

THE HARLEQUIN

York County Audubon

A Chapter of Maine Audubon

Spring 2026

www.yorkcountyaudubon.org

Grassland Birds and Aerial Insectivores

By David Nelson

On a calm, chilly morning, sometime around the first week of May, the hayfields, pastures, and sand plains of southern Maine will come alive with a wild, familiar music. The Bobolink is back. It's a member of the New World Blackbird family (Icteridae), a group well-known for its charismatics (orioles and Red-winged Blackbirds, meadowlarks and troupials). Even within this diverse, songful, and colorful bunch, the Bobolink, that 'rowdy of the meadow,' as Emily Dickinson called it, stands out.

Between the first entrance of the males in Spring and the end of breeding (usually between mid-July and early August), everything these birds do they fulfill with a boisterous ecstasy, an above-and-beyond attention to the performance. Watching the males as they launch into the air to sing, as they chase and skirmish with any birds, Bobolinks or Barn Swallows, that happen to cross their field of vision, or as they diligently feed and care for their many young (like their cousins the Red-winged Blackbirds, Bobolinks are polygynous), it's easy to feel that our joy is also theirs. It seems likelier than likely that it is.

These birds, like meadowlarks and other grassland species, are among those whose populations are shrinking across Maine and most of North America. The reasons for the losses are varied and interconnected, but center around the destruction and degradation of habitat in breeding and nonbreeding locations. YCA, in partnership with Ag Allies and MDIFW, is committed to



A male Bobolink

identifying remaining grassland habitat in southern Maine (especially those sites the Maine Bird Atlas has spotlighted for Eastern Meadowlarks and Bobolinks), helping with field refurbishment & monitoring projects and, finally, collaborating on education and outreach efforts with local landowners and land trusts.

Please reach out to David Nelson at grasslands@yorkcountyaudubon.org if: (1) you know of a location with breeding grassland birds; or, (2) you know of a place (it could be your own backyard, if your backyard happens to be as spacious as a hayfield) that, with a bit of field repair, looks like it could host a small colony; or, (3) you have any questions about grassland birds and habitat. We'll respond to all emails.

(Continued on page 2)

York County Audubon has been talking a lot about swallows recently. Well, not just swallows, but all aerial insectivores: any of those acrobatic, quick-moving birds that feed on the wing during the brief Maine summer. It's a varied group, which includes not only swallows but nightjars (Eastern Whip-poor-wills and Common Nighthawks) and Chimney Swifts, which are close relatives of the hummingbirds. Each of these species is categorized as being of special conservation concern within the state.



Purple Martins at one of YCA's nesting gourds in Kennebunk – photo by Kathy Donahue

Maine has six species of breeding swallows: Purple Martins – which we've been talking about the most, in recent months, because of the breeding success of the Kennebunk colony – and Tree, Barn, Bank, Cliff, and Northern Rough-Winged Swallows. During spring migration, there are places in Maine where all six species may occur at once. A dark, wheeling, twittering cloud of swallows, even on the clearest and calmest of days, can be difficult to make species-level sense of, and when a single bird does tilt in our direction and sweep past the corners of our eyes, it often resolves into little more than a smudge of color and shadow. With practice, we can improve on the speed and precision of our identifications, but there's something about watching swallows on the wing that will always remind us of just how earthbound we really are. Unless they happen to



A Cliff Swallow in flight – photo by David Nelson

nest in your barn, or your house, or that bird box you set up in early March to attract them (and not the House Sparrows across the road). Then you're given an extended-edition, intimate look at their lives. (Bernd Heinrich, in *White Feathers*, documents the day-to-day life of a family of Tree Swallows nesting near his house.) And when, one year, the Barn Swallows don't show up in numbers in the rafters of your neighbor's hayloft, and the Cliff Swallows disappear from the eaves of the local school, you'll notice that, too.

