

## APRIL 15-30, 2015 NATURAL HISTORY NOTES FOR EASTVIEW

By Dick Harlow



**Pileated Woodpecker, (M) *Dryocopus pileatus*** Photo © Dick Harlow

Notice in the image of a Pileated Woodpecker that this individual has a red moustache. Both sexes of this species look the same except for that one characteristic which signifies a male.

### **BIRDING AND BIRD IDENTIFICATION**

Birding in America is a sport, a past time, a hobby or a competitive activity. I have been birding for 66 years, and appreciate all the various aspects that birding offers in our society. But, as a naturalist, I find it just downright enjoyable to be outside and to know what I am looking at. I'm sure there are people who just enjoy birds for birds' sake rather than to try and identify each one that they see. "Different strokes for different folks."

My advice to anyone who wants to know the 200+ species you can see in Vermont is to take the easy route first. Start with the common birds that you already know and work from there. For example: American Robin, the robin red-breast you learned as a child, Northern Cardinal, that all red bird that comes to your bird feeder, American Goldfinch, that yellow bird with black wings, the Red-winged Blackbird, the blackbird with the red shoulder. These are birds you have seen, ones you are already familiar with, and you can work from that base of information. Make sure you have a good up-to-date field guide: Peterson's Field Guides, Eastern Birds by Roger Tory Peterson, The Sibley Field Guide to Birds of Eastern North America by David Allen Sibley, or the National Geographic Field Guide to the Birds of North America. Once you have invested in a

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field guide, make sure you use it. In a year you will want a new one because the present one is so worn!

If you want to learn about birds beyond the common feeder birds and local ones you know, you need to consider good binoculars. No, not the real expensive kind, but good inexpensive binoculars can be found that don't break the bank. Remember, binoculars can be used to look at butterflies and other things besides birds. You will be surprised at how helpful binoculars will be when the trees leaf out and you want to try and identify that pretty little bird in the tree moving among the leaves.

For interested beginners, looking at all the birds in the field guide can be daunting. All those birds of either the east or all of North America can be frustrating. But, don't despair, remember you are starting from what you know, using that information as your base and spreading out from that base with birds that are in our area. Don't worry at this time about birds found down South or out West, work on birds you see around here in the East, such as the Northern Cardinal, House Sparrow, Mockingbird, Common Grackle, Northern Flicker, Eastern Bluebird, Tree Swallow, etc.



A) ? Photo © Dick Harlow

I have added four pictures for you to identify using your field guide. The answers will be at the end of the notes.

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Another Image of (A) Photo © Dick Harlow

The first picture (A) is a good example, for it shows a field mark that will give you a good idea what you are looking at. And it will give an example of obstructions you might experience. Notice the large brown dot or blob in the center of the chest, the bold striping above the dot and generally flecked to whitish belly. Notice the mustache on either side of the bill. If you were to look this up in a field guide that is the characteristic you want to focus on.



B) ? Photo © Dick Harlow

First, I apologize for the blurry picture; it was taken through our dining room window. This fellow male or female is down so close to the ground I almost couldn't see it. At least the camera caught the yellow supraloral.

This bird is a migrant, a grassland bird. We have all three of these birds here at EastView at different times of the year. This image looks similar to the one above, but notice the yellow in front of the eye connecting to the bill. When there is color, such as white, yellow, black, etc., which occupies the space just above the eye, is called the supercillium and in front of the eye, that area is called the supraloral. This yellow supercillium and/or supraloral distinguish this bird. Its behavior is also different. This bird tends to be flighty or slink or run really fast as it moves from place to place, not like the much more open and vociferous (A).

