



## COA Elects New Officers and Directors

At the business portion of the COA Annual Meeting on March 15, 2003, Nominating Committee Chair and former COA President Jay Kaplan presented a slate of candidates which was unanimously approved.

Steve Oresman was elected President succeeding Patty Pendergast whose normal two terms had expired. Oresman thanked Pendergast for her long and diligent service as an officer and director and presented her with an engraved tray from the Association in appreciation.

Greg Hanisek was elected Vice President succeeding Oresman. Jim Zipp was reelected Treasurer and Jamie Meyers was reelected as Secretary. All the officers will serve until the next Annual Meeting.

In addition the following were newly elected Directors:

- Susan Bonk, Norwalk
- Renee Baade, Newtown
- Tom Sharp, Waterbury
- Ben Olewine, Redding
- Bruce Stevenson, Wilton

Directors can serve two consecutive three year terms and must step off the Board for at least a year before being eligible for reelection. The current Directors are listed in each issue of *The Warbler* along with their terms.

## COA Annual Meeting

The COA Annual Meeting at Middlesex Community College on March 15 attracted over one hundred birders to listen to presentations, patronize vendors and participate in an extensive raffle of bird-related items. The theme of the program this year was "Things That Birders Do" and was organized by COA Director Janet Mehmel and her Program Committee.

The first program was about bird behavior and provided clues to the impetus behind various kinds of commonly observed, but not always well understood, bird displays and calls. The discussion covered both physical and verbal signals of aggression, submission, courtship and the like. This program was presented by Sylvia Halkin, Professor at Central Connecticut State University, where she teaches Ornithology and Animal Behavior.

(continued on page 4)

## Connecticut Grassland Birds In Serious Decline; Land Acquisition and Management Required, Report Concludes

By: Steve Oresman

Nine species of grassland birds are native breeders in the state and eight are listed by the Department of Environmental Protection as threatened, endangered or of special concern. To keep these populations from further decline requires at least 5,000 acres of natural grasslands in minimum sized blocks of 500 acres and an additional 3,500 acres of managed late harvested hayfields in blocks of at least 25 acres. There are currently only about 4,300 acres of natural and managed grasslands in total in the state with only one of over 500 acres. The two largest, Bradley International Airport and Rentschler Field, threatened with development. Therefore, unless action is taken, the situation for grasslands birds will continue to worsen according to an extensive analysis and report presented to the legislature in April.

The report by the Connecticut Grasslands Working Group grew out of the concerns raised about development at Rentschler and Bradley and the need for a current assessment of the status and needs of grassland birds. This assessment was requested specifically by the Joint Standing Legislative Committee on the Environment. The Working Group was led by Audubon Connecticut, where Patrick Comins is Director of Bird Conservation. Patrick was the principal author and did most of the work. Greg Hanisek and Steve Oresman served as co-authors. Greg also led a statewide survey of grassland birds, which was largely carried out by COA members. Patrick, Greg and Steve are Directors of the COA. The 65-page report is available from Audubon Connecticut, and will soon be available for download from their website.

The report was unanimously endorsed by the Working Group, which includes, among others, The Nature Conservancy, Connecticut Audubon Society, Connecticut College, University of Connecticut, United Technologies Corporation and the Department of Environmental Protection.

The nine native breeding grassland species in Connecticut are Upland Sandpiper, Horned Lark, Sedge Wren, Vesper Sparrow, Savannah Sparrow, Grasshopper Sparrow,

(continued on page 3)

# COA Bulletin

## The COA Field Seminar Series Not Your Average Field Trip

Designed to go a step beyond the typical field trip, COA Field Seminars focus on one group of birds with the intent of helping birders improve their identification skills. In addition to the fieldwork, COA provides handouts consisting of bibliographies, identification articles, topographic maps and/or other similar materials. COA's Pelagic trips provide CT Birders with the only currently scheduled opportunity to look offshore for these rare visitors to CT waters.

Education is the prime objective of the Seminars. This focus provides a forum for birders to improve their identification skills, understand the biology of some species and get to know the members of the birding community in CT. The overall outcome should be the development of more knowledgeable birders who can better enjoy their birding experience and, at the same time, are better able to participate in surveys and to report rare or unusual birds correctly.