The Maine Department of Inland Fisheries and Wildlife has been monitoring the population declines in Cliff and Bank Swallows. Cliff Swallows nest in gourd-like structures, in colonies or pairs, built out of bits of mud glued together with their saliva, while Bank Swallows nest colonially in burrows along riverbanks, in sandpits, or over other loosely packed, gravelly slopes near water. If you know of any Cliff or Bank Swallows nesting near you, or want to know more about the MDIFW swallow monitoring effort, please reach out to MDIFW at joseph.roy@maine.gov or to YCA at grasslands@yorkcountyaudubon.org.

David Nelson lives in Berwick. He's a member of the YCA Board and an avid birder.

Our Christmas Bird Counts had some great results

Each year, York County Audubon oversees two of National Audubon's Christmas Bird Counts. Dozens of birders participate in each one. The Southern York County CBC is held in mid-December and covers a circle that extends from Kittery up to Moody. In this, our 53rd year, we had 84 total species with a total of 9005 total birds.



A Horned Lark – photo by Ken Janes

While the overall totals were somewhat low, we had a variety of highlights. 37 Horned Larks was our highest count in 42 years! We had 21 Evening Grosbeaks, a bird that's much less frequently seen in York County than it was a few decades ago. It was found in every count for 11 years straight from 1981 to 1991, but this was only the 5th time in the 34 years since then.



Male Evening Grosbeak – photo by Don Delaney

The Biddeford/Kennebunkport CBC is held at the end of December, and covers a circle that extends from Kennebunk to Old Orchard Beach. This was our 65th year. We identified a total of 78 species (with 10,286 total birds counted).



A Black Scoter – photo by Ken Janes

We had a dramatic new high count for Black Scoters of 1519, far beyond our previous record of 937.



A Bald Eagle – photo by Ken Janes

We had a record high count for Bald Eagles with 32, blowing away the previous record of 18 that was set just last year. That's a species that's clearly rebounding in southern Maine. We had a similar result with the Common Raven, where our record count of 35 beat the previous record of 26 also set last year.

Might You Like to Help Protect Local Shorebirds?

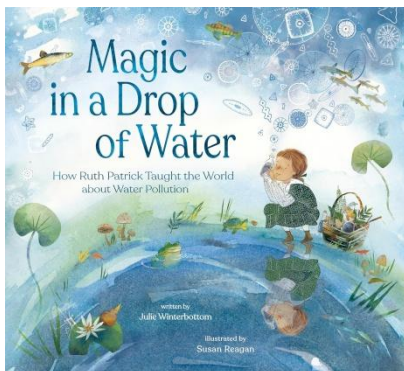


Piping Plover chick - photo by Laurie Pocher

Shorebirds are facing alarming population declines globally, including an estimated 34% drop in North America since 1980. Many species rely on Maine's beaches as crucial stopover sites during their long migrations, but threats like habitat loss, climate change, and human disturbance are putting them at risk. In 2025, we partnered with Maine Audubon to support the expansion of the Shorebird Ambassador program. The program aims to train local volunteers to educate the public and promote shorebird-friendly behaviors on Maine beaches. Last season, with YCA's support, the program was able to train and connect with over 40 new ambassadors online and in person at southern Maine

beaches. Our partnership will continue in 2026. If you might like to join the Shorebird Ambassador effort, please reach out to conserve@maineaudubon.org for more information.

— — — — Recommended Books — — — —



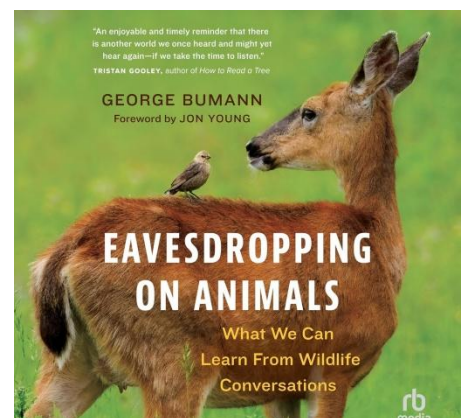
Magic in a Drop of Water: How Ruth Patrick Taught the World about Water Pollution - by Julie Winterbottom (Author), Susan Reagan (Illustrator)

The magic is the wonder discovered in a drop of pond water when viewed through a microscope – the single-celled algae and their intricate shells. By studying these organism, Ruth Patrick led a breakthrough about biodiversity and water pollution. The book is written to inspire young readers to follow their passion and possibly make it their life's work.

