

March 2022-Special Edition



TOP NATURE EXPERIENCES OF 2021: SHARING PERSONAL HIGHLIGHTS

As part of the celebration of our ninth year, we asked readers to tell us about their best nature experiences of 2021.

We deliberately chose the word “best” because the concept of “best” is personal and unique.

Read on to share the joy!

THANK YOU

to all who submitted their special experiences!



Joan Gallagher

“Plant it and they will come. In early spring I had three very old (over 100') pine trees removed from my back yard. One white pine was dead, and the other two loomed over the roof of my home. After having the stumps ground down, I planted six native shrubs in their place.



The prize shrub of the six turned out to be the Spicebush (*Lindera benzoin*). You can imagine my excitement when I found a Spicebush Swallowtail (*Papilio troilus*) caterpillar on my newly-planted Spicebush in July. I never did find the chrysalis.

Later that summer I did see a Spicebush Swallowtail butterfly in the vicinity of the newly-planted native shrubs.”

[Editor's note: Spicebush Swallowtails that emerge in early spring may produce caterpillars that pupate and emerge during summer. Butterflies emerging and flying later in the summer will generally lay eggs developing into caterpillars which will pupate and overwinter in chrysalis form. The adult butterfly emerges the following spring.]





Anne Greene

“I named a very tame wild rabbit ‘Robert’ and then realized the name had to change to ‘Roberta.’ She decided her burrow would be best in the nearby rock garden.”







Wendy Howes

“One of the most interesting wildlife encounters I’ve ever had—and I probably won’t ever experience it again—was in mid-June. I had no camera with me, of course. But even if I had, I wouldn’t have had time to take a picture. I can only offer this description:

I was hiking one of the trails accessed by Quabbin Gate 45 in Hardwick and decided to sit down for a break near one of the many beaver-maintained wetlands. Suddenly I heard some low noises, a sort of combined whimpering/grunting sound, approaching from behind an old rock wall that was obscuring my view. I knew there was vegetated shoreline behind the rock pile, and I could tell that whatever was making the sound was low to the ground. It quickly came closer.

I barely had time to react when an adult mink—presumably the mother—emerged through a break in the rocks, with six pups that clustered around her so closely they seemed to be attached to her body. It was like viewing a synchronized, fast-moving, furry, sinuous, ‘magic carpet.’ The close-knit family slid into the shallow

water just 10 feet in front of me and then continued up and over a section of the muddy beaver dam, still pressed together and moving almost as one animal.

It was extraordinary to witness an intimate family group of wild creatures at such close range. Because I seemingly wasn't noticed, the animals' behavior was natural and unhurried, so I had the chance to savor the moment. It was probably for the best that I had no camera and made no moves. Now a genuine image of a mink family is saved in my memory."



Photo by Eli Brager 2010

"To see how juvenile mink look and behave, you can view this video. The pups in this video are more developed than the ones I saw, though."

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L4lAoabCu2g>



DON & PEG LOCKE

[Editor's note: Don and Peg hiked Mt. Wachusett nearly every day in 2021. A memorable experience for them was encountering a mystery, something they hadn't seen on numerous previous hikes.]



“On the mountain's southeast side, where the spring ephemerals bloom, beside a hiking trail, on July 4th, in an area of about 12 inches in diameter, there was a scattering of red ‘buds.’ [See photo] Were they buds coming up? Were they something dropped by hikers?”

[Editor's note: We sought the help of the Club's go-to naturalist, Joe Choiniere. Joe promptly replied that his best guess would be Dutchman's breeches bulblets from which mature plants eventually emerge. Their variable size is consistent with what is noticed in the photo. These bulblets are found at shallow soil depths, and they're often exposed by small rodents. Joe pointed out that undisturbed bulblets, or corms, are clustered in clumps, but rodents take them apart and spread them about, seemingly in searching for the largest ones. Joe noted that the bulblets he'd found in the past were usually less deep-red but rather pink in color.



Dutchman's breeches (*Dicentra cucullaria*) is one of the specialty spring ephemerals that occurs at Mt. Wachusett. Armed with a suggestion and search term, we were able to locate similar images on the web. Mystery solved!

The plant flowers at this Mt. Wachusett site in May, so by July the corms are dormant. Through fall and winter they grow and store energy for the following spring. If separated from the main corm, smaller bulblets will take 3-4 years to mature and produce blooms. Additional plants are also produced by seed dispersed by ants, but seeds also take 3-4 years to produce mature plants. Presumably the activity of rodents acts to help with dispersal and formation of new plants.]



