

Volunteers ↔ Friends

A quarterly newsletter for Volunteers and Friends
of the Patuxent Wildlife Research Center and Refuge

www.friendspwrc.org



January-March 2009

Vol. 20 No. 1

Patuxent River Otters

by Frank McGilvrey, Volunteer Biologist

As part of our weekly waterbird censuses, we also record sightings of aquatic mammals; beaver, muskrat, otter, and (in one case) mink.

When I worked at Patuxent between 1962 and 1973, I don't remember ever seeing an otter. I saw my first otter on Patuxent 1998 when I returned as a volunteer. Between then and 2006, sightings were sporadic, ranging from four in 1999 to none in 2000, 2002, 2003 and 2005. From two sightings in 2006, I recorded 12 in 2007 and eight in 2008.

The river otter is the most aquatic member of the weasel family. It has fully webbed feet, is streamlined in shape with a rudder-like tail, and has valves to cover the ears and nostrils to keep out water. It can dive 55 feet and swim up to a quarter-mile under water. It feeds primarily on fish and aquatic invertebrates, but will take small mammals. Otters are very mobile with large home ranges up to 22 square miles. The female digs a burrow in a stream bank to bear the one to six blind, furred

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Spotted: Tundra Swan!

by Kristina Gaddy, Refuge Staff

On a Sunday in late November, as fellow staffer Michelle and I were cleaning inside the Visitor Center, I spotted what looked like a swan on Lake Redington. It looked like an immature Mute Swan: a greyish white color with a darker bill. But without binoculars, we thought it might be just a white, domestic goose that was flocking with the Canada Geese.

As we were waiting to close up South Tract, a visitor came over to us and asked if we had seen the Tundra Swan on the lake. We had seen a swan!

We hurried down to Snake Bridge, and saw not only the Tundra Swan, but a mélange of birds. Right there was the Tundra Swan, a Great Blue Heron, a couple of Canada Geese and some Mallard Ducks. When we got closer, we could definitely see that it was a Tundra Swan we had spotted earlier.

The Tundra Swan breeds (not surprisingly) in the Tundra, on the coastlines of Alaska and northern Canada. Unlike the Mute Swan, the Tundra Swan is migratory and flies from the north

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Welcome Back!!

By Refuge Management Team

As of mid-December, staff is starting to pack up boxes and move furniture back to the National Wildlife Visitor Center. Some work is still in progress, and staff will need a bit of time to get unpacked and re-settled. However, they hope to have the Visitor Center back open to the public in January and ready for conferences by February.

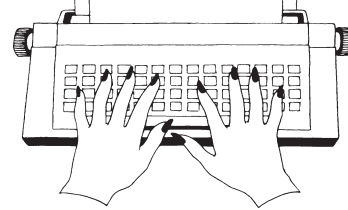


The Refuge will be closed on Federal Holidays and Inauguration Day (Jan. 20)

**For more information about Refuge programs,
visit <http://patuxent.fws.gov>**

**For more information about Patuxent Wildlife
Research Center activities,
visit <http://www.pwrc.usgs.gov>**

NEWSLETTER CONTRIBUTORS



Contributors are reminded that their input to the newsletter is due no later than the **5th of the month**. The editor(s) and the layout artist need enough time to prepare the newsletter for mailing by the 15th of the month. Special thanks are due to the many contributors who have made this publication what it has become today.

Volunteers ↔ Friends is published monthly and is mailed to all volunteers and friends of the Patuxent Wildlife Research Center.

The editor, layout artists, writers, and other helpers are all volunteers. There are some regular contributors, however we welcome and encourage all volunteers and Friends to write for the newsletter.

Send or bring comments or stories to:

Editor, *Volunteers ↔ Friends*
National Wildlife Visitor Center
10901 Scarlet Tanager Loop
Laurel, MD 20708

To become a member of the *Friends* and receive a monthly subscription to *Volunteers ↔ Friends*, send \$15 (Individual), \$20 (Family), \$50 (Contributor), or \$100 (Sponsor) to the Friends of Patuxent at the address above.



