

NATURAL HERITAGE HARMONIES



SUMMER 2007

A publication of the Nongame and Natural Heritage Program

Vermont Fish & Wildlife Department
Agency of Natural Resources

Conserving Vermont's fish, wildlife, and plants and their habitats for the people of Vermont.

Thank You Ted

By Steve Parren

I want to recognize the many contributions of my friend Ted Murin to our understanding of the natural world in Vermont. Some of you likely know Ted as an avid birder and coauthor of *Birdwatching in Vermont*. He is also the Lake Watch “master.” An annual event where he and other hearty souls observe what species of birds are cruising down Lake Champlain in the fall and early winter, including three species of jaeger.

I do my best birding by ear these days, listening to what Ted sees and hears. If you want a bird band read and your equipment doesn't quite measure up, Ted's your man. He uses a spotting scope better than mine just to line up his “Big Scope.” Need help identifying that nearly invisible speck in the September sky over Mount Philo, Ted will deliver hawk species and age.

Like many others, Ted contributes his time to the Breeding Bird Atlas, perhaps a few more hours than most. He helps with the reporting and data management for the Bird Atlas, and his old van is tired and road weary from the many miles traveled statewide with “Big Scope.”

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Vermont Fish & Wildlife Hosts the First Technical Assistance Summit

By Jane Lazorbak



Vermont Fish & Wildlife's Technical Assistance Summit provided a forum for finding better ways to help Vermonters conserve the natural and cultural heritage in their communities.

Over 100 ecologists, planners, wildlife biologists, conservationists, foresters and educators representing approximately 90 state agencies and organizations participated in the Vermont Fish & Wildlife Department's first Technical Assistance Summit, held at Vermont Technical College in May. They gathered to learn from each other better ways to reach out and help Vermonters get involved in conserving the natural and cultural heritage in their communities.

The idea for the summit sprang from discussions between some of these same people during Vermont's Wildlife Action Plan development. When asked about the big picture—how to prevent extinctions and keep common species common—most

agree “private landowners are the key to wildlife conservation in Vermont.” It's an astute and challenging reply considering 87 percent of the state is in private ownership, and the pressure to develop Vermont's forests and farmlands is increasing.

Vermont Fish & Wildlife continually addresses this challenge, and knows there are other organizations and individuals across the state that provide technical assistance in many different forms and at many different levels. The summit provided a way to bring those offering technical assistance in a variety of fields, such as forestry, wildlife habitat and community development together to coordinate efforts and leverage our work.

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DEPARTMENT UPDATE

A Note from the Director of Wildlife

By John M. Austin, Acting Director of Wildlife

It is an honor and a privilege to serve the department as Acting Director of Wildlife. Having worked for the department as a wildlife biologist for 12 years and dealing with many issues from managing the habitat and technical assistance, to serving on the waterfowl team, to helping in the development of our Wildlife Action Plan, I thought I had a fairly good understanding of the work we do. Serving in this new capacity, however, has given me a new appreciation for all that we do. The diversity and complexity of programs, projects and initiatives we are engaged in is staggering and inspiring. We truly do represent all species of wild animals and plants in carrying out our mission to conserve and protect them and their habitats for the people of the state.

I want to share my perspective on wildlife conservation and how I view the Wildlife Division's many priorities. Habitat loss to development is arguably our greatest conservation challenge. Today, we lose habitat in Vermont to roads, buildings, electricity infrastructure, fragmentation, and invasion of non-native species. There is no easy solution to the changes occurring in our environment, yet we are tasked with representing the public's interests in making sure we conserve our unique natural heritage.

We are faced with an equally compelling challenge of changing public interests in and attitudes toward wildlife and land. As Vermont grows, land becomes parcelized and fragmented, and in turn, it becomes more difficult for people to access land to hunt, fish, trap, hike and watch wildlife. It is our duty to ensure people have opportunities and reasons to connect to the land and wildlife. In my view, people will not protect what they do not care about. People must be able to pursue interests in wildlife, in all their forms, so we can continue to grow public support for wildlife conservation. We must ensure that our children's children have the same opportunities, with respect to wildlife conservation, that we are privileged to have today. Being an avid hunter and angler myself, I also feel strongly that we must work hard to maintain and expand opportunities for the traditional wildlife-based pursuits.