COA Seminars are not location oriented, as the trips are intended to help with the identification of bird groups and not necessarily to familiarize birders with specific birding sites. However, we choose locations that provide the opportunity to study both common and uncommon species so that participants may become familiar with the nuances of species differentiation. In order to reach the greatest number of Connecticut birders, the COA invites local bird clubs and other Connecticut nature organizations to co-sponsor the seminars.

The COA Field Trip Committee, currently comprised of Patrick Comins, Jay Kaplan, Dori Sosensky and Tom Kilroy, organizes the Seminars and provides administrative support to the leaders. We solicit volunteer leaders for each event and individuals wishing to lead Seminars are encouraged to contact any of the Committee members to volunteer. Both experts in specific bird groups and people willing to help with such fun tasks as bringing the bait to feed the sea birds on the pelagic trips are needed.

The Committee develops handouts that function as an extension of the field learning experience. Bibliographies, selected papers, feather tract diagrams, articles and the like are provided to help students with challenging identifications and as general interest material. While the Committee works with the leaders on these materials, the committee takes primary responsibility for the handouts so that the leaders are free to concentrate on conducting the event. When necessary, the

Committee may also provide FRS radios to facilitate communications amongst the inevitable subgroups. Often volunteer leaders have their own presentation materials incorporated into the Seminar handout.

A follow up critique of each event is in development. We hope to be able to gain important insights into improvements in future events. Look for the opportunity to complete one at the next Seminar you attend.

### Programs in 2003:

Charlie Barnard led the Waterfowl Seminar on a very cold windy February 9.

Patrick Comins led the Gull ID Seminar on March 2.

Jay Kaplan, Patrick Comins, Mark Szantyr, Jamie Myers and Fran Zygmunt led the Birding by Ear Seminar on June 1 at 8:00 AM. The new venue for this popular event was the Roaring Brook Nature Center in Canton.

Miley Bull will hold the Shorebirds and Terns I Seminar at the Milford Point Coastal Audubon center of Connecticut Audubon who is our joint sponsor for both of the Shorebird and Tern Seminars. This introductory course is intended to ignite the interest of new birders to Shorebirds and Terns. The first of the two Shorebird and Tern Seminars will be held at noon on July 26.

The Shorebirds and Terns II Seminar is a two-venue event starting at 9:00 AM on August 16 at Sandy Point, West Haven. Following the morning at Sandy Point the group will move to Milford Point at 1:00 PM to finish the day. Leaders and volunteers are still needed to help Jay Kaplan, Tom Kilroy and Dori Sosensky with this well attended event.

The Hawks and Passerines in Flight Seminar will be held jointly with the Northeast Hawk Watch, New Haven Bird Club and the City of New Haven Parks Department at the Hawk Festival that will be held on September 20. Volunteers Greg Hanisek, Neil Curry, Steve Mayo and Bill Banks will deal with identification of Hawks and Passerines as they fly over Lighthouse Point Park. Activities at the Hawk Festival start at 8:00 AM and will continue until 2:00 PM.

Pelagic I will take place in September and Pelagic II in December. No dates are available yet, but Dori will schedule

(continued on page 7)

# COA Bulletin

## Connecticut Grassland Birds

(continued from page 1)

Henslow's Sparrow, Eastern Meadowlark and Bobolink. All but the Bobolink are listed species. In addition, four raptors make use of grasslands including Northern Harrier, American Kestrel, Barn Owl and Short-eared Owl. All of these are also currently listed, threatened, endangered or of special concern.

### History of Grasslands in Connecticut

Grasslands were formerly a much larger part of the Connecticut landscape. In pre-colonial times grasslands were estimated to be more than 9% of the state, which would have been about 280,000 acres or over 60 times more than we have at present. Grasslands however, even if undisturbed, do not represent a relatively stable habitat such as a salt marsh or a hardwood forest. Grasslands eventually grow up into scrub and then woodlands if not disturbed or managed. In pre-colonial times the disturbances were numerous. Rivers flooded annually creating grassland if soil conditions were right. Forest fires, either natural or created by Native Americans, opened up the landscape. Beavers were major landscape engineers. Beaver ponds eventually silt in to create beaver meadows. Such ponds and meadows are estimated to have covered as much as an astonishing 15% of the state. Finally, along the coast sandy deposits left behind by the glaciers created soils in which only grasses would grow creating grassy plains or barrens.

