In This Issue

Spring Highlights.................................................................Inside Front Cover
From the Editor .................................................................2
Spring Season: March 1 through May 31, 2022 by Eric Masterson .................................................................3
Regional Report, Spring 2022 ..................................................9
Sullivan County and Lake Sunapee by Dylan Jackson .................................................................9
Coos County by Robert A. Quinn ..............................................10
Spring 2022 Field Notes, Kathryn Frieden, Editor .................................................................12
Iceland Gull Escapes a Bald Eagle by Kyle Wilnarth .................................................................12
American Oystercatcher Behavior photos by Jim Sparrell .................................................................13
The Three Trillers of Early Spring by Chris McPherson .................................................................13
Black-throated Blue Warbler Visits a Feeder .................................................................13
Eastern Phoebe Reclaims Nest by Sallie Barker .................................................................14
Black Vulture Makes a Home Visit by Andrew Cornell .................................................................14
Peregrine Falcon Using Osprey Nest by Kathryn Frieden .................................................................15
Aerial Show in Kensington by George W. Gatavis, Jr .................................................................16
Lapland Longspur in Breeding Plumage .................................................................16
Big Day in May by various authors .................................................................19
Cheshire County Big Day by Pam Hunt .................................................................19
A Northern Lapwing in New Hampshire by Stephen R. Mirick .................................................................21
“Glockenspiel,” the Glacous Gull by Rebecca Suomala .................................................................22
Late April Snow Concentrates Migrants by Robert A. Quinn .................................................................24
Field Trip Report .................................................................25
NH Audubon “Tri-State Pelagic” to Jeffreys Ledge by Stephen R. Mirick .................................................................25
Deer Hill Wildlife Management Area by Scott Heron .................................................................26
Warbler Wednesdays by Blake Allison .................................................................27
Easter Birds and Cans by Kurk Dorsey .................................................................28
Satellite Tracking of Fifteen NH Ospreys by Iain MacLeod .................................................................29
Birding the former Laconia State School campus by Rob Woodward .................................................................34
Simple, Cheap DIY Wildlife Microphone by Iain MacLeod .................................................................36
Black Vultures Expanding in New Hampshire by Pam Hunt and Steve Mirick .................................................................37
What to Watch for in Spring .................................................................38
Corrections .................................................................39
Colors of Spring .................................................................39

Cover Photos by Steve Mirick who also discovered these rarities: Chuck-will’s-widow (bottom), 5-16-22, Odiorne Point SP, Rye, NH; Northern Lapwing (top), 3-7-22, Greenland, NH.
Satellite Tracking of Fifteen NH Ospreys

by Iain MacLeod

Between 2011 and 2015, fifteen Ospreys were fitted with lightweight GPS transmitters (known as PTTs) at nests in New Hampshire, six adult males and nine juveniles (Table 1, Figure 1). All the birds were tagged as part of a project sponsored by the Squam Lakes Natural Science Center. I spearheaded the project and worked in partnership with Dr. Rob Bierregaard, who has deployed similar PTTs on more than a hundred Ospreys during his career. Here are the stories of each of the birds we tagged.

2011

Saco was a chick we tagged at a nest in New Hampton on July 12, 2011. She made her first flight on July 23. She started her south-bound migration on August 20. She made a meandering migration along the eastern seaboard and then headed inland to a dam in West Virginia where she hung out from August 31 until October 5. As we soon learned, this is quite typical behavior of youngsters. They often find a “staging” area where there are lots of fish and where they perfect their hunting techniques before making the “real” push towards their winter home. Once she got going again, she made quick progress through Florida and reached Cuba by October 13. She lingered in Cuba for a while and then finally made it to Haiti on October 25. On October 26, she attempted a crossing of the Caribbean and was swept off course and out into the middle of the ocean. After more than 30 hours of flying and 600 miles, she ditched in the sea and perished 300 miles from the nearest land. We were to find out several times that the crossing of the Caribbean in the fall is a very perilous journey for all Ospreys.

