

VOLUME NO.    ISSUE 3

# The Norman Bird Flyer

A QUARTERLY NEWSLETTER

Summer 1987

## Where Are the Robins and Goldfinches?

by Richard A. Ellis

How often can you make a choice that affects directly your immediate environment and especially the birds in your yard? Certainly you are not consulted about the weekly mowing of our interstate parkways that destroys potential meadow habitats for birds. Neither are you sure what happens to your old crankcase oil after it's drained from your automobile. And you probably don't know how your rubbish and garbage are disposed of when they leave your yard. For better, or probably for worse, someone else has made these decisions for you. But here is one small environmental issue you can act on that does affect the birds you watch.

Lawn care is becoming big business in America. In our little state of Rhode Island there are at least twelve different lawn care companies. The largest is a national corporation with a name that everyone who watches television recognizes. They will, for a price, treat your lawn with chemicals that will give you a thicker greener lawn along with weed and insect control. If you can't afford their service you can do the same thing yourself. Every garden shop has stacks of "lawnfood" that will not only feed your grass but will also kill weeds, prevent crabgrass, and control insects. You've seen them and you may have used them. If you follow directions the product will do everything that is promised in the brochure. But the promises will be fulfilled at some real cost to the birds in your yard, and to the robins all across this country.

Three years ago my next door neighbors hired a national lawn care company to treat their turf. Only an imaginary boundary sep-

arates their lawn from mine. I watched as a neatly uniformed "professional" sprayed their lawn with magic chemicals that prevent crabgrass seeds from sprouting, cause broadleaf weeds to wither and die, kill the underground larvae of insects, and turn the grass a brighter green. I watched with envy as all of the promises came true. Their grass was greener and grew faster than mine; they mowed it twice as often. Their weeds disappeared, along with them went all the tell-tale rosettes of dandelions. My yard was still dotted with bright yellow flowers as well as the fluffy seed heads that follow. Later, when the heat and drought of summer arrived, they had no crabgrass to contend with, while I had great patches of it here and there. These were the visible above ground affects of the latest trend in lawn care. There were even greater invisible changes taking place underground, but I did not detect them until next Spring. (cont'd)





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There is one day in March that heralds the real arrival of Spring in New England. It is what I call Worm Day. On that morning it does not take a trained biologist to notice that something is different about the lawn. With the thawing of the soil and the coming of the warm rain, the earth worms celebrate during the night by coming onto the surface of the soil and leaving little piles of "turnings". Each pile represents the output of one worm, so the number of piles is indicative of the earthworm population in the soil beneath. Charles Darwin studied these helpful creatures and understood their ecological value. They aerate the soil by their tunneling, they consume and break down dead vegetation, they deposit new topsoil by leaving their "turnings" on the surface, and among other things, provide a high protein diet for nesting robins.

Last year on Worm Day I noticed something was drastically wrong. My lawn was covered with multitudes of worm droppings but right at the property line they stopped. The imaginary boundary where I mowed on one side and the neighbors mowed on the other now stood out in relief. There was not a single pile of the earthworm indicators on my neighbor's lawn. In the following days as the robins arrived back from the South, I observed that my yard was alive with red-breasted birds seeking worms, but across the property line on my neighbor's side there were none. The same chemicals that had controlled their crabgrass and eliminated their insects had also killed off their earthworms. The chemicals poisoned them, quietly and unseen as they burrowed through the soil. Once again the birds were showing us that many chemicals are incompatible with nature. How is it that we never get the message until it is too late?

Later in the Spring the goldfinches came to feed on the seedheads of the dandelions that were rampant on my lawn, but they didn't visit my next door neighbor. Sure enough, their lawn was "weed-free" but there were no flashes of yellow and gold in the air above, either. It seems that lawn care is fantastic for the grass, but no one has considered how it affects the birds.

So here is a Silent Spring revisited, and it may be right in your yard. You may have read the lawn care advertisements that arrived with your junk mail and responded without thinking. Maybe you watched the grass turn green on television and called the toll free number. Or perhaps you saw the ad in the paper and you picked up the product at your garden

shop. In any event, you bought the promises and got the desired results. At the same time you also caused an ecological problem that may take years to reverse. If there are no robins chirping on your lawn this year, you now know why.