But where do I begin with these birds? What would I look under? The first bird is generally brown and rust on its back and sides. Many times you will see birds in trees and be looking at the underside of the bird; but you will also see it fly, hop, move from branch to branch, tree to tree or tree to ground. You would also see, as mentioned, that this bird has shades of brown on

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its back. The adage that many birders refer to when talking about these birds is "those little brown jobs." So, you would go to the field guide and flip through the pictures until you see a group of birds fitting the general description of the bird you are looking at. True, this takes time and you are trying to make a decision about the bird you are looking at before the bird flies away and before you have time to decide on its identification. Key here is to look for standout characters on the bird such as, large central dot on chest, brown striping around and above the dark brown blob on the chest, dark brown mustache, rufous and brown back, yellow supercillium, etc. Find what you think is the bird in the field guide, and if the bird has flown, then keep those characteristics in your head while you search with your binoculars for another similar looking bird. If you are so inclined you could make a sketch with notes that will help later when you are at ease with your field guide. Or, you could carry a mini recorder and record the identifying characters. If you are a photographer, take pictures. Many times during the breeding season the male of the species will "T" up, meaning hop or fly to the top of a shrub or branch and sing. This singing lets other males of the species know that this singing male thinks that this is his territory.

Once you've mastered the birds in our area, then you can go beyond local birds. You may want to expand your knowledge and understanding of the migrating birds that visit us during the spring and fall and those that stay with us during the summer. You will need those binoculars if you want to expand your visual capacity beyond checking bird feeders to enjoy birds.

If you try to stay within the confines of EastView, remember that the reported number of species seen on or from EastView property is now 93 as of this writing. You already probably know a dozen or so more birds. So, it is well within your ability to know by sight all the species recorded here at EastView.



C) ? Photo © Dick Harlow

This fellow (C) is a migrant. Look at the head, very characteristic; yes it is brown on the back has 2 wing bars, but the head is the striking characteristic of this species. This species will move through our area in the fall and spring. It will fly through our area, stopping for a few days to a week or so to feed as it moves to less encumbered fall feeding areas. If it has a successful winter it will then move back through our area, stop here to refuel on its way back to its breeding grounds in northern Canada.

EastView is situated in an open area, with relatively young planted trees, surrounded by fields, meadows, and freshwater marsh grasses. Birds that like this type of habitat will come, investigate, and if they find food will stay for awhile, but there will not be as many or diverse species as those birds that like shrub land or woodland habitats.

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Because EastView is situated in an open area with minimal trees and the ones that are planted here have low branches rather than high towering ones. This makes it easier to view birds that otherwise could be very difficult to see clearly. We don't have a large variety of species in the summer, which is a good thing because it allows you to learn what birds are here, slowly and persistently while developing your confidence in identification.