2012

In 2012, we tagged three Ospreys, a breeding male at a nest in Bridgewater (Art) and two youngsters from a nest in Tilton (Jill and Chip). Art was tagged on May 29 and we were able to follow him for the rest of the breeding season as he foraged and raised three young at his nest. We learned a lot about his territory and all his favorite fishing haunts. He started his migration on September 11 and demonstrated the major difference between adults and juveniles – experience. He made a drama-free southbound migration down through Florida, through Cuba, across to Haiti, across the Caribbean effortlessly, and landed in Venezuela. He then forged south and east ending up on a quiet stretch of the Rio Araguaia in eastern Brazil, south of the Amazon River and almost 5,000 miles from his nest. He arrived there on October 23. Art displayed what we came to recognize as typical adult behavior, moving very little from “his” spot on the river. Typically, once an Osprey finds a good wintering spot, they are very faithful to that site and return year after year. They have a summer home and a winter home that they return to throughout their lives.

Art began his northbound spring migration on March 21. He headed back to the coast of Venezuela, crossed the
Caribbean, landed in Haiti on March 28, and arrived back at his nest in Bridgewater on April 10, where his regular mate (we banded her in 2011) was patiently waiting for him, as was I . . . and a camera crew from WMUR. He put on quite a show as he sky danced overhead and dropped to the nest to join the female. Within a couple of minutes, he mated with her and went off to get her a fish . . . back to the regular routine after a six month separation. They reared three young that summer. We followed Art for the rest of the summer of 2013 and then re-trapped him and removed the transmitter in August. Art has continued to breed at this same nest with the same mate ever since (he no longer carries a transmitter, but he does carry a leg band on his left leg which makes him easy to recognize each spring). I have no doubt that he has wintered in that same spot on the Rio Araguaia each winter since then.

The two juveniles that we tagged in 2012 did not fare as well. Chip left his natal nest in Tilton on August 21 and headed for coastal Rhode Island where he loitered until October 9 (classic juvenile staging). On that date, he headed out over the ocean and after a long day of continuous flying, he landed on a ship. Unfortunately, the ship was heading east towards Europe and Chip went along for the ride. After multiple days at sea and rides on at least three different ships, he perished closer to Europe than South America. He almost made it to the Azores.

His sister Jill started off doing so well. She left the nest for the last time on September 10 and made a very rapid southbound trip through Florida, then made the crossing of the Caribbean look like a piece of cake. Her last signal came from a very remote part of the Venezuelan rainforest on October 4. We assume she perished.

2013

In 2013, we tagged five Ospreys, two adult males and three juveniles. Donovan was an adult breeding male at the Tilton nest and was Jill’s and Chip’s father. We caught and tagged him on May 13. Like Art before, we were able to see all his favorite fishing spots in his territory as he and his mate raised three chicks.

He started his southbound migration on September 17. He followed the usual route through Cuba, but surprised us by heading all the way to the Virgin Islands. On October 8, he headed over to St. Croix and then made an attempt to cross the Caribbean. He got into some bad weather and had the common sense to turn around and head back to Puerto Rico. He hung out there and finally made a second, successful crossing on October 17. He then quickly headed to his winter home close to the Orinoco River in Venezuela. As is typical for an adult, he moved very little throughout the winter. He headed north on March 10, 2014 and reached his nest on April 4 where he bred again and raised two more chicks.

He headed south again on September 18, 2014 and after following a similar route, arrived back at his winter home on October 12. After an uneventful winter, he started north again on March 12 and arrived back at his nest on April 3. He and his mate raised two more chicks. He started his third southbound migration on September 20, 2015 and arrived back at his same winter home on October 12. Unfortunately, we lost contact with Donovan on November 11, 2015. There was no indication of whether he perished or whether the transmitter failed. He did not return to his nest the following spring and his mate quickly found another partner.