Dutchman's breeches at Mt. Wachusett, spring 2021. Photo by Doug Wipf



JIM MORELLY

“I wanted more from camera trapping than just setting out trail cameras capturing pictures of random wildlife. Bears fascinate me! I enjoy researching, reading and learning all I can about black bears. To further expand on learning, I came up with this idea of coordinating my own 2021 anecdotal bear project with an expectation it might provide me firsthand information about bears. I must say, what a lesson!”

Jim's excellent observations and photos are here:

[**JIM'S ANECDOTAL BEAR STUDY**](#)

Editor's note: Scientists sometimes use the terms “anecdotal” or “ancillary observation” to describe things they or others have observed in nature that are not part of scientific testing. A simple example might be one in which a person makes repeated observations of certain behaviors or patterns many times. Assumptions can be made, although without further examination there isn't scientific certainty. Nevertheless, gathering anecdotal information and evidence is a great way to gain understanding of the nature around us.



TED PURCELL

“The last week of 2021 I had the opportunity to be with a total stranger, new to birding, while he experienced seeing a life bird.

It was school vacation week, and I went to try and see the Rough-Legged Hawk at Worcester Airport as part of an errand to Oxford. It was extremely foggy, so I went and ran an errand, and stopped on the way back. The fog had lifted a little and I saw a raptor in the distance. I used my binoculars and saw it was the Rough-Legged Hawk. Several people were hanging around and I pointed it out to them. A couple of them came over and we all confirmed it was the Rough-Legged Hawk and not a Northern Harrier.



One observer with a camera went off to try and get a closer photo. The other person stayed, and we watched the hawk for 10 minutes or so. He told me he was new to birding. Rough-legged Hawk was a life bird for him and he had come from Concord to see it. He was very excited about being able to catch up with the hawk. We chatted for a bit, and I gave him directions to Route 56 where he might get a better view.

Our encounter brought home to me the exhilaration of traveling to see a new bird and the simple pleasure of seeing a life bird. It also reminded me of how seeing a bird normally found hundreds or thousands of miles away can be a special experience.”

Rough-legged Hawk by Barry Van Dusen



BILL PLATENIK

“My nature activities have been limited to local adventures, one of which was monitoring an Osprey nest in Warren for the second year. I spent time at the nest from April until the end of August 2021, visiting weekly or more often, and watched the pair of Osprey mate and raise their two young.

On a day in late April I was watching one Osprey sitting down in the bowl of the nest. I heard an Osprey call and then noticed an adult Bald Eagle fly within 100 feet of the nest. I soon realized that the eagle was chasing a second Osprey that was carrying a fish. The bird in the nest immediately left the nest and flew towards the eagle and the other Osprey, its mate. Eventually I noticed a fish in the talons of the returning Osprey.

The eagle and both Ospreys flew around the pond near the nest for about 5 minutes. I noticed a second eagle flying over the far end of the pond several hundred yards away. The second eagle, an immature individual in its third or fourth year, never approached the nest or the fish-bearing Osprey.



*A fish is just visible below the Osprey's right wing.
The eagle never got very close to the nest. It was more interested in trying to steal a fish*



While observing the Osprey nest the first week of August I was treated to aerial displays by the juveniles. I'm not sure what the birds were doing. Bathing? Swimming? Fishing? Playing? Once I noticed one of the juveniles dragging its feet in the water.

[Editor's note: The young birds were probably practicing maneuvers and skills they would need in order to become good at catching fish.]



One juvenile took off from its perch near the edge of the pond and dove right into the water. It launched off its perch about 30 feet above the ground and glided about 50 feet and into the pond. Splash! I also saw a bird dive into the water from the top of a dead stump about 5 feet high; it launched off the stump and landed in the water 20 feet away.



Juvenile Osprey floating!

After floating on the surface of the pond with its wing extended and tail feathers fanned out for about a minute, the young bird pulled itself out of the water and took off.

Quite a show!”