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### Bird's-foot-trefoil



**Bird's-foot-trefoil, *Lotus corniculatus***

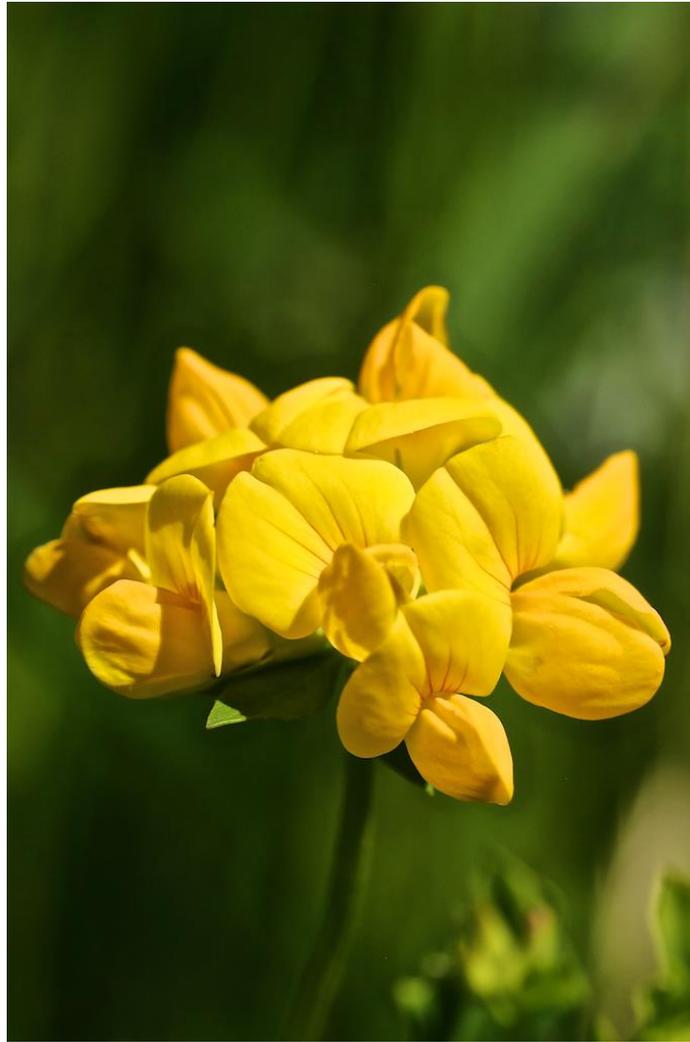
Photo © Dick Harlow

This deep-rooted plant is an agricultural perennial and is planted with other legumes, clovers and grass seed. Agriculture has used it as a food plant in pastures, and for hay and silage. It will grow in good and poor soils, one of the reasons, I'm sure, that it was mixed with grass and clover for quick germination and sediment stabilization in barren or new soil areas after new construction.

Birds-foot-trefoil as feed for livestock, except horses, is considered better than alfalfa and is also considered to give a high nutrition value to hay, silage and pasture. These dark yellow, pea-like flowers you see growing low amongst the clover and grass in our uncut fields and lawns is another introduced species of the pea family. Originally from the grasslands of Europe, Asia and Africa, it was brought to this country as a possible pasture plant for cattle fodder along with clover.

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**Bird's-foot-trefoil flowers, *Lotus corniculatus***

Photo © Dick Harlow

The resulting seedpods on the stalk are where this plant gets its name. This plant has five leaflets that make up each set of leaves. However, three (trefoil) leaflets stand out from the other two; and the seedpods, as they appear on the stalk below the leaves look like a birds foot.

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**NOTE:**

- A) This April has been difficult for man and beast! It has been especially difficult for birds to get a head start on finding food, nest building and laying eggs. Even though some raptors have already laid eggs and are incubating regardless of weather, migrant birds and warm weather nesters have a difficult time when it is cold and the food supply is scarce. Some people have estimated that Vermont is approximately one, two or more weeks behind the normal growing season. I'm sure once the warm weather arrives everything will catch-up to where plants and their flowers are supposed to be. Until then, you and I need to be patient and deal with this early spring-like weather.
- B) Deb Venman has brought to my attention that there is in fact a common name for *Carex crinita* according to Britton and Brown in *An Illustrated Flora of the Northern United States and Canada*. That name is Fringed Sedge. Thanks Deb!

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## MAMMAL SIGHTINGS

- White-tailed Deer – 3
- Muskrat – 2
- Meadow Vole – 1
- Deer Mouse - 2

## ANSWERS to Pictures:

- A) Song Sparrow
- B) Savannah Sparrow
- C) White-crowned Sparrow

## Weather Tidbits

All Measurements taken at solar noon (1130 EDT).

### APRIL PRECIPITATION

**APRIL 2015 Total Precipitation: 57.4 mm or 2.3 inches**

*Precipitation includes rain and snow melt.*

**Snow Days: 3**

**Snowfall for APRIL 2015: 120 mm or 4.8 inches**

**APRIL Overcast Days: 16**

### APRIL WIND

**Highest wind gust: 35 MPH, APRIL 2nd Direction: North**

**Average Wind speed for APRIL 2015: 4.1 mph,**

**Dominate Wind Direction: North**

**Days w/wind gusts 20-30 MPH: 25 = 83%**

**Days w/wind gusts >30 MPH: 5 = 17%**

### APRIL TEMPERATURE

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**Mean Temp: 6.9 C<sup>0</sup> 44.8 °F**

**High Temp: 23.4 C<sup>0</sup> 74.1 °F**

**Low Temp: -7.8 C<sup>0</sup> 18.0 °F**

**APRIL DAY NUMBERS FOR:**

**Max. Temp: 0.0 C<sup>0</sup>/32°F: 0 days**

**Min. Temp: 0.0 C<sup>0</sup>/32°F: 8 days**

**Min. Temp: -18 C<sup>0</sup>/-0.4F: 0 days**