The reduction of Connecticut's natural grasslands has occurred steadily until it is now a small fraction of one percent. The causes are clear. First, development has virtually eliminated the coastal grasslands. Fires and flooding have been controlled. Beavers are no longer the principal landscape engineers. Fertile grasslands have been converted to agriculture.

However, in earlier times, agriculture was not an unmixed blessing for grassland birds. Pastures and hedgerows created some suitable habitat. More importantly extensive hayfields existed in the state and were suitable for Meadowlark, Bobolink and Savannah Sparrow. However, hayfields have declined from almost 400,000 acres at the beginning of the 20th Century to about 60,000 at its close. Further, the quality of these hayfields for breeding birds has also worsened since the little remaining agriculture is much more mechanized and intensive. Earlier cutting means that young birds do not have a chance to fledge. The current extent of late har-

vested hayfields is hard to determine but it is certainly much less than the 60,000 total. In addition the other grassland species require natural grasslands and do not use hayfields.

### Status and Trends of Grassland Birds

Determining the precise status of grassland birds in the state is problematical since there are so few of them that statistical trends are probably meaningless. All but the Bobolink have small enough populations to be listed by the DEP. Meadowlarks, where there are some data available show declines of 9% annually from 1966 to 1980 and of 14% from 1980 to 2000. This is consistent with nationwide trends. Based on the current COA led survey and comparisons with the Connecticut Breeding Bird Atlas in the 1980's all the species are down with natural grassland species Grasshopper Sparrow, Upland Sandpiper, and Vesper Sparrow now found in only a very few locations. There were no breeding locations reported for Henslow's Sparrow. None of this is at all surprising since if the habitat disappears so do the birds.

### Habit Requirements for Grassland Birds

The encouraging thing about grassland birds is that it appears if suitable habitat is provided the birds will return. An experiment in Maryland created a large colony of Grasshopper Sparrows where none had bred before by developing a large tract with the appropriate vegetation. Therefore, the key is both habitat and size. The study focussed on determining how many plots of what size were required for viable populations of each species. This determination was used by analysis of previous scientific research that has established two different tests for establishing minimum plot size for these particular species. For the natural grasslands, this resulted in 10 sites of 500 acres, for a total of 5,000. For the hayfields the number was 130 sites of 25 acres or 3,250 acres total.

Interestingly enough, this total of 8,250 acres is reasonably close to the Partners in Flight estimate of 7,000 acres of grassland for Connecticut. PIF is a large nationwide cooperative government and private effort to develop bird conservation plans for the entire country. Their estimate was arrived at independently and used an entirely different methodology than the one in this report.

The challenge for grasslands, however, is not just in procuring this habitat but in managing it for grassland birds. Natural

(continued on page 4)

# COA Bulletin

## Connecticut Grassland Birds

(continued from page 3)

grasslands must be burned or cut to prevent their growing up into scrub. Further, during most of the year, the grassland should be free of human intrusion such as picnickers and the like, which is why fenced airports are the last refuge of these species. Hayfields need to be cut late in the season, probably at least late July and preferably August. This will require cooperation from the private landowners.

### Recommendations for Preservation

The recommendations are simple but the implementation is challenging, complex and costly. First, this means acquiring at least 5,000 acres of natural grassland in 500 acre plots, plus protecting or replacing the few current large sites. This will mean funding for both purchase and active management. Second, establishing programs with private landowners is needed to ensure 3,500 acres of late harvested hayfields. This will probably require incentive payments and supervision by the DEP.

It is expected that organizations such as Audubon Connecticut, Connecticut Audubon and The Nature Conservancy that are active in Hartford will take the lead in the lobbying efforts to fund and achieve these goals and the necessary supporting research and education programs. The COA will continue to work to provide the best available scientific data and to support to this effort.

## COA Annual Meeting

(continued from page 1)

Some birders focus on a few species or a family. Larry Fisher is a well know raptor expert and is a member of the Western Connecticut Bird Club. Larry has spent many years studying the life history and biology of Great Horned and Northern Saw-whet Owls. His outstanding photographs and detailed talk gave a full sense of the life cycle, habit, diet and distribution of these birds.