Friends of Patuxent
Present The
Twentieth Annual
Patuxent Wildlife
Art Show & Sale

in Migration Back to the
National Wildlife Visitor Center
10901 Scarlet Tanager Loop,
Laurel, MD 20708-4027*

Artists' Reception

Friday, March 27, 2009, 6:30 pm - 9:30 pm

Come and mingle with the artists, enjoy hors d'oeuvres, listen to live music, and participate in our annual *Friends of Patuxent Silent Auction* fundraiser.

Tickets for the Artists' Reception: \$40.00 per person with advance purchase or \$45.00 at the door. Early birds get an additional **\$5.00 discount** per ticket when purchasing two or more tickets before March 8. For more information or to order tickets, call (301) 497-5789, FAX (301) 497-5765 or visit us on the web at www.friendspwrc.org

Art Show & Sale (Admission - free)

Saturday, March 28, 2009, 9:00 am - 4:30 pm

Sunday, March 29, 2009, 11:00 am - 4:30 pm

Special Weekend Events Sponsored by the Friends of Patuxent

Wildlife Interpretive Tram Tours • Live Animals • Artisan Demonstrations

Saturday -- Maryland Migratory Game Bird Design Contest &

Maryland Black Bear Conservation Stamp Contest



Friends of Patuxent use the proceeds from the Annual Patuxent Wildlife Art Show & Sale to sponsor environmental education projects conducted by the staff of the Patuxent Research Refuge and wildlife-related research conducted by scientists at the Patuxent Wildlife Research Center. Friends of Patuxent Wildlife Research Center and Patuxent Research Refuge, Inc., are a 501(c)(3) organization. Our Maryland charitable organization number is 2348. Our Combined Federal Campaign Designation Number is 63960. All contributions are tax deductible to the extent allowed by law.

* Just off Powder Mill Rd. between the Baltimore/Washington Parkway (MD Rt. 295) & MD Rt. 197.

Bird Festival: Students Present Flying WILD

Refuge Staff recently attended the Bird Festival at the 20th Annual Symposium of the Wildlife Habitat Council. At this event, members of Edgewood Middle School's Student Environment Awareness (SEA) Club presented Flying WILD lessons. This is an excerpt from an article, "Students Try Teaching to Learn" by Cassandra A. Fortin for the Baltimore Sun. To read the complete article, please visit: <http://www.baltimoresun.com/news/local/harford/baltimore.birds09nov09,0,4247439.story>



During the event Nov. 17 ... at the Baltimore Marriott Waterfront, the children presented lessons inspired by the Flying WILD curriculum (www.flyingwild.org). Produced by the Council for Environmental Education, the curriculum stresses the "learner to leader" model in keeping middle school students engaged in learning about science, (Director of Conservation, Education and Outreach for the Wildlife Habitat Council) Thelma Redick said.

The teachers helping with the project were trained during the summer, and the students began working on their projects shortly after the start of the school year. The Edgewood teachers involved with the project are Carolyn Swift, and Kathleen Conroy, who teach life sciences, and Sarah Bernhofer, who teaches language arts.

Conroy saw the program as a way of pulling the environment into the curriculum and hitting the science standards, she said. And Bernhofer, who has an affinity for the environment, helped start the SEA Club, she said.

Divided into small groups of four or five students, the students are assigned to work on one of five different projects.

One project, called "Aiming to Save," teaches participants about the challenges of endangered and threatened species by having them putt their way through a golf course to find the things they need to survive. Each putt represents success or failure in finding food, water, shelter, and space.

The project gives people a look at what birds go through when they are seeking the things they need to survive, said sixth-grader Bradlee Gibson.

"We want people to know they have to take better care of our environment, so the birds and other animals can find what they need," said Bradlee, 11, of Edgewood. "You should recycle and do what you can to help."

November Bird Walk

by Steve Noyes, Volunteer Naturalist

One cold morning this past November, three “regulars” showed up for a bird walk at 8:00 a.m. at the National Wildlife Visitor Center. The morning started out cold (around 30F) and calm.