But you have also learned something from this experience. It is important to know just what chemicals are applied to your lawn and how they will affect animals as well as plants. On your own property you can make the decisions, but can you influence your neighbors? If you live in a condominium is it possible to get the groundskeepers to change their ways? What about your town park or golf course? Do the people in charge know the effects the chemicals they use may have on the food chain? Perhaps you can even get through to that neatly uniformed lawn care specialist. After all, he delivers only what the customers wants!

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# Public Programs



## Sunday Morning Bird Walks

Every Sunday - weather permitting

8:00 a.m.

Ready for some early morning "eggs"cite-ment? Wake up and join NBS Director, Larry Taft for our 8:00 a.m. bird walks. Birdwatchers of all levels are invited.

Fee: no charge

Pre-registration is not required

## Herbs and Natural Healing

Wednesday Evenings 6:00 - 8:00 p.m.

July 29, August 5, August 12,

Hap Morgan, NBS Naturalist and Herbalist will introduce participants of this three week mini-course to the history and study of herbalism. The course will include a field identification walk, slide show, techniques on harvesting and storing herbs, preparing salves and tinctures.

Limited to 15 people

Fee: \$14.00 ( \$10.00 NBS Members)

Pre-registration is required



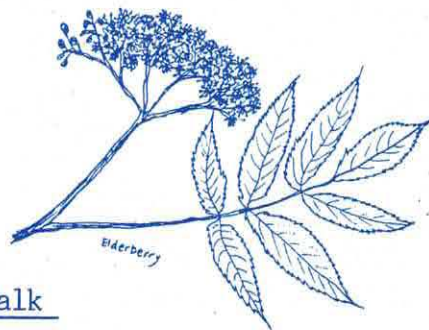
## Star Walks

Wed.	July 29	Cloud Date	July 30
Thurs.	Aug. 20	Cloud Date	Aug. 21
Wed.	Sept. 23	Cloud Date	Sept. 24

8:00 p.m.

Enjoy the summer's night sky with Astronomy enthusiast Bill O'Connell as you find the summer triangle and look for meteor showers. Bring a blanket and binoculars. Please note cloud dates

Pre-registration is not required



## Wild Edible Walk

Thursday August 6, 7:00 p.m.

Discover and taste some delicious samples from Nature's kitchen cupboard. Hap Morgan will be your guide as you search the fields and forest in quest of wild edibles with samples to taste.

Fee: \$3.00 (\$1.00 NBS Members)

Pre-registration is required.

## Beach Comber's Walk

Wednesday, August 19 7:00 p.m.

What washes up along the sandy shore of Third Beach? What creatures live among the rocks? Larry Taft, NBS Director will be your guide on this beach walk, pointing out some of our local shore and sea life. Families are welcome.

Fee: \$2.00 (\$1.00 NBS members)

Pre-registration is suggested



To keep our members informed about the many activities at the Norman Bird Sanctuary, this year's Annual Report to the Advisory Committee is included in this issue of the Norman Bird Flyer. The success of the past year is reflected by the continual support of our members and the community at large, the quality of our educational programs, and the progress made on many of the on-going projects here at the Sanctuary.

### Visitation

This year, 6131 visitors registered to walk the trails. This is an 11% increase over last year. Although visitation is always greater during the summer months, the trails were well used throughout the year. Monthly numbers are shown below.

April	488	October	809
May	532	November	480
June	472	December	326
July	971	January	270
August	490	February	242
September	660	March	391

### Membership

In October, the total number of Sanctuary members reached 1050. Our programs continue to attract new members. Two Life members were gained this year, making a total of nine.

### Buildings and Grounds

Much effort was concentrated on structural renovations to the barn loft in preparation for the Trailside Museum. The loft was expanded to wrap around the entire barn, allowing for a better flow of visitors through the future exhibit area. The railing was replaced with a higher, more sturdy one, a fire escape from the loft was constructed, and low voltage spot lights for the displays were added. The stairs were relocated to the back of the building, giving the first floor more open space. The leaky roof was patched to keep the weather out. The entire electrical system was rewired to comply with fire and building codes, and to meet the demands of our special events, as well as the new lighting. A 120 foot mural, depicting the habitats, birdlife, seasons and natural history of the Sanctuary was created by artist, Evelyn Rhodes, and hung up in the loft, beginning phase II of the museum project.

Organization of the limited space in the "Ed Shed" classroom was aided by the construction of 60 "cubby holes" for campers to put their belongings while they are here, and the addition of storage shelves for educational supplies.