Judy Richardson is a Master Bander and leads the extensive banding operations at Connecticut Audubon's Birdcraft Museum and Sanctuary, in Fairfield. Her talk and slides captured the excitement, fascination and contribution to science that attracts birders to bird banding. The program at Birdcraft also provides an educational experience for students that can stimulate their interest and appreciation of birds.

After a business meeting and presentation of the Mabel Osgood Wright Award (both reported elsewhere in this Bulletin) the group adjourned for lunch and returned for a digital photography workshop by AJ Hand, now retired from *Popular Science* magazine.

AJ opened the eyes of many of the audience to the huge potential in digital photography of birds. The ability of digital equipment to provide and manipulate superior images was well reflected in the magnificent prints that AJ circulated in the audience. It was also obvious that both time and money are required to acquire and learn to use the equipment. As in most birding related activities time, effort and talent are required to produce first class results such as AJ's.

Mark Szantyr followed with a discussion of the functions of the COA's Rare Records Committee, of which he is currently Secretary. Since many birders are avid listers, this is a topic of some considerable interest to them. Mark provided suggestions on the kind of information that is most helpful in getting records accepted and also the process by which records are considered. The final program of the day, with Mark and other COA Directors past and present participating, focused on birding ethics and the electronic reporting of rare birds.

After the close of the formal program the winners of the numerous raffles items were drawn. Mark Szantyr and Bill Guayana had contributed original artwork to the raffle. Birding related items, books and artwork were contributed by The Audubon Shop of Madison, The Fat Robin of Hamden, The Wildlife Gallery of Stamford and Bushnell Optics. The COA wishes to express its appreciation to these and other generous contributors.

**The Newsletter of the Connecticut Ornithological Association is published quarterly in February, May, September, and December. Please submit materials for the next issue by August 1, 2003 to Manny and Teri Merisotis at [tmerisotis@earthlink.net](mailto:tmerisotis@earthlink.net) or at 93 Ripley Hill Rd., Coventry, CT 06238**

# COA Bulletin

## Trips & Events

### Connecticut Ornithological Association Shorebird Identification Series 2002

By Tom Kilroy

The second of the 2002 Shorebird seminars started at Sandy Point, West Haven on Sunday August 25, 2002 and by all accounts was a very interesting day. Sixty participants and leaders were greeted by a spectacular day and a weather change that guaranteed an interesting day for those seeking lots of species and those wanting to get a look at the "rare ones."



*The audience was very attentive to the suggestions made by Patrick Comins.*

Patrick Comins and Dori Sosensky welcomed the participants to the event and explained the order of the day. Following the commercials for the Audubon Council and COA, Dori introduced the COA volunteers present to help with individual identification challenges. Patrick then began a discussion of the key elements of shorebird identification. The attendees heard comments on structure, color, plumage variation and aging. Patrick's shorebird bibliography was particularly well received. Please see the bibliography of recommended shorebird literature at the end of this article.



*Dori Sosensky and Patrick Comins introducing the participants to the many field guides available for shorebirds.*

Dori passed out a species list of the anticipated birds and a copy of "Connecticut's Long Distance Migrants" a very interesting paper written by Paul Fusco of the State Department of Environmental Protection about the migration of shorebirds through Connecticut. The article is on line at <http://dep.state.ct.us/burnatr/wildlife/pdf/cwja99.pdf>. For those present intending a more detailed pursuit of the nuances of the hobby, she also distributed a description of how to tell a Western Sandpiper from the other "peeps" we would see.

Following the presentations, we moved towards the viewing sites on the sandbar where several of the veteran observers had already set up shop, far out on the tidal flats.

(continued on page 6)

# COA Bulletin

## Trips & Events

### Connecticut Ornithological Association Shorebird Identification Series 2002 (continued from page 5)



*The group spent an hour or so viewing out on the sandbar as the tide came in.*

The walk to the sandbars turned up several views of Clapper Rail, Short-billed Dowitcher, Yellowlegs, Black-Bellied Plover, Sanderling and Semipalmated Sandpiper. As we moved towards the veterans encampment on the sandbar, two cooperative Red Knots in winter plumage on the outer beach gave us plenty of time to study the hue of their winter garb.

