

# THE HARLEQUIN

York County Audubon  
Winter 2014



*A Snowy Owl on Drakes Island in Wells in December. Photo courtesy of Ken Janes*

## A Snowy Owl Explosion

*By Jeff and Allison Wells*

Seeing even a single snowy owl is an exciting moment for just about anyone. But can you imagine seeing 10 in one place? Amazingly, a Maine birder had just that experience in December in Biddeford Pool, and at least six were seen at both Monhegan and Popham Beach. In just a few weeks' time, one of the most amazing influxes of snowy owls in recent history has been underway in Maine and beyond.

While the 10 seen in a single day at Biddeford Pool is astonishing, imagine the lucky person who counted 30 between New Hampshire and Boston. Or the Newfoundland birders who tallied 138 snowy owls on December 1, including one spot where they could see 25 in a single scan of the horizon!

Several snowy owls have made it to the coast of

North Carolina, a state where the species has only been seen a few times previously. One bird even showed up on Bermuda. It must have been relieved to find this island refuge after trekking across the featureless ocean nonstop for days as it headed south, though the warm air must have been a shock for this Arctic dweller.

When massive numbers of birds move outside of their normal range like this, ornithologists have coined the term “irruption” to describe the phenomena. Backyard birders are more familiar with the more regular “irruptions” of Northern finches like common redpolls and pine siskins that can occur every two years on average in our area.

These irruptions are thought to be the result of a very successful breeding season or the sudden lack of food as they move into the wintering period. Probably both of these factors actually act together, with large numbers of both adults and immatures coming out of a favorable summer breeding season followed by a dearth of food with too many mouths to feed in the late fall.

In the case of snowy owls, their breeding success is often linked to the cyclical increase in numbers of a favorite Arctic food, the lemming, a small mammal that is also famous for exhibiting a population crash after it reaches a high density peak. Such a crash leaves the increased numbers of snowy owls suddenly starving.

This apparently triggers a sudden urge to undertake a massive long-distance migration with the hope of surviving long enough to reach a place with more food. Sadly, many of these owls are emaciated on arrival and won't find food quickly enough to survive. Others fall prey to cars, which they may have never seen before in their isolated breeding range and since snowy owls are diurnal (active during the day) they have a high likelihood of encountering traffic.

Although the circumstances may not be the best for the birds, for us humans, the phenomenon

presents a rare opportunity to see a beautiful bird that has come from the land of polar bears and caribou. It's worth trying to get out and see one if you get a chance. Just be sure to give it space and respect so that it has a better chance of surviving and making it back to its Arctic home.

*Dr. Jeff Wells is the senior scientist for the Boreal Songbird Initiative. During his time at the famed Cornell Lab of Ornithology and as the Audubon Society's national bird conservation director, Dr. Wells earned a reputation as one of the nation's leading bird experts and conservation biologists. Allison Childs Wells, also formerly of the Cornell Lab of Ornithology, is a widely published natural history writer and a senior director at the Natural Resources Council of Maine. Together, they have been writing and teaching people about birds for decades. The Maine natives are authors of “Maine's Favorite Birds.”*



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**The Harlequin, the newsletter of the York County Audubon Society, is published spring, summer, fall, and winter.**

**[www.yorkcountyaudubon.org](http://www.yorkcountyaudubon.org)  
and please visit us on Facebook!**



*The Harlequin is printed on 50%  
post-consumer recycled paper.*

## York County Christmas Bird Counts Set New Records

Beginning on Christmas Day in 1900, the Audubon Society has been sponsoring Christmas Bird Counts to help monitor the health and status of bird populations throughout North America. In that first year, there were 25 count circles with a total of 27 birders. Now, there are over 2300 count circles each year with over 70,000 birders participating, with the locations stretching from Alaska to South America.

Each year, York County Audubon sponsors two counts. The Southern York County circle extends from Kittery to Ogunquit, while the Biddeford/Kennebunkport count circle reaches from Kennebunk to Saco.



*Black Scoters appeared in record numbers this year, as did Buffleheads.*

Thanks to the thirty-two individuals who counted 86 species of birds on December 16, 2013, the 39th year of the Southern York County CBC. We walked about 60 miles, drove another 130 in temperatures ranging from 8-22 degrees. We identified new high counts for Black Scoter, Long-tail Duck, Northern Harrier, Sanderling, Ring-bill Gull, Eastern Bluebird, Great -horned Owl and of course Snowy Owl. 2013 is certainly the year of the Snowy Owl! Derek Lovitch in Section 1 of the count circle identified two new birds for the count: Clay-colored Sparrow and Brown Thrasher. Anne and Bob Watson found our first Ruddy Duck although it was classified as pre moribund, while Monica and Bill Grabin and Shiloh Shulte identified the first Batimore Oriole. We finished the day with chili and goodies. Thanks to organizer Pat Moynihan and all who made this year Christmas Count a success.