Once again, our recent public opinion survey demonstrates strong, public support for the department and the work we do. I'm always amazed and proud to think that Vermont is second only to Alaska for the percentage of residents that engage in wildlife-based activities. The challenges are great, but so is our support for addressing them.

I will be working with the Commissioner and Steve Parren on recovery planning for threatened and endangered species. We will develop a process for accomplishing this critically important work in an efficient fashion and provides the attention needed for these at-risk species.

Some of our most effective initiatives for addressing habitat loss are through our interaction with private landowners and Vermont communities. Our assistance in land use and conservation planning, management and acquisition is critical in this regard and we should continue to grow in this area. The Technical Assistance Summit the department hosted this spring was a remarkable demonstration of the diversity of land use planning and management organizations in Vermont joining together to identify opportunities for more effective conservation and management assistance to landowners and communities.

The Wildlife Division has a strong program for management and conservation of department lands. We can continue to expand our efforts to set an example for being a responsible land steward in Vermont, for acquiring more land to provide the public with secure access to land, habitat and wildlife, and to ensure the long-term conservation of the many species that rely on these public lands.

We will be developing new ten-year management plans for black bear, white-tailed deer, wild turkey, and moose over the next year. This will be a great opportunity to interact with hunters and many others to ensure the well-being of the environment, the interests of all Vermont citizens who enjoy these species in many ways, and those who have serious concerns about the impacts they have on the land or their property.

We will press forward in the application of our Wildlife Action Plan and all the projects it is funding, ranging from bobcat research and butterfly inventories to habitat evaluations.

I look forward to working with all of the talented conservation professionals in the department and all of our dedicated partners as we proceed with conserving Vermont's wildlife heritage.



Nongame and Natural Heritage News

The Vermont Fish & Wildlife Department (VFWD) and our Nongame and Natural Heritage program (NNHP) are currently involved in over 72 projects. Many of the projects are funded by the State Wildlife Grants program, which provides critical federal funding for wildlife conservation. Here are highlights of some of our projects.

Birds and Butterflies

Vermont's **common loon** population continued to grow in 2006. Vermont's Loon Recovery Project, a program of the Vermont Institute of Natural Science (VINS) and the VFWD, documented a record high 58 loon nesting pairs and 77 territorial pairs statewide. Forty-four nesting pairs successfully hatched 66 eggs, with 56 chicks surviving through August, resulting in an 85 percent survival. Two fewer eggs hatched in 2006 than in 2005 due to a higher number of nest failures. Flooding, predation and human disturbance contributed to the nest failures.

Vermont's **peregrine falcon** breeding population reached a new post-DDT record high of 34 territories in 2006, surpassing 2005's previous record of 32 pairs. New territories were established at Benson Ledges in Benson and Swanton Quarry in Swanton. A pair also returned to Brousseau Mountain in Averill after a one-year absence. Of the 34 pairs present in 2006, 28 nested and 19 pairs fledged an estimated 45 young. Nineteen nestlings (42%) were banded at eight sites.

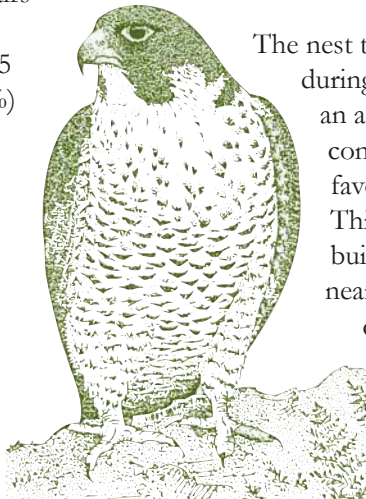
Results of cliff monitoring this spring by staff from the National Wildlife Federation and VFWD, and various volunteers are promising, with 35 territorial pairs—a new record. It appears to be a year for relocations and re-nests. Pairs have moved to nearby

cliffs from Rattlesnake Point, Belvidere Mountain Quarry and Checkerberry Ledge, and several pairs are using new eyries. We also have at least two re-nest attempts at Nebraska Notch and Fairlee Palisades.