Mackenzie was a breeding male at a nest along the Connecticut River in Stratford. He was tagged on May 14, 2013. He instantly surprised us by regularly commuting 17 miles each way over to the York Pond Fish Hatchery near Berlin. He and his mate reared one chick. In late August after the chick had fledged, Mackenzie spent most of his time fishing along the Androscoggin River. His transmitter stopped moving on September 21 at Head Pond in Berlin. I found his remains there on October 1. The cause of his death is unknown. I recovered a leg band but never found the transmitter.

Artoo and Bergen were brothers from the nest in Bridgewater. Their father was Art. They were tagged on August 12, 2013. Artoo surprised us by leaving the area just three days later and heading to Pennsylvania. Bergen also left quickly (August 21) and by August 24 had reached the Chesapeake Bay. After taking two very separate routes, amazingly, the two brothers came together on the night of September 25 and headed from Hatteras Island out into the open ocean at the same time. They must have seen each other. They both turned west at the same time and made it to the Georgia coast by morning. They then separated and followed different paths through Florida, but on September 30, roosted just over four miles apart in southern Florida. Artoo crossed over to Cuba on October 1 and Bergen followed on October 4. They both reached Haiti on the same date. Bergen crossed the Caribbean on October 14 and landed in Colombia. Artoo made his Caribbean crossing without trouble on October 20 and landed in Venezuela. Bergen settled down on a mountain river in Colombia for a couple of weeks before resuming his migration on October 20 and heading into Venezuela, back into Colombia, back into Venezuela and then into northern Brazil by November 3. Meanwhile, Artoo headed for a spot close to the Orinoco River right next door to Donovan's winter home. They were sometimes within seven miles of each other. Bergen made a big push south and ended up on the Rio Purus just south of the main trunk of the Amazon River in Brazil. He settled on a lovely oxbow deep in the rainforest for the winter. Artoo remained on his spot until late January and then surprised
us by resuming his migration. To our amazement, he headed straight for Bergen’s spot and settled within 90 miles of his brother’s location, close to the main Amazon trunk. Both of Art’s sons ended up making their winter homes at almost the exact same latitude as their dad.

Sadly, we lost contact with Bergen on February 13, 2014. There was no evidence of trouble . . . just no more signals from his PTT. Meanwhile, Artoo stayed safe as he explored the Rio Japura and Rio Solimões. He stayed in one tiny area for the next eight months and then moved again in October 2014 (perhaps displaced by a returning adult) and settled again on the Rio Japura. He moved short distances for the rest of that second winter and then started on his first northbound migration on March 31, 2015. He reached the coast of Venezuela on April 20, apparently dipped his toe and then turned around and retreated 260 miles. He headed north again on May 20 and made a nonstop 700-mile Caribbean crossing to Cuba. He made his way to the furthest western tip of Cuba and then tried to bypass Florida completely with an equally long crossing of the Gulf. He meandered up through Alabama, into Tennessee and reached Pennsylvania on June 27. He finally made it back to New Hampshire on July 24, 2015 and was within 22 miles of his natal nest. He then settled just over the border in Massachusetts. On September 1, he decided to start his second southbound migration. He made a quick journey down the classic “adult” route to southern Florida, then on September 18 headed out for the short crossing to Cuba. The last GPS point uploaded on September 18 was at 7:00 pm and he was nearly half way across, but the next group of points beginning at 10:00 am on September 19 indicated that sometime in the night, Artoo had landed on a boat. The slow moving vessel had taken him 140 miles north and now 25 miles off the Florida east coast. Landing on a vessel in the night is not too surprising (although never good), but why he would stay on the vessel throughout the next day is a mystery. The next PTT data upload three days later indicated that Artoo was floating off the coast of Florida and then we never heard from the PTT again.