The 54<sup>th</sup> Biddeford/Kennebunkport Count was held on December 28<sup>th</sup>. Thanks to the good weather, many dedicated birders in the field, some pre-dawn owling (yielding Great Horned and Barred Owls), our feeder watchers (adding an Eastern Towhee and a Saw-whet Owl), and a heads up from a birder in the count area (leading to the American Wigeons and one of the Pintails), we had a very successful CBC. We found 92 species on count day - a new high - and added a new species during the count week - the White-winged Dove which unfortunately was not relocated on count day. We had 10 new high species counts - more than doubling the previous number of Black Scoters and Snow Buntings, and a third more Buffleheads. As expected, our 16 Snowy Owls (maybe 17) demolished the old record of 6. The 16203 total birds seen is also a record for the count. Thanks to organizer Marie Jordan and all who participated.

## 2014 Hog Island Scholarship Announced



In 2014, YCAS is once again seeking an educator or community leader to participate in a one-week program on famed Hog Island off mid-coast Maine in July 2014. YCAS will sponsor one participant who can benefit from the Hog Island experience and use it to teach others. **Complete information is available at [www.yorkcountyaudubon.org](http://www.yorkcountyaudubon.org) and applications are due by March 15, 2014.**

**The program is entitled “Sharing Nature: An Educator’s Week” and will run from July 20th through July 25th.** Program details and descriptions are available at <http://hogisland.audubon.org/sharing-nature-educator-s-week>. The YCAS scholarship will pay 70% (up to \$700) of the recipient's cost for program tuition, room and board.

YCAS’s 2013 Hog Island scholarship winner was Johanna Klein. She provided a lively description of her program experience in an article for the Autumn 2013 issue of *The Harlequin*, the YCAS newsletter, which can be accessed through the YCAS website. Since 1936, some of the world’s most well-known and highly respected naturalists have come to Hog Island and inspired thousands to learn about and protect birds and the environment. Roger Tory Peterson was among the first teachers on the 335-acre island. Rachel Carson described her visit to Hog Island in her landmark book, *Silent Spring*. Kenn Kaufman, only nine years old when he read Peterson’s account of Hog Island, is now an international authority on birds and nature.

## New Members:

Neal Atkins and Sandra Hrasdzira	Saco
Timothy and Diana Kilfoil	Cincinnati, OH
Mr. and Mrs. Stewart E. McClure, Jr.	Mendham, NJ
Mr. and Mrs. J. Thomas Scrivener	Woodbine, MD
Judy Crown	Saco
Catherine Duford	Bar Mills
Michael Gauthier	York
Linda C. Rioux	Old Orchard Beach
Laura Turner	Cornish
Inge Valentine	Kennebunk
Bradley Woodward	Old Orchard Beach

## Welcome Back:

Betsy Bischoff	Kittery Point
Scott Eldredge	York
Ruth Leavitt	Hollis
Barbara Schultheis	Kennebunk
David Flavin	Eliot
Pierre Vial	Biddeford Pool
Mason M. Williams	Richmond, VA

## Winter Birding Patch: Lund Road, Saco

*Contributed by Joanne Stevens*

Lund Road industrial park is a reliable spot to check in the winter for fruit-eating birds such as Pine Grosbeak, Cedar and Bohemian Waxwings and Robins. It has also hosted a Northern Shrike, Bluebirds, Sparrows and others. The main attraction is a small stream surrounded by fruit-bearing trees and shrubs near a cattail marsh. Pine Grosbeaks and Bohemian Waxwings don’t always make it this far south every winter, but when they do this area is a good place to look for them. Lund Road is easily accessible from Rt. 112 (North Street) in Saco near the turnpike. Turn at the Shell Station and pull into the large dirt parking lot on the right

## **How You Can Help Our Feathered Friends**

*by Marian Zimmerman*

If you are one who enjoys bird feeding, there are several things you can do to be a great host. First, keep your feeders clean to reduce the spread of disease. Think of your feeders as community plates where all share, the healthy and clean as well as the sick and dirty. The accumulation of seed fragments and shells tends to mold when moisture seeps in and this, combined with the many different birds visiting feeders, creates unhealthy conditions. Feeders need to be thoroughly cleaned on a regular basis. After removing shells and caked seeds, scrub the feeders clean, and soak in Clorox wash (¼ Cup Clorox in 1 Gallon water) for 1-2 hours. Rinse feeders in plain water and air dry thoroughly before refilling with good quality seed.

