy new facilities and recreation opportunities on the Sable Highlands Conservation Easement Lands in Franklin and Clinton counties. DEC and partners built new parking lots, opened recreational corridor roadways for motorized vehicle use, and installed information kiosks. Details of the new facilities and recreation corridors, as well as directions and usage guidelines of the land, can be found at [www.dec.ny.gov/lands/71173.html](http://www.dec.ny.gov/lands/71173.html), or by calling the DEC Region 5 office at 518-897-1291.

### Learn About Black Bears

Want to learn more about black bears? Check out the new black bear education website at <http://blackbearinfo.com>. The free site contains a wide array of education materials, including videos and pictures. New York teachers and students may especially enjoy



computer programs like “Understanding Black Bears,” which can be downloaded for free. Visit the website today to explore the variety of materials available.

DEC photo



### First Day Hikes

Celebrate the New Year by going on a hike! On January 1, 2014, state park systems in all fifty states will sponsor First Day Hike Programs. These First Day Hikes allow individuals and families a chance to begin the New Year by enjoying and connecting with the outdoors, at a state park. Visit [www.americasstateparks.org/first-day-hikes](http://www.americasstateparks.org/first-day-hikes) to see pictures from past years, and to plan your First Day Hike.

### Arbor Day Poster Contest

DEC is accepting submissions for the annual Arbor Day Poster contest. All fifth-grade students are eligible to design and enter an original poster depicting the 2014 theme, “New York’s Forests Where We Live.” School contest winners will be eligible to compete at the regional level; regional winners will then compete for the state title. The final winner’s artwork will be featured on the official 2014 NYS Arbor Day bookmark. The winner will also receive an invitation to attend the NYS Arbor Day Event in Albany, as well as have a tree planted in his/her name at his/her school. Entries can be dropped off at regional offices until December 17, 2013. Visit [www.dec.ny.gov/education/25420.html](http://www.dec.ny.gov/education/25420.html) for more details.

Answer to Question on page 31.

**How Many Deer?** Did you guess four? That’s right! In the photograph, three deer can easily be seen. However, if you look closely, you can see that the head and neck of the deer in the foreground do not go with the body of the deer to the right—that deer’s head is lowered, out of view.



### The Kelloggsville Coyote

I was photographing wildlife from a tree stand at our hunting camp in Kelloggsville when this coyote came trotting through the woods, heading directly at me. When it was about 30 yards away, it climbed onto a downed, dead tree and looked all around. I quickly snapped off some photos. The sound of the camera clicking didn't seem to bother it a bit. Boy was it my lucky day!

Ed Snyder  
Williamson, Wayne County

*This is one impressive photo. You sure are lucky this coyote stopped where it did—striking a great pose for you!*

—Eileen Stegemann, Assistant Editor

### Redpoll Friend

I thought you might enjoy this photo I took of a redpoll that came to visit. I actually counted 119 of them at one time.

Alvin Briesch,  
Retired DEC Amphibian and Reptile Specialist



*You must be serving something good at your house, Al!*

—Dave Nelson, Editor

### Postcard Cardinal

I wanted to share a picture of a bird that's been making an appearance around here after a recent snowfall.

Zachary Brown  
West Valley, Cattaraugus County



*What a great mood piece for the season. It reminds me of an old postcard!*

—Jenna Kerwin, Staff Writer

### Winter Flight

*Phil Naccarato of Kingston, Ulster County sent us this picture taken by his late son, Keith. A resident of Olive Bridge, near the Ashokan Reservoir, Keith would "tramp through the woods and marshes getting photographs of the wildlife in the area, as well as many scenic pictures of the sunsets and the mountains around the reservoir." We are happy we could share Keith's love of the outdoors. Truly he was passionate about nature, as well as his photography.*



## ✉ LETTERS

### Unusual Smallmouth

I caught and released this beauty while drifting on the lower Niagara River. Its bright yellow color and orange eyes are different from other smallmouth bass I've caught here. Is this unusual?

Brian Steger  
Amherst, New York



*What a nice catch! Like most wildlife, fish coloration will differ between individuals and between different waters. While this smallmouth bass is a bit lighter than most that we see from Lake Erie, we do come across fish like this from time to time.*

—Donald Einhouse, DEC Fisheries Biologist

### Strength in Numbers

Last year, Diane Hayes of Honeoye, Ontario County, sent us this photo of white-tailed deer on her property. We posted it on our Facebook page with the caption, “How many deer do YOU see?” and received quite a response. This year we thought we’d ask our subscribers the same question. How many deer do you see pictured? Turn to page 29 for the answer.



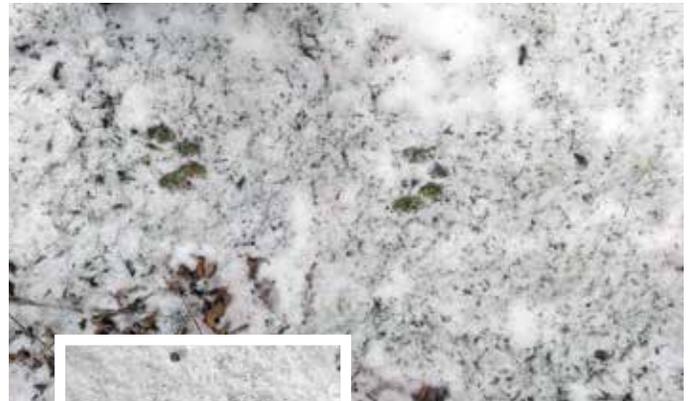
### Ask the Biologist

**Q:** I came across these giant tracks and wondered what made them. Could they be from a big cat like a bobcat or cougar?