Navigation around the trail network was made easier with the repainting of old signs and the addition of new ones. A summer trail crew of two, and a handful of volunteers kept almost seven miles of trails well maintained. The old Boardwalk connecting the far ends of two ridge trails was rebuilt and a bird blind and boardwalk over the newly flooded back section of Red Maple Swamp was completed as well.

### Wildlife

In addition to maintaining 30 acres of wildlife clearings to promote a variety of open land wildlife species, the Sanctuary began three other wildlife projects. With the help of State Forester, Paul Dolan, a wildlife management plan for the Sanctuary is being updated. Since the last plan the Sanctuary has changed dramatically. The new plan is expected to be completed in the upcoming year.

To promote the conservation of a local bird species and to provide our visitors with an opportunity to observe bird behavior close-up, 40 nesting boxes donated by the family of Barbie Sturtevant, were erected in the Spring to attract a colony of Tree Swallows. At the writing of this newsletter, about a half dozen clutches of Tree Swallows have fledged. Hopefully most of them will return nest Spring to create a larger colony.

To help conserve the locally threatened Barn Owl, the Sanctuary began promoting the construction of owl nesting boxes to replace the dwindling number of suitable sites in which this owl can breed. This project began with articles that appeared in the Norman Bird Flyer and with a lecture by biologist, Chris Raithel. As a result, 12 potential nesting sites around the Island have been identified, and a number of people have volunteered to build nesting boxes and erect them on their property. The Newport Garden Club also donated \$1,800.00 to restore the Sanctuary's water tower in which Barn Owls have been nesting for 25 years.



### Trailside Museum

This summer, the Sanctuary's Trailside Museum won first place in the 1987 Garden Club of America Founders Fund Award. The award of \$20,000.00 will enable us to complete Phase Two of the project which entails the fabrication and installation of the exhibits.

Phase I which was completed last year consisted of structural renovations to the barn's loft in which the exhibits will be housed.

The exhibits have been designed to interpret the living museum out in the Sanctuary grounds, and will include a collection of specimens, artistic renditions of natural phenomena, and a few hands-on exhibits to invite viewer participation.

When finished, the museum will serve to enrich the quality of our visitors time here, as well as expand upon our educational programs by providing learning areas to supplement the "outdoor classroom" of the Sanctuary.

### Community Programs

The Sanctuary led 83 Girl Scouts, Brownies, and Cub Scouts for guided walks and volunteer projects.

Also, the Sanctuary hosted a Department of Environmental Management Workshop for the curriculum R.I. Naturally-Bird-life for fifty local teachers.

### School Programs

This year, the Sanctuary staff guided 1604 children from the Elementary and Middle Schools of Middletown, Newport, Portsmouth, Bristol, Providence, Cranston, North Kingstown, South Kingstown, and Fall River through the trails. Nature walks included lessons on changing seasons, the forest, ridges, pond, field, seashore, and saltmarsh ecology. A fee of \$1.00 per child was instituted for a guided walk.

The Gaudet Middle School in Middletown participated in its second year of environmental education curriculum. The program is offered to sixth graders who visit the Sanctuary three times per year on guided walks that focus on local ecosystems.

In addition to the on-site tours, Sanctuary staff spoke to approximately 400 students during in-school presentations; "Birds", "Animal Kingdom", and "Endangered Species".

### Children's Programs

Children's programs included Nature Club (5 sessions), Winter Vacation Weeks, (for both public and private schools), Spring Vacation week (public schools) Pre-schooling with Parents Nature hour (5 sessions), Halloween Party, Christmas Crafts, and a new program for children in 5-7 grades, Explorer's Club. A total of 275 children participated in these programs.

### Public Programs

An estimated 700 adults took part in seasonal public programs including "Herbs and Natural Healing", "Cross Country Skiing", "Mushroom Foraging", "Full Moon Owl Prowl", "Grapevine Wreath Making", "Woodcock Walk", "Beginning Birding", "Nature Photography", "Beachcomber Walk", "Star Walks" and Sunday morning bird walks. Volunteer teachers for these programs were Chris Raithel, Lee Gardner, Jan Goodland, Bill O'Connell, Ann Truslow, Art Swoger, and Chris Callahan.

### Summer Camp

During the summer camps of 1986, a few changes were made affecting the programming, fees, and enrollment of children; For Preschoolers, a "Preschoolers with Parents" program two mornings per week offered an alternative for younger children unable to participate in Nature Day Camp. Summer Challenge, for children in grades 5-7 offered three, one week sessions of rock climbing, canoeing, and camping in handmade hammocks. The fees for Nature Day Camp and Summer Challenge were increased to reflect the longer camp day. Weekly programs were limited to 50 children with each child attending no more than three weeks (Nature Day Camp) and one week (Summer Challenge and Preschoolers with Parents). A total of 480 children enrolled in summer camps.