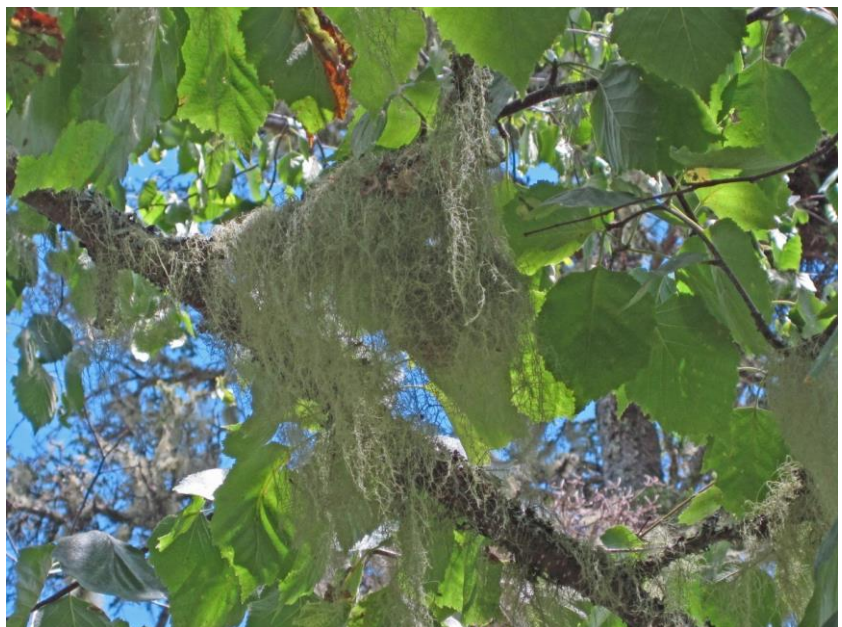


Lift-off!



BARRY VAN DUSEN

“Perhaps my most memorable nature experience of 2021 occurred while I was part of the teaching team at **Hog Island Audubon Camp** in Bremen, Maine. Northern Parulas were everywhere on the island during the camp session in June – I never saw so many of these birds in one place! There’s lots of ‘old man’s beard’ lichen draping the branches of the spruces and birches on the island, and one camper noticed a particularly dense clump of moss that we confirmed to be a parula nest. We briefly set up a step-ladder to get a better look. The nest had the effect of a tennis ball stuck in a particularly dense clump of moss, with the nest opening well-concealed by birch leaves and moss near the top. I had heard that parulas construct their nests from the moss, so it was NEAT to see an actual nest!”





ALAN RAWLE

“Obviously, it’s hard to have only one memorable nature event in a year, but a high contender was the viewing of a Sandhill Crane family over about 6 months (June – November) in 2021 in my immediate home ‘patch.’ For me, the event was increased in emotional importance as it was in contrast to the sad events of 2020 when the cranes nested, but the two chicks disappeared not long after hatching.



July 4, 2021

In 2021 the same Sandhill Crane pair successfully raised two young. I watched several times a week as the chicks, also called colts, grew from small, fluffy young in June all the way through their trial flights, gliding, and finally full-fledged flight. I followed them with bated breath as they walked, bathed, shared (and didn’t share) food, and saw them grow almost as large as their parents. I was anxious when either one or both of the colts weren’t immediately obvious.

A few times I observed the adults and one colt ‘guide in’ the apparently more slowly-developing second colt. I successfully tracked various grazing places in the locality, but this got increasingly more difficult after the colts were able to fly. By October and culminating in November I couldn’t locate their precise morning and afternoon locations, but with luck and perseverance I found where the family was flying overhead at sundown, on the way to an unknown night roost. I said goodbye to them on November 15th, 2021 but hope to welcome them back in 2022.”



July 28, 2021



August 1, 2021



August 10, 2021



DOUG WIPF

“Looking back over the year, I realized that plenty of satisfaction came from small but significant experiences. For instance, 2021 marked five years since we moved to our home in Rutland, and when Eastern Bluebirds finally showed up at our feeders!



It was February 19, and up to 5 individuals visited most every day. The last were seen April 1. I would still see and hear them in the neighborhood, but for only a few more weeks.

No more bluebird observations on the property until four arrived December 20 and spent some time at the feeders. Bluebirds have revisited a few times since; perhaps they will soon resume daily visits.

Bluebirds figured in another way during the summer. I was able to help the WRNC monitor nest boxes in the Prison Camp area of Rutland State Park. This was part of a larger project. We were particularly interested in Eastern Bluebird and Tree Swallow nesting attempts, as well as keeping an eye on Bobolinks in the fields. I hope to continue checking that area of the park this summer. Small events; but good ones.”



THE END