We started out with a quick check of the feeders in front of the building (lots of Tufted Titmice) zipping back and forth. We then headed to the Loop Trail to look for sparrows (not active yet). Noticing some activity in the tree tops near the trail to Goose Pond, we went down the trail for a closer look. One of the participants had remarked that Pine Siskins have been coming to her feeder for the second year in a row. Could we have them on the Refuge today? The birds were checking out the seed pods in the Sweet Gum trees. At first glance, I proclaimed “Looks like American Goldfinches.” Wait a minute, one of them has faint streaking on its sides! Checking our field guides, we determined that we, in fact, had a female PINE SISKIN!! “There’s another one!” someone exclaimed.

Other birds, not wanting to be missed, were flitting about in the woods...Carolina Chickadees, a White-breasted Nuthatch, White-throated Sparrows, Dark-eyed Juncos, a Downy Woodpecker, and Blue Jays. Near Goose Pond, we discovered Golden-crowned Kinglets, two Northern Flickers, and a Yellow-bellied Sapsucker.

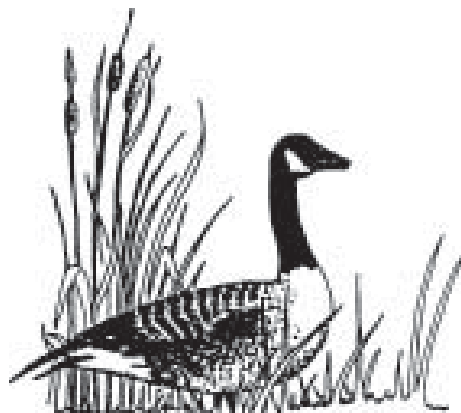
A large group of Common Grackles (several hundred) flew over the woods like a flowing river. A large flock of American Robins flew over Lake Redington. The sky also produced Canada Geese, a Cooper’s Hawk and a Turkey Vulture; the latter two after the breeze picked up.

We headed to the blind at the upper end of Cash Lake, mainly in search of shorebirds in the mud flats. Alas, we only spotted five Killdeer (no surprise). The only ducks observed were a few Ring-necked Ducks on Lake Redington. A Great Blue Heron made an appearance. One of the participants, who normally gets a head start by arriving ½ hour or so before the walk, did report a female Hooded Merganser (or a juvenile) on one of the lakes.

Other birds noted on this day included what we think was a “dark morph” Red-tailed Hawk; Mourning Doves; a Belted Kingfisher; a couple of Red-bellied Woodpeckers; a singing Carolina Wren; Eastern Bluebirds; a Northern Mockingbird, a singing Common Yellowthroat; a Northern Cardinal; and Chipping, Song, and Swamp Sparrows.

So, for a two-hour effort, we were rewarded with 33 species of birds. Our timing was perfect as the wind started during the last ½ hour. Activity was fairly constant throughout the walk...no really slow periods.

Join us later this winter on one of our refuge walks. You never know what surprises await your discovery. Check our website <http://patuxent.fws.gov> for upcoming walks and details concerning making reservations (required) for these FREE outings. Hope to see you on the trail.....



Annual Patuxent Wildlife Festival

The National Wildlife Visitor Center hosted the Annual Patuxent Wildlife Festival on October 18th, 2008 from 10AM - 3PM. This is an annual partnership event between the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's Patuxent Research Refuge and the U.S. Geological Survey's Patuxent Wildlife Research Center. These two agencies come together each year to celebrate Earth Science Week and National Wildlife Refuge Week.

Visitors viewed live animals which included various species of birds of prey and turtles, and scientific displays highlighting topics such as pollinators and waterfowl harvest surveys. Visitors also climbed aboard a bus for a behind-the-scenes tour of the normally-closed research areas of the U.S. Geological Survey's Patuxent Wildlife Research Center, where they saw endangered Whooping Cranes being raised at Patuxent for release to the wild; guided tours of the captive Sea Duck colony were another popular activity.