### Volunteers

Over 1700 hours have been logged by volunteers working at the Sanctuary on the Harvest Fair, Birds and Breakfast, Newsletter mailing, artwork, committee meetings, and a number of grounds and garden projects. Students from St. George's School and E. Hunti Camp volunteered for trail and brush cutting and clearing. A color coded volunteer file was organized for keeping track of volunteers for various fundraisers and events.





**October 3 & 4**  
**10 am to 5 pm**

Volunteer positions are now available for every facet of the Harvest Fair. Your help is needed for specific jobs on the day of the fair or with preparations in the coming months. Please call the Sanctuary today at 846-2577 if you can help. It may seem like a long time away, but volunteers are needed as soon as possible. A few hours of your time can make a big difference. Here's how you can help:

- \* Chair one of many Harvest Fair Committees
- \* Staff an entrance gate
- \* Tend a ticket booth
- \* Direct traffic
- \* Direct a children's game
- \* Help with food service
- \* Help set-up and clean-up
- \* Donate homemade jams, baked goods honey, or garden produce to our Country Store



## Whale Watch Update

The Sanctuary sponsored Whale Watch on June 13, from Provincetown, proved to be an excellent day for spotting marine mammals and pelagic birds.

On Stellwagon Bank, the feeding ground for many whales, approximately 10 miles from Provincetown, three shy Finbacks were sighted. According to Scientists from the Center for Coastal Studies aboard the Dolphin IV, whalesightings had been very sporadic.

As the boat headed for shore, the 27 participants from NBS were enthusiastically greeted by a female Humpback and her calf that continuously resurfaced near the boat for ten minutes! For the birdwatchers, numerous Wilson's Storm Petrels, Black-backed and Herring Gulls, and an immature Gannet were sighted.

After such a wonderful day at sea, another early summer Whale Watch will surely take place next year.



## Sponsor A Child

This summer, 24 children from Child & Family Service, Martin Luther King Center, the Jamestown School, and Gaudet School are being sponsored to attend NBS Nature Day Camp and Summer Challenge. The funds for the children to attend were generously donated by NBS members and the John Clarke Trust Foundation. Children are chosen based on financial need and interest in the natural world.

## At Large...still needed

- old or / stale bread or cereals
- a retired parachute
- scrap computer print out paper
- natural history graphics

## Volunteer Corner

- Weeds, Weeds, Weeds We will continue to search for volunteer weeders and waterers who will clean the Sanctuary Gardens free of weeds and provide a weekly watering for the rest of the summer and into the Fall. Please call us or stop by.

- We are looking for Volunteers to help us with this year's Harvest Fair, October 3 & 4. If you've heard about this successful event and would like to join in the fun, call Larry or Lisa at the Sanctuary for details.

- A "bird felt" thanks to all the following Spring volunteers: From the garden: Jill Hall, Ruth Jernigan, Cheryl McLarney, Ernest Platt, Terry Ordinetz, Marie Resz, Donna Shook, Mary Smith and Rachel Weimann. From Public Programs: Bill O'Connell, Anne Garnett and Chris Raithel.

From Animals: Charles Donald, Jennifer Reed and Adele's Pet Emporium.

From the Trails: David Rindlaub and Scott Peterson of St. George's and all the volunteers from E.Hunti Camp.

From Birds and Breakfast: the Birds & Breakfast Committee, the talented bakers, the great kitchen workers and servers, and the following local businesses, Katrina's, Cappuccino's, The Cookie Jar, La Pattiserie, Steam Heat, Coffee Corner, Frisch Bakery, Our Daily Bread, Dunkin Donuts, Le Bistro, Sheraton Islander, Harvest Natural Foods, Crystal Spring, Newport Creamery and DeCastros.

- Goodbye and thank you to volunteers Lorna and Phil Bornemeier who have moved to Virginia. We are grateful for all their effort and support!



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Education Coordinator: Lisa Pritchard

Teacher/Naturalist - Caretaker: Hap Morgan

Secretary: Jean Ballantine

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graphics by Lucia deLeiris and Amy Wright





" Commonly we stride through the out-of-doors too swiftly to see more than the most obvious and prominent things. For observing nature, the best pace is a snail's pace."

Edwin Way Teale



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