Another important consideration during the winter months is fresh water. With our freezing winter temperatures, fresh water can be more limiting than food. Try adding a water feature with heater to your feeding station and see how that affects bird activity.

Windows can be a hazard to birds frequenting feeders as they may fly into them and be injured or killed. To reduce this possibility, place decals on your windows near your feeders. These can be most anything, but silhouettes of birds of prey, seem to be especially effective in getting the birds to notice the window.

Bird feeding can be fun, but to get the maximum activity (for you) and benefit (for the birds), make sure your feeders are clean, there is water available, and your windows are delineated so the birds are aware of them. Then sit back and enjoy the wonder and beauty that comes to you!

## ***Behind the Scenes***

For more than a decade, YCAS Board member Julie Suchecki has tirelessly served as Editor of our Harlequin newsletter. She did an exceptional job of pulling each issue together with great patience and skill. When she stepped down this past year, Peter Morelli provided much needed production assistance, assembling the Summer and Autumn issues. Thanks so much to both of them!

Our sincere thanks are also extended to Marie Jordan, Pat Sanborn, Lyman Page and Paul Wells who stepped down from our Board in 2013, after years of stellar service in a variety of capacities. We're also delighted to welcome new Board member Ken Janes.

## **Quest for 300 Results**

*From Scott Richardson*

The 2013 Quest for 300 came up short by more than a score. Birders reported 278 species in York County via eBird and the maine-birds email list, the smallest species count for any year yet tallied for the Quest. The total had increased steadily: 289 in 2010, 296 in 2011 and 302 in 2012.

Reaching 300 requires a good showing by expected species, plus a decent number of those inconsistent visitors that can brighten any birding day in the field. In 2013, a soft push by pelagics, southern songbirds and northern geese kept our total down. This year...well, we'll just have to wait and see.

## ***New Monthly Email***

We've created a new email that we'll be sending out most months to announce upcoming events. If you'd like to receive it, please send a request to [warbler@yca.org](mailto:warbler@yca.org).



## **Gull Identification Workshop** **with Derek Lovitch** *February 8th - 9th*

York County Audubon is very pleased to be presenting a workshop led by well known Maine birder Derek Lovitch. This two-part workshop will get you started on unraveling the mysteries of gull identification. Most gulls are not very difficult to tell apart; adult and juveniles of most species usually look quite different. We're going to give ourselves confidence with identifying these easier plumages of our common species, and then tackle the more challenging intermediate plumages. Only then will we have the toolbox to find the needles in the haystack and identify the less common species.



Little Gull in Wells, July 2013 (Ken Janes photo)

Part one of the Workshop on Saturday February 8th will be indoors at the Mather Auditorium of the Wells Reserve, at 342 Laudholm Farm Road in Wells, from 2pm-4pm. Using Powerpoint and book resources, we'll start with the basics of gull identification, such as feather topography, and then move on, slowly, but steadily to more complicated topics of identification. Most of our time will be spent looking at photos of common species, but we will then apply what we have learned to tackle and understand some identification quandaries.

On Sunday morning, February 9th, we'll meet in Portland (Back Cove parking lot on Preble Street Ext, opposite the Hannaford's) to carpool around the area to apply what we have learned. We'll spend some time with our most common species: Herring, Ring-billed, and Great Black-backed, and then seek out Iceland and Glaucous, and perhaps we'll find something even better! We'll "gull" until lunchtime or so.

York County Audubon hopes that you will join Derek for this workshop to foster appreciation for this fascinating group of birds. Derek, with his wife, Jeannette, own and operate Wild Bird Supply in Freeport. He's the author of "How to Be a Better Birder" and is well respected as one of the premier birders in Maine and beyond.

York County Audubon is sponsoring this Workshop. We are asking for a \$10.00 fee to participate. Some scholarships will be available. Please register by calling Pat Moynahan at 284-5487 or signing up on our website: [www.yorkcountyaudubon.org](http://www.yorkcountyaudubon.org). Weather dates or Workshop updates will be posted on the York County Audubon website and Derek's Web Page ([freeportwildbirdsupply.com/birdingtoursinMaine.asp](http://freeportwildbirdsupply.com/birdingtoursinMaine.asp)).