There were many activities for children to enjoy including face painting, a fish print craft, origami and view the sun with NASA's solar telescope. Families also explored wildlife habitats on discovery hikes and conservation tram tours led by refuge naturalists. The event was a huge success and there were over a 1000 happy visitors!



photo by Vol. Ed Grimes

River Otters.... continued from page 1

young in March or April. She is impregnated immediately after the young are born and delays implantation of the sperm until the present young become independent in the fall. Females reach maturity their second year.

Excessive trapping decimated otter populations over much of the United States. Also, there are indications that air and water pollution (particularly mercury) were factors in population declines. There have been reintroductions in some areas where they have been extirpated and the species appears to be on the increase.

Although otters are diurnal, they are usually shy and seldom seen. Evidence of their presence may be found with "scat" consisting of fish and crayfish remains on

banks and beaver dams. I have only seen otters once on South Tract, but 16 times on Central Tract and 14 on North Tract over the last 12 years.

Three encounters with otters stand out in my memory:

1. Early February on a Central Tract impoundment, watching a pair using a snow bank as a slide into Knowles Unit One.

2. A spring morning on the backside of Shaeffer Lake, where three young otters swam along side me as I walked the bank. They swam in line and surfaced periodically to squeak at me, as if asking me to come in and play. After about 20 yards they realized I was not going to join them, so they swam off.

3. An early summer morning on Shangri-la, a beaver dammed oxbow of the Little Patuxent River and the most isolated body of water on the Refuge. A large, dark brown pair were lounging on the beaver dam; so large that at first I thought they were beavers. After lounging about for awhile, they stood up and started to groom one another. After about five minutes of this they entered the water and swam off in the undulating style unique to otters. I thought to myself, a pair in the autumn of their lives enjoying a few minutes of marital bliss?

Isn't it nice to know that Refuge management policies have contributed to the increase in this delightful species? What policies you ask? Don't have a clue, but KNOW it must be true!



Tundra Swan..... Continued from page 1

to winter on the Pacific and Atlantic coasts. Usually they prefer shallow estuaries, lakes, ponds and rivers to winter on. They will eat aquatic plants, seeds, tubers, grains and some mollusks and arthropods.

After telling Refuge volunteer naturalist Steve Noyes about the

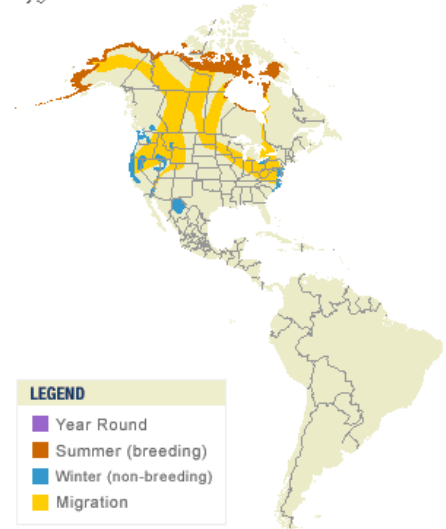
bird, he said that Tundra Swans are occasionally seen here, usually in late winter and early spring as they migrate north. It is also unusual to see a lone Tundra Swan, since they mostly are found in flocks except when breeding. Keep your eyes out for this unusual visitor to the Refuge!

((Still seen as late as December 12...Steve Noyes))



Tundra Swan (Picute from Wikimedia Commons)

Tundra Swan
Cygnus columbianus



LEGEND	
■	Year Round
■	Summer (breeding)
■	Winter (non-breeding)
■	Migration

Map by Cornell Lab of Ornithology
Range data by NatureServe

The range of the Tundra Swan. (From the Cornell Lab of Ornithology.)

AMERICA'S NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGES...
Where Wildlife Comes Naturally!!

FIRST EVENING CREEPY CRITTERS HELD AT THE VISITOR CENTER IS A SUCCESS

by Dennis Hartnett

It was Halloween Eve at the Visitor Center and all kinds of creepy, strange and mysterious creatures roamed the grounds. This was the setting for the first ever Evening Creepy Critters event.