—David Brack

**A:** You may be surprised to know that these are actually small tracks left by a bounding squirrel. The four “prints” (or what appear to be toes) are from the squirrel’s four feet. This is particularly clear on the photo showing the person’s shoe. In the other photo, the squirrel was moving from right to left, and you can see that the hind feet partially obscured the tracks of the front feet. Rabbits leave behind similar trails. Also, note that if this was a bobcat or cougar, there would be a huge central pad mark behind the four individual “toe” prints, as shown in the sketch here.

—Dan Rosenblatt, DEC wildlife biologist



cougar print for comparison

### Contact us!

✉ E-mail us at: [magazine@gw.dec.state.ny.us](mailto:magazine@gw.dec.state.ny.us)

✉ Write to us at: Conservationist Letters  
NYSDEC, 625 Broadway  
Albany, NY 12233-4502

📘 [facebook.com/NYSDECtheconservationist](https://www.facebook.com/NYSDECtheconservationist)



# Back Trails

Perspectives on People and Nature

John Bulmer

## The Very Friendly Grouse by Ellie George

Last year I was walking along a quiet dirt road just south of Westport, New York with John and Pat Thaxton, two accomplished birders, when I had the most extraordinary experience. It was my very first Christmas Bird Count, in which birders get together to try to identify and count as many birds as they can in a particular area; we were searching white pines for small songbirds.

Pat played a recording of a screech owl's call, hoping to elicit a response from some birds in the trees. Instead, a grouse popped out on the lane and walked toward us. We smiled and recorded the grouse on the tally sheet. But the grouse kept coming, and to our surprise, it walked right up to our feet and seemingly checked out our boots!

Smiling broadly, we looked at the grouse, then at each other, then back at the grouse again. The bird, a female, I believe, as it lacked the black base of the ruff that males have, made almost constant sounds. Some were almost chicken-like low coos, others were purrs, and still others were high-pitched.

As she looked from our boots to our faces, we tried to understand her tame behavior. We wondered if people had fed her, and if she was looking for a handout. She allowed us to move a hand slowly to within a couple inches of her breast, but then would back away. She never once pecked or touched us.

The grouse followed us the whole time we walked around, usually staying right behind our feet. When we stopped, she stopped, and we had to be careful not to step on her when we turned around. Sometimes she went off into the under-

growth to feed, but she always came back.

She seemed to focus on one person at a time, and if that person walked away, she followed them. But when another one of us approached, she checked out that person's shoes and then followed them if they went in a different direction. At one point I tried mimicking her low cooing noises, at which point she stopped and listened, then cooed again. I did this a few times with the same result, but since I don't speak Grouse fluently, I hoped I didn't say anything unpleasant.

When we returned to our car, we saw that another birder, Gary Chapin, had arrived. He walked toward us, but stopped when he saw the grouse. I told him it was okay to walk right up to the bird, and he did. To Gary's delight, the grouse checked out his boots, and started to follow him.

After taking a bunch of photos, we reluctantly agreed it was time to search for other birds to count. If I had been alone, I would have spent the rest of the day with Ms. Grouse. I loved watching her feed, and was fascinated by my up-close view of the tiny scales that line the edges of each toe, forming a kind of snowshoe that enables the bird to stay on the surface of the snow. Her feathers were just beautiful, with many different patterns of brown, white, rust and gold which formed superb camouflage.

Gary got into his car to leave, and the grouse followed. I was able to distract her, but as Gary drove off, the grouse first ran, and then flew right after his car, staying right behind his bumper. When he stopped, she did too. We got in our car and drove past Gary, and as he pulled in behind us,



we saw the grouse running behind Gary's car along the edge of the road. She ran faster and faster, but finally gave up after we had gone a few hundred yards. It was amazing to watch, and we almost felt badly leaving her behind.

Later, we speculated on the reason for this unusual behavior. Was the grouse raised by humans and imprinted on them? Or was she just a young bird looking for company?

Whatever the reason, it was an extraordinary birding adventure! I wonder what gift this year's Christmas Bird Count will bring!

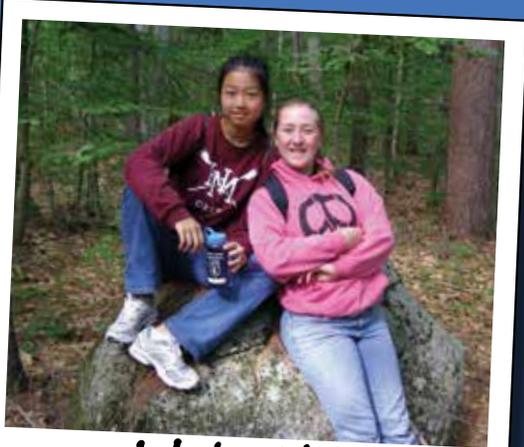
A naturalist since childhood, **Ellie George** works as a bookkeeper from her home in Charlton, and monitors loons for the Adirondack Center for Loon Conservation from her camp at Paradox Lake.

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