

# Habitat Happenings

## SAVING BIRDS THRU HABITAT NEWSLETTER

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Pat Bussey and Kay Charter

### Check Us Out

If it's been a while since you visited our Habitat Discovery Center, you will want to make it a point to come next spring. Thanks to the dedicated efforts of Jim Charter and a new member, Elaine Stuckey, our prairie demonstration garden looks terrific. And since SBTH property abuts that of Charter Sanctuary, the 35-acre prairie construct there will offer visitors the opportunity of seeing what a genuine North American native prairie looks like once it has fully established. The first eighteen acres, where massive clumps of little bluestem thrive, is beautiful in the russet and mahogany hues typical of this native grass in autumn. Take advantage of these areas of native grasses and wildflowers to see how you might incorporate some of them into your own garden. You'll be happy you did, and so will the birds that stop in for a visit or stay to nest.

by Executive Director Kay Charter

### SBTH Executive Director Visits New England

In early September, SBTH Executive Director Kay Charter took her PowerPoint presentation about creating backyard habitat for migrating birds to New England. One of the places she visited was Grafton, Massachusetts, home of Ted and Donna Williams. Mr. Williams is the Editor at Large for Audubon Magazine. He is also the Conservation Editor for Fly Rod & Reel magazine as well as the author of two books. His wife is Advocacy Coordinator for Broad Meadow Brook Audubon Sanctuary. Mr. Williams wrote about Charter's presentation for this issue of Habitat Happenings.

### SBTH Presentations in New England

by Executive Director Kay Charter

My speaking tour began in southeastern New Hampshire, where my gracious hosts – Carol and Gordon Page – had worked to promote my presentation and set up the local Grange hall for the event. Shortly after I arrived, Carol expressed concern about attendance, saying that she had absolutely no idea if we would have a handful of people or fill the thirty chairs in the room. She needn't have worried; the thirty chairs filled quickly, another ten were added, then another ten and then another ten.

From there I went to Montpelier, for a presentation in the North Branch Nature Center. Executive Director Chip Darmstadt was similarly concerned about attendance. His worries, like Carol's, proved to be unfounded as interested participants again filled the room.

My experiences in Massachusetts and Connecticut repeated the first two regarding attendance, with greater turnouts than expected.

This wonderful response testifies to the power of our message: Everyone can help make a difference to these wonderful birds by simply planting the right things in their landscapes.

It's time for conservation organizations to let up on the gloom and doom messages that have filled publications and airwaves for decades. That is not to diminish the urgent message that we must make changes if we are to resolve the challenges we face. But we who are involved in environmental

education need to understand that empowering people is much more effective than frightening them. One of the things my trip to New England accomplished was to reinforce that view.

### Charter's Massachusetts Presentation

By Ted Williams

On Monday, September 10, 2007 Kay Charter again confirmed what I have long told my fellow board members on the French Foundation and the Norcross Wildlife Foundation: "Kay Charter and Saving Birds Thru Habitat are among the best investments in fish and wildlife we have ever made."

Programs at Mass. Audubon's Worcester office tend to be poorly attended, particularly when they are scheduled for Monday night. My wife, Donna--advocacy coordinator for the office--and I were worried, but we needn't have been. The room was packed, and Kay's infectious enthusiasm energized everyone. Even the young children sat up and paid attention. The audience loved her and couldn't wait to get back to convert their sterile, alien-infested yards and grass monocultures to native wildlife habitat.

Particularly revealing to me were the questions from the floor. The audience almost wouldn't let Kay out of the room. What I most appreciated was the way she deflated popular myths such as the alleged value of alien plants to native wildlife and, most important in my opinion, the spurious, ubiquitous and hurtful notion that registered herbicides used in accordance with the label are somehow dangerous to humans and wildlife. Kay explained that she had once believed this about herbicides, but when confronted with acres of deep-rooted invasive exotics she quickly learned that herbicides are sometimes the ONLY option. "Chemotherapy for wildlife habitat," she aptly called them. And she made a point that needs to be repeatedly hammered home to the public: Without herbicides we can kiss native fish and wildlife goodbye.

--Ted Williams,  
Editor-at-Large, Audubon magazine  
Conservation Editor, Fly Rod & Reel magazine

We invited Mr. Williams to expand on his views about herbicide use. Following is his response:

### **Costs of Chemophobia** *by Ted Williams*

A weed's second best friend (after a public-range, public-subsidized cattle rancher) is a chemophobic environmentalist. While some environmental organizations recognize herbicides as the most important of all tools to protect and restore biodiversity, others oppose all chemical use no matter what the formulation or circumstance. They have all read *Silent Spring*, but none have read it carefully.