Osprey nesting continues to expand around the state with help from Central Vermont Public Service and other power companies, who provide support and materials for nesting platforms. There were 71 occupied nests in 2003, 75 in 2004, 76 in 2005, and 82 in 2006. A State Wildlife Grant for nongame birds is helping fund this project.

The **Bald Eagle Restoration Initiative** has completed its hacking phase of the project. Twenty-nine eagles were raised and released from the Dead Creek Wildlife Management Area in Addison since 2003. The project is now focusing on public education about eagles and other endangered species, and monitoring eagles in the wild. This is the final year of the project.

Department biologists also are monitoring the nesting efforts of eagles in southeastern Vermont. Eagles built two nests in 2005 but did not appear to lay eggs in either of the nests. This is typical of first year nests. Nesting occurred in 2006 and chicks were hatched in one nest, but then lost.



The nest tree blew down during the winter, and an artificial nest was constructed in a favorite roost tree. This spring, eagles built a new nest at a nearby location, but continue to hang out at the roost tree. Eagles displaying nesting, courtship and



territorial behavior also has been observed from other parts of the state.

The **Vermont Breeding Bird Atlas** is in its final survey year of a five year project. Atlas results to date are helping to designate rare species that require more focused surveys. Whip-poor-will surveys and outreach in 2005 and 2006 effectively provided more information on this species, which showed a dramatic decrease in the number of blocks it occupied since the first atlas in 1985.

Eastern meadowlarks and vesper sparrows continue to show changes in distribution and a decrease in the number of blocks occupied compared to the first atlas. Eastern meadowlarks appear to have disappeared from most of the eastern half of the state, and vesper sparrows have almost vanished from southern counties. These grassland species may be responding to the decline in actively farmed land in parts of Vermont.

The distribution of some shrub-dependent species has not changed, but the number of blocks they occupy is still lagging behind the first atlas. Some boreal species continue to exhibit decreases in block occupancy. The olive-sided flycatcher and yellow-throated vireo have been reported in fewer blocks in this atlas compared to the first. Another species possibly experiencing declines in block occupancy is the Canada warbler. Although its distribution in Vermont is still widespread, it has been reported in 40 percent fewer blocks.

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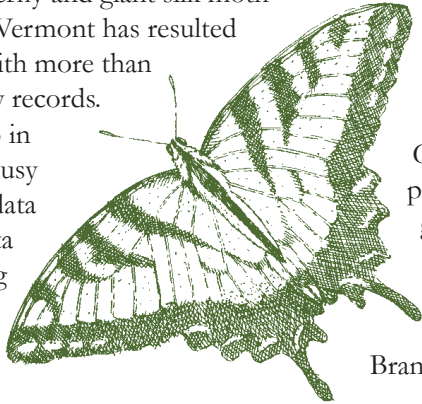
Nongame News

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Vermont's Butterfly Atlas also is in its final field season. The project to document butterfly and giant silk moth distribution in Vermont has resulted in a database with more than 30,000 butterfly records.

Volunteers, 135 in all, have been busy collecting this data since 2002. Data collected during the first three years was critical in

determining which butterfly species should be included as species of greatest conservation need in Vermont's Wildlife Action Plan (see insert). Sixteen butterfly species were identified in the action plan.



These winter surveys show that the gating of some caves in Vermont has been effective in helping to protect hibernating bats. In Plymouth Cave, hibernating bat numbers continue

to grow since it was gated, increasing 19 percent in the past two years. Hibernating bat numbers in Nickwackett Cave have increased by 64 percent since the cave was gated in 2004. The surveys also showed that Indiana bats were once again located hibernating in a mine in Brandon.

Spring, summer and fall bat surveys also were conducted in 2006. VFWD conducted surveys directly within or adjacent to the known range of Indiana bats to determine the boundaries of the species range in the Champlain Valley. Surveys were conducted using mist nets, harp traps, and acoustic monitoring. New Indiana bat colony sites were located in New Haven, Hinesburg, and Starksboro. The Hinesburg colony is the most northeastern colony in Vermont as well as in the Indiana bat's range in the U.S. A female Indiana bat was netted this June on the same Hinesburg farm and the discovery is helping secure

federal funds to conserve this land (see sidebar).