Staffer Dionne Briggs and her team of staff and volunteers organized the event. Among the attractions were two evening tram tours. While on the tram, visitors had a chance to see staff portraying various animals and other creatures including a beaver, fox, wolf, bear, bat, Mother Nature and Old Man Winter. They shared, with the participants, some of the characteristics of their animal.

Meanwhile, in the Visitor Center, there was a wealth of activities for children and parents. Two screech owls were exhibited for the participants as well as a mammal skulls table. The children had an opportunity to make bat clothespins, decorate their treat bags, design an animal button or have their face painted by an expert. Goodies were also sold by the Friends of Patuxent.

The estimated participant count was between 200 — 250 and special thanks for all the time and energy put in by the staff and volunteers to make this evening a successful one.



News from the USGS Patuxent Wildlife Research Center

(www.pwrc.usgs.gov)

USGS Scientist Receives 2008 Marine-Estuarine-Environmental-Sciences (MEES) Colloquium Research Poster Award

The University of Maryland announced Ms. Diann Prosser as the recipient of the 2008 outstanding student poster award from the Marine-Estuarine-Environmental-Sciences (MEES) Colloquium. The colloquium, held in mid October at the University of Maryland, unites graduate students and faculty from across the University System of Maryland to discuss environmental research and education. The poster, entitled, "Wild Birds and Emerging Diseases: Modeling Avian Influenza Transmission Risk Between Domestic and Wild Birds in China" describes her research being conducted at the USGS Patuxent Wildlife Research Center and University of Maryland on wild birds and avian influenza.

Congratulations to Ms. Diann Prosser!



(color me red)

**Happy
New
Year !!**

Newsletter Contributors Needed:



Our newsletter has evolved into a quality publication due to outstanding input from our staff and volunteers at the Patuxent Research Refuge. Although we have some regular contributors, we look forward to input from anyone, whether it's a "one time", occasional or regular contribution. Volunteers are encouraged to write about their experiences, their knowledge of nature, submit nature poems and anecdotes, etc. Beginning in January 2009, the newsletter will be issued quarterly. Items should be submitted to either Michelle (michelle_donlan@fws.gov) or Nell (nell_baldacchino@fws.gov) no later than the 5th of the month (i.e. December 5th for winter issue..Jan.-Mar.; March 5th for Spring issue..Apr.-Jun; etc).

COMING SOON:

Our webmaster, volunteer Dick Kaiser, is working on some photo galleries that will showboat the Patuxent Research Refuge...wildlife, education, scenery, events, etc. Watch for this new feature on our website <http://patuxent.fws.gov>

Stay tuned!!

For images of the Patuxent Research Refuge
visit another gallery at
[http://www.pbase.com/photoops2/
patuxent_research_refuge](http://www.pbase.com/photoops2/patuxent_research_refuge)



Volunteers Friends
Friends of Patuxent
 National Wildlife Visitor Center
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 Laurel, MD 20708-4027

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 ☎ 301-497-5789

We Invite you to join...

Friends of the Patuxent Wildlife Research Center and Patuxent Research Refuge, Inc. is designated Section 501(c)(3) public charity. It is a membership organization whose mission is to financially support the research of the PWRC and the environmental education, outreach and recreational missions at the PRR. All contributions are tax deductible to the extent allowed by law. Our Maryland Charitable Organization Registration - 2348

Your membership/contribution helps support the mission and programs at Patuxent. You also receive the following benefits:

- > Quarterly newsletter
- > 10% discount in our Wildlife Images bookstore and other area refuge bookstores
- > Attendance at members-only functions
- > Participation in on-site educational programs
- > Sense of accomplishment in providing many opportunities for wildlife-related recreation, education and research

Your mailing label denotes your membership expiration date. We appreciate your prompt renewal

Friends of Patuxent

Membership Application

Please mail, along with check, to:
 Friends of Patuxent
 10901 Scarlet Tanager Loop
 Laurel MD 20708-4027
 (make check out to "Friends of Patuxent")

Date: _____

New Member Renewal

Annual Membership Rates

Individual (\$15/yr) Family (\$20/yr)
 Contributor (\$50/yr) Sponsor (\$100/yr)

Donation only \$ _____

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