Among the more arrogant and irrational chemophobic groups is the Northwest Coalition for Alternatives to Pesticides (NCAP), which has never bothered to learn that often there is no alternative to pesticides. In 1984 it obtained an injunction on all herbicide use on Forest Service land in Oregon and Washington and on BLM land in Oregon. The injunction required the Forest Service to voluntarily scuttle its old vegetative management plan for the Northwest and, with input from NCAP and other environmental groups, write a new one. The cost in biodiversity was horrendous.

Just as some of the worst weeds were appearing in some of America's best wildlife habitat the injunction hampered weed management for five years on Forest Service land and three years on BLM land--not only in Washington and Oregon, but also all over the West. Already strapped for money and personnel, federal land managers chose to avoid herbicides rather than face the associated quagmire of resource-exhausting administrative appeals, lawsuits and environmental impact statements

In the late 1990s I saw some of the results along the Salmon River in Idaho's Craig Mountain Wildlife Management Area. The topography of Craig Mountain and adjacent federal lands creates tremendous habitat diversity. Low canyon grasslands sustaining desert-like plants and animals give way quickly to higher-elevation grasslands and shrub fields, then more and different grasslands, then trees, plateaus and subalpine fir--all within three miles from the river.

There is, of course, a corresponding diversity of wildlife--bighorns, sage grouse, sharp-tailed grouse, elk, moose, mule deer, white-tailed deer, wintering bald eagles, to mention just a few of the more spectacular species. But this diversity is being eroded by yellow starthistle. Even from the river I could see it spreading in bilious green lesions along the high rim rock.

State and federal weed managers believe it would never have gotten away from them had the BLM and Forest Service been allowed to cut off its main access. This would have entailed continuing selective, point-and-squirt herbiciding of a few hundred acres of public land, mostly along roadways. Managers knew they weren't going to eradicate yellow starthistle in this drainage, but they were confident that this kind of spot spraying was keeping it in check.

Then the 1984 injunction came down, and the yellow starthistle took off. "It's pretty sad," comments BLM weed manager Lynn Danly. In Hells Canyon the injunction has allowed rush skeletonweed to drift down the entire drainage.

According to the Forest Service's Lynn Burton, that's probably the area's biggest threat to native wildlife. "Now rush skeletonweed is as far up into Hells Canyon as you can get," he said. "You can't drive or fly to it. You have to jetboat to the sites and then do backpack spraying." The injunction also let spotted knapweed march unmolested into Hells Canyon along the Dug Bar Road. Since the lifting of the injunction in 1989 the Forest Service has spent enormous resources just trying to knock knapweed back to where it was before.

When registered herbicides are used according to the label there is little danger to wildlife and humans. This, however, doesn't mean that herbicides have no effect on non-target organisms. Just as chemotherapy is a shock to the body of a cancer patient, herbicide application is a shock to any native ecosystem. What the two treatments have in common, however, is that they can prevent certain death.

### **Bobolinks Will Benefit from Herbicide Applications on Charter Sanctuary**

Two years after Kay and Jim Charter purchased their property, they were delighted to find Bobolinks arriving to nest in their meadow. The numbers of these fascinating members of the blackbird family grew over the next several years, reaching seven or eight pairs. Also nesting in their meadow were Eastern Meadow-larks and a number of upland sparrow species.

With the invasion of spotted knapweed, and a corresponding loss of insects, the numbers of nesting birds dropped precipitously. Now the Charters are constructing a prairie to aid these nesting species, all of which are in decline. Once the prairie is completely established, and fills in with native grasses and wildflowers, this area will see a significant increase in the above-listed species.

Accomplishing this effort would not have been possible without repeated applications of herbicides, and this area of Charter Sanctuary would have been lost as breeding habitat for species that are in serious decline.

A few visitors questioned the necessity of using chemicals, suggesting that the knapweed could have been removed by hand. But hand-pulling would have taken an army of volunteers months to clear out all of the knapweed on the Charters' 35 acres of meadow. With few exceptions (such as the beetle for purple loosestrife), it isn't possible to eradicate noxious invasives from large areas without the use of herbicides.