This summer, VFWD biologists successfully trapped at least one Indiana bat at 9 of 11 sites in the Champlain Valley. New maternity colonies were located in Addison, Bridport, and Brandon. The department's survey efforts over the past several summers now provide a better picture of the Indiana bat's range and distribution of female maternity colonies in the Champlain Valley. This information will be instrumental in developing local management guidelines for foresters and private landowners in the region.

This fall, biologists will concentrate on studying populations of migratory bats residing in Vermont and using Vermont as a corridor for their migration. Migratory bats in Vermont include eastern red bats, hoary bats and silver-haired bats.

The tracks of a **Canada lynx** were discovered in one of Vermont's Northeast Kingdom state wildlife management areas by state wildlife biologists from Vermont and New Hampshire in February 2007. The Canada lynx is native to Vermont, but the species has always been scarce in

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Vermont's Wildlife Action Plan

Vermont's Wildlife Action Plan is a statewide, all-species conservation strategy. It provides a science-based foundation for understanding wildlife needs, and it serves as a common conservation vision to guide local, state and federal agencies, sportsmen's and non-profit conservation organizations and the general public in wildlife conservation.

Congress asked each state to develop a wildlife action plan. These proactive plans examine the health of wildlife and prescribe actions to conserve wildlife and vital habitat before they become more rare and more costly to protect.

Vermont's Wildlife Action Plan was developed over the course of two years with extensive public involvement. It was created by pooling the knowledge of the people who know Vermont's wildlife best—Vermont Fish & Wildlife Department staff and the representatives of more than 60 local, state and national agencies, sportsmen and conservation groups, academics, land managers and other wildlife experts.

Partners helped select Species of Greatest Conservation Need (SGCN), identified problems impacting wildlife, developed conservation strategies and influenced the organization of the Action Plan.

The federally-funded State Wildlife Grants program (SWG) provides limited funds for Action Plan implementation. SWG is our nation's primary conservation program for keeping species healthy and off the list of threatened and endangered species. Vermont received approximately \$600,000 for State Wildlife Grants in fiscal year 2007. For more information about Vermont's Wildlife Action Plan and SWG, visit our website:

www.vtfishandwildlife.com/SWG_home.cfm.

the state. The lynx is federally listed as a threatened species and listed by Vermont as endangered. The last time there was a confirmed occurrence of a lynx in Vermont was 1968.

Fishes and Turtles

Department fishery biologists are investigating whether the last known native Vermont-strain **muskellunge** is still present in the Missisquoi River. Muskellunge or muskies were widely reported in Lake Champlain through the early 1900s, but by the 1970s, Vermont's remaining native, naturally reproducing muskellunge population was restricted to the Missisquoi River, between the Swanton Dam and the Highgate Falls Dam.

A chemical spill upstream of this stretch of river in 1979 caused a massive fish kill and presumably wiped out the remnant native muskie population.

However, anglers occasionally catch muskies in the lower Missisquoi River, but their origin is unknown. They may be from previous stocking programs or they may be descendants of the original Lake Champlain strain from the upper Missisquoi River.

Our fishery biologists surveyed ten sites on the 11-kilometer stretch of the Missisquoi River between the Swanton Dam and the Highgate Springs Dam over a 30-day sampling period during the spring of 2006 and 2007. The survey sites were based on their proximity to potential muskellunge spawning habitat.

Unfortunately, no muskellunge were captured or observed during this sampling effort. However, a large number of spawning northern pike were captured. Since northern pike and muskellunge have nearly identical spawning habitat requirements, our site selections should have yielded muskellunge if they were present.

The results of our extensive sampling efforts seem to indicate that the native

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Bissonette Farm Conservation Initiative

Located just south of Hinesburg Village, the Bissonette Farm is a classic Vermont landscape of open fields, rolling wooded hills, and stunning Green Mountain views. The 630-acre property has prime farmland and forest, and its hillside springs and low-lying wetlands are the headwaters for the LaPlatte River. The farm also has superior habitat for bats, especially the federally endangered Indiana bat.