The entire group eventually arrived at the point where they could study the assembled flock of Common Terns and gulls on the easternmost bar. The practically resident Brant flock was also present. Eventually we found Forster's and Roseate Tern individuals embedded in the flock of Common Terns.

Following the view of the Roseate and Forster's terns and fleeting views of the Piping Plovers and the two very persistent Red Knots, the tide chased us off the sand bar and on to Milford Point.

Lunch and high tide greeted us at the Connecticut Audubon Coastal Center. The day was planned to optimize the tide at both locations, low tide at Sandy Point and high tide at Milford Point, so the birding began immediately.

The incoming tide had already concentrated the terns, plovers, sandpipers, oystercatchers and Patrick's gulls, so the search began immediately. Five American-golden Plovers, Forster's Terns, Short-billed Dowitchers, the long staying Marbled Godwit and plenty of Semipalmated Sandpipers were quickly located. The mid-day heat made the close review of the peeps rather frustrating, so neither White-rumped nor Baird's Sandpipers were quickly identified. As time would tell, they were probably there and obscured by the heat shimmer.

Following an hour and one half of close observation, discussion on the beach turned to other subjects and the "students" and teachers began to depart for home. As Patrick Comins began the trek to his car, a faint sound caught his attention and he exclaimed, "White-rumps." Sure enough, a small six-bird flock of the elusive species flew off towards the marsh side of the refuge and gave the observers quick enough to get on them a good look at why they are named as they are. This seemed like a rather fitting way to end the formal sessions.

In the true spirit of the day, several of the participants led by ever-enthusiastic Dori Sosensky decided to bird the pools on Access Road in Stratford. This extension of the trip proved to be rather productive. The old Admail pool along Access Road (now the R.E. Michel pool, due to a change in building tenants) was particularly birdy during our visit. Small flocks of sandpipers, plovers and yellowlegs changed regularly as we scanned for rarities. We quickly found two immature Western Sandpipers and a Baird's Sandpiper. Also present were Lesser Yellowlegs and their "Greater" cousins. This small non-tidal fresh to brackish pool is productive, and when incorporated with the other nearby grassland and salt water environments makes for a very varied series of habitats to visit on a day trip.

The day's take turned out to be twenty shorebird species, a number of terns and a group of happy birders.

# COA Bulletin

## The COA Field Seminar Series

(continued from page 2)

them once Project Oceanology has their fall schedule late this summer. Due to the nature of the Pelagics, pre-registration by email will be required for these two events and we will charge a fee to cover the costs of the trip. We need Volunteers for both of the Pelagic Odysseys.

If you are interested in leading or participating in the leadership of a Seminar or joining the Field Trip Committee of COA please contact one of the Field Trip Committee members at the following coordinates.

Dori Sosensky, [dori.sosensky@yale.edu](mailto:dori.sosensky@yale.edu)

Patrick Comins, [pcomins@audubon.org](mailto:pcomins@audubon.org)

Jay Kaplan, [JayBrd49@aol.com](mailto:JayBrd49@aol.com)

Tom Kilroy, [tkilroy@compuserve.com](mailto:tkilroy@compuserve.com), 203-929-6683

Good Birding!

## DWIGHT SMITH RECEIVES COA AWARD

Dr. Dwight G. Smith received the Mabel Osgood Wright Award for significant contributions to the study and conservation of birds in Connecticut. The award was presented to Dr. Smith at the COA Annual Meeting by Milan Bull, COA Director.

Dr. Smith is a Professor and Chairman of the Biology Department at Southern Connecticut State University and is well known for his many books and articles, including "Connecticut Birding Guide" with Buzz Devine. In addition, for many years he made a major contribution to the COA by editing the Bulletin.

Mabel Osgood Wright was an early Connecticut birder, conservationist and author. Her book "Birdcraft," published in 1897 and illustrated by Louis Agassiz Fuertes, went through numerous editions. The Connecticut Audubon Society's Birdcraft Museum and Sanctuary, established by Wright in 1914, is located in Fairfield.

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*COA is always in need of volunteer help. If you are interested please check the areas below that you would like to know more about:*

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*\*COA does not release its membership list to other organizations. Dues are tax deductible as allowed by law.*

# COA Bulletin

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