The third chick we tagged in 2013 was named Weber. He was tagged on July 29 at a platform in the Hampton saltmarsh. Weber barely left the vicinity of the nest until September 6, when he decided to head south. He made an uneventful trip through Florida and reached Venezuela on September 28. His first stop there proved to be his last. He landed along a small river about 160 miles from the coast and the PTT stopped moving. We assumed he died. Strangely, we got a series of points uploaded between June and December of 2014 from the same location, although the last four points were half a mile from the September 2013 spot. The PTTs are powered by a tiny solar panel, so if that cell is suddenly exposed to the sun it can recharge the PTT. How the PTT moved a half mile is a mystery. The river did not look like a spot that could have sustained an Osprey for any length of time, so it’s unlikely that Weber actually survived into 2014, but we’ll never know!

### 2014

In 2014, we tagged two youngsters. Tilton was tagged on August 12 at Donovan’s nest, so is a brother of Jill and Chip.
who were tagged here (same parents) in 2012. He headed south on August 19 and settled down at Cape May by August 23. He stayed there for the next month. All seemed well, but the PTT stopped moving on September 24 and we assumed he died. An attempt was made to locate him and retrieve the PTT, but no remains were found. The PTT sent one low quality signal in March 2017 from the same spot.

Bridget was tagged on August 13 at the Bridgewater nest, so she is a daughter of Art and a sister to Artoo and Bergen. She headed south on August 20 and headed for Milton, CT where she settled on the Housatonic River. She was photographed there hanging out with other Ospreys. She stayed there until September 18, then headed south out over the Atlantic and flew nonstop for 26 hours arriving in Man-O-War Cay, Abaco, in the Bahamas. A couple of days later, she went to West Palm Beach in Florida and then settled at Vero Beach where she was photographed again, this time by New Hampshire photographer Libby Libbey (what are the chances?). This is where she decided to end her migration and she foraged around Vero Beach until January 31 when her signal stopped. Her last GPS points were close to a road and I suspect that she was hit by a vehicle.

2015

In 2015, we tagged three adult males and two juveniles. On May 19, we tagged the breeding male at the nest in New Hampton (where we tagged Saco in 2011). We named him Gundersen. On May 20, we tagged the breeding male at a nest in Groveton. We named him Wausau. On May 21, we tagged the breeding male at a nest in Seabrook Harbor. We named him Staddler.

Gundersen’s nest failed in early June (after four days of torrential rain). Although he was not raising chicks, he still stuck to his regular territory throughout the season. His nest is the nearest to Art’s nest to the north and Donovan’s nest to the southeast, so by doing what’s called kernel mapping, I was able to see how their territories overlapped (almost not at all). Gundersen headed south on September 7 and quickly made it to Cuba where he took a six-day break then headed over to Venezuela and settled along a nice-looking river just east of the city of Barrancas on October 4. He moved around more than adult males normally do in the winter (which exposes him to more risk) and we lost contact with him on January 12. His last points were near a major four-lane highway that crosses a river. He did not show up at his nest in April, so I assume he died in January.

Wausau’s nest also failed in 2015. I checked it on June 3 and all was well, but by June 24, there was no activity. Wausau remained close to his nest and defended his territory for the rest of the season and headed south on September 11. He followed the usual route and, after a short stopover in northern Colombia, he reached his winter home in the Vichada region of southern Colombia. He had a very uneventful winter there and headed north on March 18, 2016. After travelling 140 miles north, he turned around and flew back to his winter home again (maybe he forgot to forward the mail). He restarted on March 28. This is late for a returning male to depart and he did not get to his nest until April 19, by which time his mate already had a new male with her. I was able to get to his nest in time to watch him arrive back and see off the interloper. He and his mate quickly rekindled their partnership and started incubation, but when I observed the nest in early June, I found poor Wausau defending the nest from a very aggressive intruding female Osprey. He was trying to drive the interloper off while also trying to incubate the eggs. There was no sign of his mate (which was strange). After watching for a couple of hours and seeing poor Wausau trying to do it all by himself, I was concerned. His data over the next couple of days showed him on the nest (incubating) for long chunks of the day (much more than normal for a male). A check in late June showed no activity at the nest. I can only assume that something happened to his mate and without her he was not able to sit on the eggs and hunt and he had to abandon the effort. His data for the rest of the summer showed that he remained close to the nest. He began his southbound migration on September 4 and made it back to his winter home on October 5. He had a very uneventful winter but then on February 23, 2017, we lost contact. The last few points were perfectly normal and he was moving around, but then nothing. It turns out that this was a PTT failure because on June 26, 2017, I checked his nest and found Wausau (still wearing the PTT) close by with a fish. The 2017 nesting attempt failed. In 2018, the nest was used again but we didn’t get a look at the male. In 2019, a new nest was used nearby and the male did not have a PTT (or leg band). The female was also new (we had banded Wausau’s mate in 2015 and the 2019 female was unbanded).