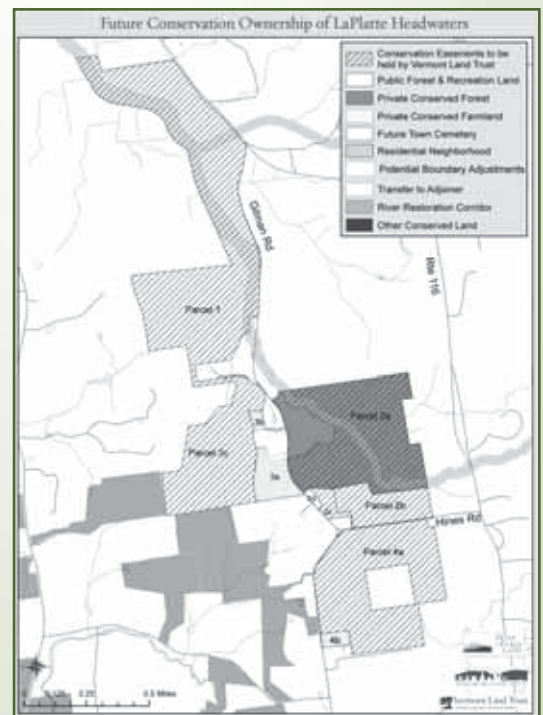
The Fish & Wildlife Department recently received a federal grant for \$500,000 to help permanently protect this property that is home to the largest Indiana bat summer roosting and foraging habitat in this area and the northernmost known maternal colony. This was the first time Vermont has received federal Endangered Species Act funding to purchase land, and it went a long way toward the \$3.6 million needed to conserve the farm.

This ambitious conservation initiative is a collaborative effort of the Hinesburg Land Trust, the Trust for Public Land, the Vermont Land Trust, the Vermont Fish & Wildlife Department, and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. Private fundraising and grants from the Vermont Housing and Conservation Board and the Agency of Natural Resources' Clean and Clear program are helping secure additional funding.

"The Bissonette Farm is an ideal conservation project for bats," said VFWD Wildlife Biologist Scott Darling. "A combination of conservation easements, conservation buyers and wetland restoration will preserve the forest and productive farmland. About 303 acres will belong to the town of Hinesburg, 150 acres will be sold to farmers, 140 acres will go to a private conservation buyer, and 26 acres may be used for limited development."

The Indiana bat is not the only species to benefit from conserving the Bissonette Farm. Several hundred acres of lowland forest, an important habitat type that is being rapidly lost to development in the Champlain Valley, also will be protected. The farm has 225 acres of deer wintering habitat and 46 acres of wetlands, and is home to a wide variety of wildlife, including bobcat, fox, and a myriad of birds and amphibians. Two natural communities of statewide significance—Transition Hardwood Limestone Talus Woodland and Valley Clayplain Forest—are also found on the property.

Protecting this area will help link other privately and publicly conserved lands and allow wildlife to travel in a north-south route from Shelburne Pond to the Bristol Cliffs Wilderness, and in an east-west route from the northern Green Mountains to Lake Champlain. It also will preserve a place for people to enjoy the outdoors and take advantage of the network of trails that provide abundant opportunity for four-season recreation.



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Vermont-strain muskellunge no longer exist in this stretch of the Missisquoi River, or if they do, they are in extremely low numbers.

Tissue samples from muskies caught in the lower Missisquoi River

also are being genetically analyzed to help solve the mystery of their origin. Results of the analysis will help guide future management actions for possible muskie reintroduction efforts.

Vermont's only known population of endangered **spotted turtle** will benefit from the recent purchase of a 17-acre parcel adjacent to a wetland complex used by the spotted turtles. The Vermont River Conservancy (VRC), working with the Agency of Natural Resources, negotiated the sale and secured funding for the purchase of the land that was slated for development. VRC transferred ownership of the land to the Vermont Fish & Wildlife Department. The Vermont Housing and Conservation Board and VFWD provided the funding for the purchase.

Sixty-five young **map turtles** were returned to Lake Champlain and released after spending the winter at the ECHO Science Center in Burlington. Steve Parren, Vermont Fish & Wildlife's NNHP coordinator, collected the newly hatched turtles during his annual fall nesting beach clean-up. A fox had dug up most of the turtles.