*Bobolink by Dianne Saunders*

**Mea Culpa**  
**By SBTH Docent Bobbie Poor**

We frail humans live with our daily sins hoping for forgiveness from whichever god we pray to for absolution and the comfort it brings. Some sins are not so readily forgiven as others, and there is a daily reminder of that in our yard. Big time! Thick, glossy beds of myrtle are ribboned with garlands of airy sweet woodruff and, stems entwined; they are creeping into the woods, a relentless green glacier crushing trillium, hepatica, trout lily and other spring ephemerals into oblivion.

Honeysuckle dots the yard's edges and a weighty tangle of serpentine vines studded with bright orange berries bend on a hillside a hillside cedar to its knees. Snow-on-the-mountain and creeping bellflower gallop to conquer any open space. Garlic mustard, another insidious alien, has sneaked into the woods.

Our penance has begun. The Japanese invaders are under attack. The honeysuckle has been extirpated with loppers and shears and the bittersweet has yielded to the ax. The mustard has been pulled from its shady hideaway. Small patches of myrtle and woodruff have been yanked clear without mercy, and on these bits of cleared land, native ferns and trillium will grow again.

It is a beginning. There is hope. We are not too old to learn, and we will sin no more. We will PLANT NATIVE.

*Bobbie Poor is an ardent birder, an SBTH founder, and she is one of our most knowledgeable and dedicated docents. She is also a valued docent for the Leelanau Conservancy. During the milder months, Bobbie lives with her husband, Jim, in their lakefront home north of Leland. In October, they depart for St. Louis, MO, where she is a docent for the St. Louis Zoological Society and a member of the Education Team for the St. Louis Audubon Club.*



*Spring ephemerals fill wooded area of SBTH member David Dister's yard, after he removed all English ivy and creeping myrtle.*

**Why Are Native Plants So Important?**

It all makes sense if we think about it: while every ecosystem begins with a particular soil type and climate, each

supports a wealth of native plants. Those plants, in turn, host the abundant insects upon which most birds and amphibians as well as many reptiles and mammals depend. Thus, if we replace those non-natives in our personal landscapes with natives, (or if we follow Bobbie Poor and David Dister's example and simply pull out the non-natives allowing natives to return) the birds, frogs,

turtles, lizards and snakes using our property will fare better.

Incorporating native plantings in your yard will make it a welcome stopover site for migrating birds, where insect food will help them rebuild lost resources after their long, harrowing, and energy-depleting travels.

You may even find that your yard will attract one or more of our feathered visitors from the tropics to nest. It is possible to have Gray Catbirds or Red-eyed Vireos nesting in almost any setting – rural or urban – across much of the country, if there is sufficient habitat to provide cover for nesting and insect food for the young.

**New School Program**

In September of this year, we initiated a new program for local schools. This program, called "We Fly to You; You Fly to Us," was the brainchild of Docents Bobbie Poor and Ann McInnis as a way to encourage more schools to take advantage of our field trips at the Habitat Discovery Center. Teachers can become involved by inviting our docents into their classroom for an on-site program, which can be followed up with a spring trip to the Discovery Center. If you would like to know more about this program, please contact Ann McInnis at: [dmcinnis@tir.com](mailto:dmcinnis@tir.com).

**Michigan Breeding Bird Survey**  
**By Marlin Bussey, President of SBTH**

In September, a four-year survey of Michigan's nesting birds came to a close. With help from my wife, Pat, Jim and Kay Charter and numerous others, the canvassing results from our Omena area have been completed, summarized and now turned in for this final year. The last survey, completed in 1988, resulted in a large 594-page Atlas showing specifically where all 215 species of Michigan birds nested. It has been 20 years, so it was time to repeat the effort and see what changes might be occurring. This well-organized project, headed by the Kalamazoo Nature Center, was coordinated locally by Bob Carstens. Additional funding came from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Michigan DNR Non-Game Wildlife Fund, Rouge River Bird Observatory, Arcus Foundation and Michigan Audubon.

My assigned area was Block 4 in Leelanau Township, nine square miles encompassing Omena and the surrounding area. Also covered was Gull Island (Bellows Island) in Grand Traverse Bay in Block 1. Nesting was recorded for four categories; Confirmed, Probable, Possible and Observation. Each of these required different levels of nesting evidence as specified in the rules. Results are logged daily, finally tabulated and then entered on "quadrifolds". Additional Casual Bird Observation cards are included for nesting birds outside the assigned area and for "special interest" birds such as threatened or endangered species. Entries consist of the date, nesting evidence code and number of nesting pairs.