Staddler was tagged on May 21, 2015. He and his mate
successfully raised one chick. He headed south on August 31. He reached his winter home on the Rio Tefé near the Rio Solimões in Amazonas, Brazil, on October 17. He was the model of a “smart winter Osprey” and barely moved outside a ¼ square mile territory on the Rio Tefé all winter. He headed north on March 18 and arrived back at his Seabrook nest on April 7 (he stopped to catch a fish just before he headed to the nest, always a good way to impress your mate). On July 18, 2016, I visited the nest and confirmed that he and his mate had two chicks. He headed south again on September 9 and made a textbook flight down to the Dominican Republic. His luck ran out on September 24 when he started his Caribbean crossing. He flew right into the path of a hurricane and by the end of the day was floating off the coast of Venezuela.

**Juliet** was tagged on August 11, 2015 in Tilton. She is one of Donovan’s chicks and sibling to Jill (2012), Chip (2012) and Tilton (2014). She left the nest area on September 3. She made a very “adult-like” migration along the classic route. She crossed the Caribbean from the Dominican Republic to Colombia on September 26, flying about 460 miles in 24 hours of continuous flying. Her PTT stopped sending signals on October 10 and I never heard from her again. I don’t know if she perished or the PTT failed.

**Lizzie** was tagged on August 12 at the Bridgewater nest. She is the daughter of Art and a sister to Artoo (tagged in 2013), Bergen (tagged in 2013) and Bridget (tagged in 2014). She left the nest area the day after we tagged her and quickly moved to Rhode Island where she “force-adopted” herself into a nest on a pole in Belcher Cove near the Narragansett Sound. A local photographer (Butch Lombardi) confirmed that she had indeed moved into a nest that had recently fledged chicks and was aggressively fending off the resident chicks and taking fish brought to the nest by the resident male. What a brilliant survival strategy! Although Osprey chicks in close nest clusters will often visit nests that aren’t theirs, this was the first time we had recorded it over such a large distance. Lizzie was seen at the Belcher Cove nest for almost two weeks, but then her signals on August 26 were all clustered in the same place next to a utility pole and I suspected the worst. Butch visited the area a few days later and found Lizzie’s body. He suspected that she had a dislocated wing and may have hit one of the many overhead wires – another sad end for a juvenile Osprey.

**Summary**

We wrapped up our tagging of New Hampshire Ospreys in 2015. We learned a lot, but at $4,000 per transmitter there was a limit to how many more PTTs it was prudent to deploy. The survival rate was alarmingly low, particularly in the juveniles, and we began to wonder if the transmitters were contributing to the high mortality. We knew from decades of banding studies that the mortality rate for Ospreys in their first year of life is calculated to be around 70%, already a very high number. Only one of the nine juveniles lived long enough to return to New Hampshire as a two-year-old. We also suspect that males, once they reach maturity, live shorter lives on average than females. A female in Scotland that reached the ripe old age of 27 went through four mates in her long life at her nest in Perthshire.