Our Facebook page has been the happy recipient of many new posts and has experienced a steady increase in page visits. Visitors to the page have been rewarded with "hot off the digital camera" photos of local Snowy Owls and other treats. We've reached 100 likes, which includes quite a few other organizations that are sharing our posts. Please visit the page, "like" us if you wish, and post a photo, sighting or comment of your own.

\*\*\*\*\* Upcoming YCAS programs at the Wells Reserve at Laudholm Farm \*\*\*\*\*

Programs are free and open to the public.



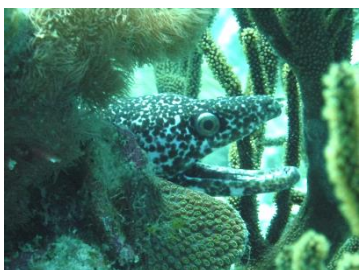
**Thursday, February 20th, 10am-2pm *Winter Wildlife Day*** (snow date on Friday, February 21). The Wells Reserve, Center for Wildlife, and York County Audubon team up once again to celebrate the wildlife of southern Maine! Join us for lots of family fun with live animal presentations, guided walks, and crafts. Snow or no snow, explore the trails and treasures of the Wells Reserve at Laudholm. If the ground is white bring skis, sleds, and snowshoes (we have some snowshoes to share — mostly kid size — if you don't have your own).

Center for Wildlife presentations: 10-11am & 12-1pm

Tracking walks & wildlife crafts: 11am-12pm & 1-2pm



**Tuesday, March 18, 7pm *The Mousam River at a Turning Point.*** Rivers are being restored across the country, bringing back large native fish runs, eagles and osprey, and a variety of other birds and wildlife. In Maine, the Kennebec River has seen dramatic positive changes, and the Penobscot is poised to experience the same. Can this happen in York County as well? The Mousam River is the largest remaining river system in Maine completely lacking in fish passage. John Burrows, on behalf of the Mousam and Kennebunk Rivers Alliance, Maine Rivers and the Atlantic Salmon Federation, will present an overview of our local dams and rivers, the impacts we've had on our ecosystems, and what changes might be possible.



**Tuesday, April 15, 7pm *Diving the World.*** Underwater, there is a world as alien as any that can be found without leaving the earth. Ten years ago, Monica and Bill Grabin started exploring this world, and it has led them to some amazing places and adventures. Through Bill's photos and video of underwater landscapes, fish and assorted otherworldly creatures, they will share their adventures in the Caribbean, the Red Sea and across the islands of Indonesia, and give you a sense of what it's like to dive.

Our ***Wednesday morning bird walks*** are continuing most weeks through the winter. If you'd like to receive an email alert for these, please send an email request to Dave Doubleday at [davidd@roadrunner.com](mailto:davidd@roadrunner.com).

***See the latest YCAS news and updates online!***

***A new Calendar feature has been added to our website: [www.yorkcountyaudubon.org](http://www.yorkcountyaudubon.org)***

Just click on "Calendar" below the Harlequin Duck image and you'll jump to a list of all upcoming events, with links to more information.

And, if you view this newsletter on our website, you'll see all the black and white photos magically transformed into full color!

York County Audubon  
P.O. Box 201  
Kennebunkport, ME 04046-0201

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### OR CURRENT RESIDENT

ETYMOLOGY  
Razorbill (*Alca torda*)

The Razorbill gets its scientific names from Scandinavia. "Alca", the root for some of the terms used for the Alcid family, comes from Scandinavian roots "alka" or "alke". These words may have been imitations of the cries of some of the auks. "Torda" is a local Swedish word used commonly for the Razorbill in Gotland. The word was first noted by the great classifier Linnaeus in 1741.

### Maine Audubon Membership Form

Yes, I would like to join the Maine Audubon and the York County Chapter of Maine Audubon (this also includes membership in the National Audubon Society). I want to help promote environmental education and advocacy in our communities, and protect and conserve wildlife habitat. I understand that membership benefits include *Maine Audubon 's Habitat: The Journal of Maine Audubon*, *The Harlequin* newsletter, and discounts on field trips and tours, children's programs, and at Maine Audubon nature stores and Audubon sanctuaries nationwide. For a subscription to Audubon, the magazine of the National Audubon Society, please add \$10.

☐ Senior/Volunteer \$25    ☐ Individual \$35    ☐ Household \$45    ☐ Contributing \$65  
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