Steve normally keeps young turtles recovered from disturbed nests at his home, but there were just too many. He made arrangements with Steve Smith at ECHO for the young turtles

to stay at the Science Center until they were old enough to fend for themselves. But Steve's wading pool wasn't empty this winter. Four young **spiny softshell turtles** stayed with the Parrens before being released this spring.

Steve will be conducting his annual nesting beach clean-up this October. If you are interested in volunteering to help, contact Steve Parren at 802.241.3289 (steve.parren@state.vt.us) or Eric Lazarus at 802.658.8505 (ericlazarus@verizon.net).



Fisheries Biologist Shawn Good with a muskie from Otter Creek

Plants and Natural Communities

Fish & Wildlife staff, New England Plant Conservation (NEPC) volunteers and others put in a busy field season searching Vermont's landscape for rare plants in 2006. Volunteers with NEPC program visited 51 sites, relocated rare plants at 29 of the sites, and discovered four new rare plant populations.

Two of the six known populations of the state threatened **Green Mountain maidenhair fern** were found to be considerably more extensive than originally thought. This fern is adapted to a specialize habitat, growing in the soils of exposed serpentine bedrock. It is typically found only on serpentine outcrops.

One volunteer found a population of this fern growing into the woods well below the outcrop where it was previously documented. Fish & Wildlife Botanist Bob Popp made a similar discovery at another site, where the fern was more widespread than previously reported. Bob also found a large population of the state rare **large-leaved sandwort**, another plant adapted to the soils of serpentine outcrops.

The **beach pea** that we moved to the Winooski Valley Park District site last year is doing quite well. Over half

of the transplanted clumps survived. WVPD cut back trees and removed competing vegetation to improve growing conditions. More beach pea may be moved from their present site at UVM to the Winooski site next spring.

Plant conservation has made great gains with the New England Plant Conservation Program and Fish & Wildlife's Landowner Incentive Program. But there have been some documented losses. Neither the **alpine bilberry** nor the **boreal bentgrass** could be relocated on the summit of Mt. Abraham. They were last seen at this site in 1991 and 1989, respectively. These species may reappear, however, through the efforts of the Green Mountain Club's summit stewards program that is helping the alpine area recover from previous heavy hiker traffic.

Bogs and Poor Fens are two closely related, nutrient-poor peatland types that are rare in Vermont. They have very specialized vegetation, usually dominated by heath shrubs and Sphagnum moss and including the insectivorous pitcher plant and sundew. A new project began in spring 2007 to inventory these fascinating wetlands statewide. We have completed a thorough review of known records, maps, and aerial photos to identify potential sites, and completed low elevation flights over all the sites in June. Landowner contact and site visits will take place this year and in 2008. We expect to learn a lot about the ecology and habitat value of these small wetlands.

There are several forested natural communities in Vermont dominated by oaks, pines, hickory, and other species typical of warmer regions to our south. These forest types are generally uncommon in Vermont and are especially important for many species of wildlife. **Oak-Pine-Northern Hardwood Forest Blocks** is a State Wildlife Grant-

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funded project that will identify the forest blocks dominated by oak and pine using known information, aerial photographs, ecological modeling, interviews with foresters and biologists around the state, and low elevation flights. High priority blocks will be visited with landowner permission, and wildlife habitat and significant natural communities will be identified. The project will be completed in 2009.

The State Wildlife Grants program has been a big boost to our conservation efforts, allowing us to manage our wildlife resources more effectively and address specific threats to Vermont's wildlife. It is a critical funding source for implementing Vermont's Wildlife Action Plan.

Your contributions to the Nongame Wildlife Fund are also vitally important. To use the federal funds from the State Wildlife Grant program we must have matching state money. The Nongame Wildlife Fund is our primary source for the matching funds. So, whether you purchase a conservation license plate or hunting, fishing or trapping license, make a direct donation, or donate by using the tax check-off, you are helping conserve Vermont's wildlife to enjoy now and in the future. 🐾

Technical Assistance Summit

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Other goals of the summit were to reduce redundancy and improve the quality of the services offered, produce a technical assistance webguide Vermonters can use to find the help they need, and establish partnerships that work on many issues to aid our efforts with communities, towns and private landowners.