Eavesdropping on Animals - by George Bumann

Humans once relied on the calls of wild animals to understand the natural world and their place within it. Now, this remarkable guide reveals what our ancestors knew long ago—that tuning in to the owl in the tree or the deer in the gully, can tell us important information and help us feel connected to our wild community.

From a Yellowstone naturalist and expert in animal language comes “a tantalizing guide to revamping our approach to wild things.” (WSJ) Growing up in rural New York, as a young man George Bumann learned to track deer and turkeys as a hunter. Then everything changed. He left his hunting days behind and began an extraordinary journey into the more-than-human world.



Birding Backpacks are now at a library near you!

York County Audubon has established a Birding Backpack program that donates complete birding kits to local libraries. Bird watching is for everyone, and people of all ages and abilities can enjoy looking at birds. You can bird in your backyard, in the woods, at the beach or anywhere you see birds. You can bird with your family, your friends or by yourself. You can learn to identify the birds you see and keep a “Life List” or just enjoy watching bird behavior.



Each backpack contains everything you need to enjoy birding whether you are a beginner, an avid birder or just interested in the natural world. The kit includes binoculars to get a close look at the birds; birding guides from beginner to expert to help you to identify the birds; birding checklists for children and adults to keep track of the birds you see; documentation on how to use binoculars, where to look for birds and get more information; plus maps of local land trusts and trails that are full of birds.

The following Libraries now have Birding Backpacks: McArthur Public Library in Biddeford, Kennebunk Free Library, D.A. Hurd Library in North Berwick, Dyer Library in Saco, Louis B. Goodall Memorial Library in Sanford, and Waterboro Public Library – and more may be added. If you are a patron of these libraries or in their borrowing network, you can take advantage of this program.

YCA welcomes its New Members!

August - February

Barbara Dunn	Saco
Martha and Gerard Gach	Lyman
Kristin Keeler	Cape Neddick
Kathy Stout	North Berwick
Elaine Tito	Saco
Bruce Maggs	Parsonsfield
Erin Nadeau	Arundel
Elaine Trench	Wells
J'Aime Walker	Saco
Kathleen Welton	Chicago, IL
Dorothy Ahlgren & John Rummler	Kittery Point
Kate Cone Brancaccio	Cape Neddick
April Carson	Lyman
Amy Malinoski	Cape Neddick
Meagan Concannon & Marianne Neal	Biddeford
Diantha Harrington	Kennebunk
Lisa Townsend	Old Orchard Beach
Matthew Waldo	South Berwick
Greg Dumas	Saco
Robert Durocher	Buxton
David Lappin	West Newfield
Dawn Madore-Bourgoin & Scott Bourgoin	Saco
Susan Rogers & Dick Jablonowski	Old Orc Beach
Denyse Wise	Biddeford
Jennifer Young & Michael Wilusz	Hollis Center
Megan Allen & Daniel Chenard	Saco
Meghan Harris	Kittery
Mary Hubert	Saco
Kelly McMann & Victor DeTroy	Windham
Diane Stevens	Kennebunk
Amy Hartzell	Sanford

Global Big Day is Coming!



From the Cornell Lab of Ornithology

Be a part of birding's biggest team! Global Big Day is an annual celebration of the birds around you. No matter where you are, join us virtually on Saturday, May 9th, to help celebrate World Migratory Bird Day, and share the birds you find with eBird.

Participating is easy—you can even be part of Global Big Day from home. If you can spare 5 or 10 minutes, report your bird observations to eBird online or with our free eBird Mobile app. If you have more time, submit several checklists of birds throughout the day. You never know what you might spot. Your observations help us better understand global bird populations through products like these animated abundance maps brought to you by eBird Science.