Because we wanted to learn about hunting territories, we only tagged males in the spring (the males do almost all of the hunting while the females stay at or very close to the nest all summer long). We learned that our adult males are very faithful both to their nesting site and to their winter home in South America. Kernel mapping revealed distinct territories in the Lakes Region population with very little overlap in hunting ranges of the males. We learned that the crossing of the Caribbean in the fall is a very dangerous journey because of hurricanes. We never lost any of our tagged Ospreys on this crossing in the spring. We learned that young Ospreys have to learn the route south. They make a lot of mistakes in their first few months on the wing. Adults showed very little variation in their migration routes and followed what we call the “established route” with uncanny consistency.

The whole project was a fascinating insight into the lives of these birds. All the nests that we used for tagging continue to be used by Ospreys and produce youngsters. We now know the trials and tribulations that these birds face throughout their lives.

More information with hundreds of maps illustrating each of the journeys is available at:

https://www.nhnature.org/programs/project_ospreytrack/osprey_maps.php

This page has not been updated since we ended the project in 2016, but by clicking on each of the yearly tabs, you can follow along.

The project was funded by Eversource Energy, the Jane B. Cook 1983 Charitable Trust, 3M, Squam Lakes Natural Science Center’s Innovative Project Fund, and Meredith Bay Colony Club.

**Publications Related to the Project**


The former Laconia State School campus has only a recent birding history, but a lengthy and sad human history. In 1901, legislation was passed to create the New Hampshire School for Feeble-minded Children and the facility opened in 1903 with its first 57 children. The goal was to segregate those with developmental disabilities from the general population as they were deemed “unfit” and possibly dangerous. Inevitably, institutionalized segregation resulted in the “warehousing” of the patients in deplorable conditions. Over the years, the population of “inmates” as they were called grew, especially in the 1920s when the eugenics movement flourished. By 1958, when sterilizations were ceased, 400 patients had undergone this procedure. A high count of over 1,100 residents was reached in 1970.

As a result of a federal lawsuit filed in 1978, the population was reduced until there weren’t enough patients to justify the facility. On January 31, 1991, the doors were locked for good. For an inside look at the dark history of this institution, see the 2010 documentary “Lost in Laconia” available on YouTube. In the 1980s, part of the campus was used as a minimum security state prison until 2009, as evidenced by the barbed wire around some of the buildings. At the top of the hill, are two houses behind curved fencing. Until 2021, these buildings housed those deemed mentally unfit to stand for criminal trial. Today, only the Lakes Region Mutual Aid dispatch center occupies the campus.

As of this writing, all 250 acres of the property are up for sale, lock, stock and barrel, as is. On a recent visit, I asked the worker who regularly patrols the grounds about the status of the property. He said he recently showed it to a prospective buyer, but it will be a while before there are any changes. We don’t know when that will be or what shape it will take, but whatever development comes here – an office park, workforce housing, high-end condominiums – the site will be altered and the birding will be different. What makes the birding so good now is that the entire property is like an unkempt yard with bushes and trees growing at random in a “messy” way. No doubt, the first thing a developer will do is “clean” it up. Worse, access could be restricted. If you want to enjoy the birding here, do so now before the bulldozers get here.

The first eBird report for this site is from April 9, 2020, surprisingly recently. I first discovered this area by accident on September 17, 2020. I parked in the upper parking lot of Ahern State Park and wandered up the trail that leads to the campus. I knew there was a Laconia State School but I didn’t know exactly where. As soon as I saw the decaying buildings, I knew where I was. Access to the campus is unrestricted except for the buildings due to asbestos and probably lead. You are likely to run into dog walkers but nobody else.

I use two entry points. The first is from the upper parking lot to Ahern State Park along the dirt access road. As this road has deteriorated, I now more often enter the main entrance road and turn left for the visitor parking area. Either way, you are free to wander the grounds wherever you like. One area I like in particular is the road that goes to the top of the hill where there is a water tower. Along both sides of the road there is a dense tangle of vegetation providing good habitat for American Redstarts and other warblers, including Mourning.

At the top of the hill, a small road leads to the tower. The cherry trees can be loaded...
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