Peter Forbes, co-founder of the

Center for Whole Communities, was the keynote speaker. He emphasized the need to collaborate to tell a more effective, powerful and unified story about Vermont's natural heritage. The morning session featured success stories made possible by thinking outside the box, pulling in different partners and engaging the community.

In the afternoon, folks participated in break-out groups based on the different regions of Vermont. The idea was to facilitate communications among various technical assistance

programs operating in the same part of the state and provide a forum for creating collaborative partnerships.

Similar themes emerged from the different groups. They included a need for the Agency of Natural Resources (ANR) to play a leadership role in this arena, a need to understand who is doing what, and a desire to broaden their skills to a provide better technical assistance.

Vermont Fish & Wildlife is committed to this project and is taking steps to keep the momentum going. We plan to release the technical assistance webguide later this summer. It will be a resource for the technical assistance provider community as well as the public. We also are collaborating with VT COVERTS to put on fall/winter workshops for private landowners to make them aware of the new webguide. And, we are working with ANR's technical assistance providers to help determine the appropriate role



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of ANR in the technical assistance arena.

Peter Forbes spoke of measuring success through our work in partnerships with other groups to engage Vermonters in protecting our natural heritage. The real success for us in the technical assistance community will be our ability to redefine for Vermonters their relationship to the land. The Technical Assistance Summit marks the first of what will hopefully be many more opportunities for us to consider if we are doing the best job we can. 🐾



Nongame and Natural Heritage Program

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Your Support Makes a Difference!

Please donate to the Nongame Wildlife Fund on your Vermont income tax form. Look for the loon icon.



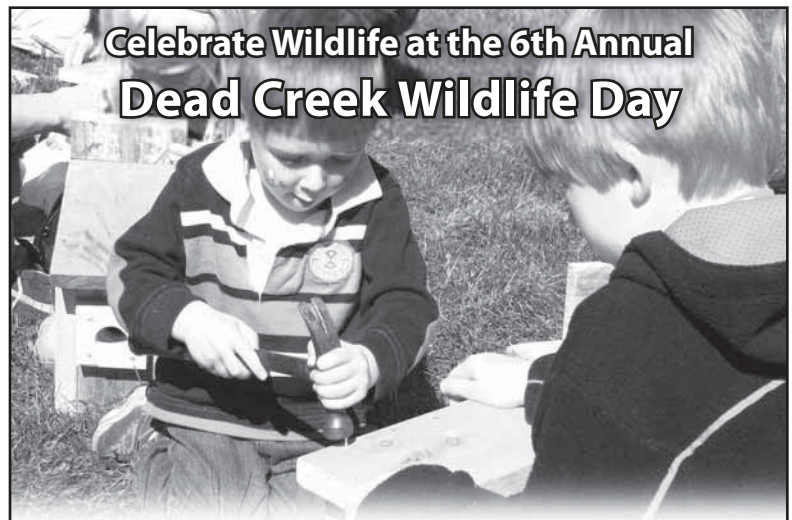
Thank You

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If there is a Bird Atlas block not completed or a rare species not yet documented breeding, let Ted know. He researched Cerulean Warbler habits, hooked up with other kindred spirits who had observed the birds in Vermont, organized a search party, marched us into the woods, and willed us to deliver. We spent a day gathering clues—a female gathering a spider web, a tussle with a Redstart—and sharing information until we nailed the nest high in an ash tree. I will remember the day as one of the finest birding efforts I have participated in.

Ted respects the natural world and considers the impacts his and others' actions have on wildlife. He values Vermont landowners and shares with them what he knows.

If you happen by Dead Creek in Addison this fall, when the Snow Geese are gathering a crowd along the Route 17 pull-off, look for “Big Scope” and the friendly guy making sure everyone gets a good look. Thanks Ted. ➡



Saturday, October 6, 2007 9:30 a.m. to 4:00 p.m.

**Vermont Fish & Wildlife Department's
Dead Creek Wildlife Management Area**
Free Admission and Parking

Mark your calendar for a day filled with wildlife demonstrations, nature walks and loads of family fun.



For more information visit our website:
www.vtfishandwildlife.com/dead_creek_wildlife_days.cfm
or call 802-241-3700