Last year, Global Big Day collected more data about birds on a single day than ever before. More than 73,000 people gathered observations on 185,000 checklists, setting new world records for a single day of birding. 8035 species of birds were reported!

How to participate

Get an eBird account: eBird is a worldwide bird checklist program used by millions of birders. It's what allows us to compile everyone's reports into a single massive Global Big Day list—while at the same time collecting data to help scientists better understand birds.

Sign up at www.ebird.org. It's 100% free from start to finish.

Enjoy birds on May 9th. It's that simple. You don't need to be a bird expert or go out all day long, even 10 minutes of birding from home counts. Global Big Day runs from midnight to midnight in your local time zone. You can report what you find from anywhere in the world.

Enter what you see and hear in eBird. You can enter your sightings via our website or download the free eBird Mobile app to make submitting lists even easier. Please enter your checklists before 13 May to be included in our initial results announcement.

Watch the results roll in: During the day, follow along with bird observations from more than 200 countries in real-time on our Global Big Day page. For more information, please go to <https://ebird.org/globalbigday> and click on "Learn More."

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For all upcoming events and general information, please visit our website:

www.yorkcountyaudubon.org

And for the latest news, photos and updates, please visit us on Facebook.

*** Upcoming YCA Programs ***

There's no charge for our programs, but advance registration is required for watching via Zoom. Please go to our website, yorkcountyaudubon.org to sign up.



Shorebirds in Maine: Protecting our beach-nesting Piping Plovers and migratory birds – with Laura Zitske – Tuesday, April 21st - at the Wells Reserve and via Zoom

Each spring, endangered Piping Plovers and Least Terns return to nest and raise their young on southern Maine beaches. They are two of Maine's most iconic and threatened bird species. Laura Minich Zitske has been working with birds for 28 years, the last 15 of which have been spent at Maine Audubon as director of the Coastal Birds Project. In this talk, Laura

will highlight some of the project's successes and challenges over the past 45 years, including Maine's exciting increases in the Piping Plover population.

Exploring the Life and Times of an Extraordinary Bird: the Purple Martin - with Anna Forsman – Tuesday, May 19th - at the Wells Reserve and via Zoom

The extraordinary Purple Martin is North America's largest swallow. It's a beautifully iridescent colonial nester, with a distinctive liquid gurgling call. Purple martins were once a common sight in summer all over the East Coast of the United States, but their populations have significantly declined over the past half-century. In Maine, where they used to be found all over the state, they have experienced a precipitous 95 percent decline. Dr. Anna Forsman from Colby College wants to better understand why that is the case, and is focused on how immune systems develop in the wild. Working with over 200 Purple Martin colonies in the U.SDNA analysis of these samples reveals both the diet and microbes of the birds.






AN EXPERIMENT IN BIRDING
a PRESENTATION and BOOK Signing
hosted by **YORK COUNTY Audubon**

Where: Mather Auditorium, Wells Reserve at Laudholm, Wells, ME

When: Tuesday June 16 at 7:00 pm
FMI go to YorkCountyAudubon.org

- A Tale of their Record-setting Maine Big Year
- for Birders and Non-Birders alike!



Stacey Huth & Noah Gibb

A Record-setting Maine Big Year – An Experiment in Birding – with Stacey Huth and Noah Gibb – Tuesday, June 16th - at the Wells Reserve and via Zoom

Two friends, Stacey Pazar Huth (a scientist) and Noah Gibb (an avid birder, photographer, and birding tour guide) embarked on a Maine Big Year and discovered how their team effort was a winning combination. What started as an occasional bird walk at the local marsh grew into the concept of their Integrated Birding Process and "The Experiment." They combined top-notch birding expertise with remarkable strategic planning. The outcome resulted in a new state of Maine record of 332 species of birds seen in a calendar year!

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Our community of members is integral to our success on behalf of Maine's diverse wildlife and habitat. When you join or renew your Maine Audubon membership, you ensure that work can continue.

Thank you!

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