So what did we find over the four-year period? Total "nesting" species was 129. Of these, 85 were Confirmed and 31 Probables. The remainder were Possibles or Observed, which

includes birds found in suitable nesting habitat but with no evidence of nesting. Of course we do see many additional species that do not nest here but are on their way north or south during migration. While we were excited to see the Northern Parula and Red-necked Grebe, these are not listed as nesters. I am also aware that we have other nesting species here we did not see during the survey. These include most of the hawks and owls, and surely a number of species that come out primarily at night. For me, these need to remain as a future challenge.

This has been an engaging project as I learned to be more cognizant of nesting, courting and protective display behavior, and also of fledgling plumages and their antics. The specific time of the year individual species nest is also of interest. The mother Canada Goose at our waterfront was on eggs in mid-March while our American Goldfinches did not fledge until September.

Nesting birds listed as Confirmed or Probable, of course, include many species that we commonly see. These include the Bluebird, Robin, Song Sparrow, Eastern Phoebe, Cardinal, Ruby-throated Hummingbird, Purple Martin and many others.

Nesters listed that are not so common, at least for me, included the Red-headed Woodpecker, Yellow-bellied Sapsucker, Wood Duck, Raven, Sandhill Crane, Black-billed Cuckoo, Yellow-billed Cuckoo, Scarlet Tanager, Bobolink, Cedar Waxwing, Mockingbird, American Coot, Bank Swallow, Woodcock and several species of warblers. Nesting for Grasshopper Sparrow, Common Loon, Caspian Tern, Bald Eagle, and Northern Goshawk required documenting the location, as these are birds of "special interest".

We are eager to see the new Atlas published – probably in a year or so. It will show where all the Michigan species are now nesting. When last published, there were few nesting species shown for Leelanau County. Thanks to the efforts of our local volunteer birders, we will now be well represented on the maps.



*Red-necked Grebe*

### **One Cool Cavity Nester by David Dister**

One of our largest flycatchers and a long-distance migrant, the Great Crested Flycatcher is a familiar breeding bird of mature open woodlands and forest edges throughout the eastern U.S. Our most colorful flycatcher in the Great Lakes

area, the combination of gray head/throat/upper breast, yellow belly, olive back, reddish-brown tail, and dark wings make it stand out when it forages within gaps high up in the canopy. The great crested flycatcher is further unusual in that it is the only cavity-nesting flycatcher in eastern North America. Such specificity in breeding habitat has likely contributed to its slight decline in continental population, except at the periphery of its range where the species is increasing in numbers. Populations in Wisconsin and Ohio, in particular, have declined steadily during the past thirty years.

Not surprisingly, this flycatcher competes with the non-native European starling for nest cavities. Fortunately, this bird readily defends its nest cavity/ territory against woodpeckers and squirrels, and it is believed to be a rare host to brown-headed cowbird parasitism. The loss of potential nest trees through human-related activities such as firewood cutting has also been a negative influence on the species. Nest cavities are typically 10 to 70 feet above the ground, and the nest is a rather bulky mix of leaves and twigs, lined with feathers, fur, and often a snakeskin. Should the snakeskin be visible or extend outside the cavity hole, it is thought this may deter some predators from entering (probably not snakes, however!). Although usually well hidden in the forest canopy, their distinctive “prreet” or “whheep” calls reveal their presence.

The female will incubate 4 or 5 eggs for 13 to 15 days. Both parent birds feed the young for 14 to 15 days whereupon the young birds leave the nest. The longevity record for the great crested flycatcher is approximately 14 years, although most birds survive much less than this. The usual diet during the breeding season (late April to October in the Great Lakes area) consists of insects and small berries. Great Crested Flycatchers winter from south Florida to Venezuela.

By now these flycatchers are well on their way to such warmer climates, but it's not too early to begin thinking about their return next spring. In particular, this species will often accept nest boxes for its breeding site and thus we can help offset the loss of natural cavities to some degree. The nest box should have an entrance hole of 1.25-1.5 inches in diameter and the dimensions should be 5-6 inches wide and deep by 8-10 inches tall, with the hole 6 inches up from bottom (detailed plans are available on the internet). The box should be placed at the edge of woods between 10 and 20 feet above ground to allow for ease of cleaning. Bluebird boxes have occasionally been used by the great crested flycatcher, and reportedly even mailboxes have been used as nest sites.

Although the crest on a Great Crested Flycatcher is raised primarily when defending its territory, once you have a pair using a nest box you had best keep it clean after each year's use, or your friendly inhabitant may raise its crest on behalf of your tardiness.

*David Dister is an environmental scientist who lives in Dayton, Ohio. Dave often identifies hard to determine plants for us. Dave is an avid birder, and he is a supporting member of SBTH.*

### **SBTH Partners with Industry on Shorebird Habitat**

For the next two years (until the fall of 2009), our organization will be partnering with CACM sand mine in Ferrysburg (a Fairmount Minerals Subsidiary), Lakeshore Environmental (a consulting firm in Grand Haven), Ottawa County Parks, and Wildlife Habitat Council to fulfill the terms of a U. S. Fish and Wildlife grant awarded to improve wetland/shoreline habitat for migrating shorebirds.

We are always pleased to see habitat restoration for any family of migrating birds, but this project is especially exciting for us, as we will have the opportunity to work with Chip Francke. For those who don't know Chip, he is an avid and able birder who once worked for the Leelanau Conservancy. Chip co-authored "*Birds of Leelanau County and Sleeping Bear Dunes National Lakeshore.*" He is currently the naturalist for Ottawa County Parks. Chip has completed a baseline survey of which shorebirds occurred on the property during fall migration.

### ***SBTH Partner Organization to Raffle Log Cabin***

The Missaukee Conservation District will raffle a log cabin in May of next year. The cabin is newly constructed on 5.5 acres of land in Missaukee County. It has 2 bedrooms, with loft, with a full basement, forced air heat, septic, well, new stove and refrigerator, hardwood floors, tiled entryways, covered porch and entryway. It is move-in ready. Tickets are \$50 each with a maximum of 3500 sold. The raffle will take place 5/3/08. The proceeds will support conservation in Missaukee County. The approximate value is \$100,000. Call 231.839.7193 or visit [www.missaukeecd.org](http://www.missaukeecd.org) for more information.

### **Thank you Eagle Scout troops # 33 and 333!!!**



Eagle Scout Blake Mikesell from Suttons Bay decided to make improving shorebird habitat on Charter Sanctuary his Community Service effort. What was needed was to clear out

wetland vegetation that has grown up around the new pond down the hill from the Habitat Discovery Center. Shorebirds do not like to forage where predators can lurk in adjacent vegetation. In order to get the job done, Blake organized a cadre of workers (there were both other scouts as well as parents) to dig cattails and other vegetation away from the edge of the water.

Blake also got materials for adding to the trim along the upper edges of the windows on the east side of the building and assigned this task to some of his helpers. The hope is that this widened ledge will attract nesting Barn and Cliff Swallows.

He also organized relocation of nearly a dozen shrubs (both willows and red osier dogwoods) to help fill in the open area near the recirculating pond on SBTH property. These wetland shrubs, once mature, will provide nesting habitat for Gray Catbirds, Common Yellowthroats and Yellow Warblers.

We deeply appreciate the hard work of these young men and their parents. Thanks, guys!!

### ***Conservation Conference***

The 4th International Partners-in-Flight Conference will be held February 13 through 16, 2008, in McAllen, Texas. Called: Tundra to Tropics: Connecting Birds, Habitats, and People. The focus of the conference will be international connections of all sorts that further bird and habitat conservation throughout the Western Hemisphere. There will be informative sessions, keynote speakers, vendors, social events, a poster session, and a variety of single- and multi-day birding field trips. The conference is open to all who are interested in birds and bird conservation.

Partners-in-Flight is a cooperative effort involving partnerships among federal, state and local government agencies, philanthropic foundations, professional organizations, conservation groups, industry, the academic community, and private individuals. All Partners-in-Flight meetings at all levels are open to anyone interested in bird conservation and we eagerly seek your contribution.

Go to [www.PartnersinFlight.org](http://www.PartnersinFlight.org) for more information.

### **Habitat Discovery Center Closed for Winter**

Our nature center is now closed for the winter. We will reopen by May 1 of 2008. See you in spring!

***Our heartiest thanks to our dedicated members for their continued support:***

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# Saving *B*irds Thru *H*abitat

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*Habitat Happenings*

*SBTH Newsletter*

*Vol. 6., No. 3, November, 2007*

*Mission Statement:*

*To protect, enhance and restore habitat for North American birds and to educate people of all ages about this important mission and how to achieve it.*

**Our goal is to improve habitat for migrating birds  
one backyard at a time.**