

# The Overlook

Summer 2020

[www.FINWR.org](http://www.FINWR.org)

Banner Photo (Habitat-2nd Place) by Evelyn Meadows

## Mustelid Encounter

by Gerry Rising

As you grow older you accumulate experiences, some of them quite rare. And the added years increases your realization just how rare a specific experience can be. A few weeks ago I had an unexpected woodland encounter with a mustelid that belongs well up on my personal list for how unexpected it was.

But first some background. Mustelids are carnivorous (meat-eating) animals of the weasel family. Over my lifetime I have seen only a few of them: my only weasel an ermine, about which I wrote in an earlier column, a pine marten in the Adirondacks, perhaps a half dozen otters encountered on Canadian canoe trips, and one mink along a Southern Tier stream. I've never seen a fisher.

For that reason I was surprised and delighted to come upon a tiny member of this family on a woodland walk. I was "atlasing," that is, seeking to record nesting birds for the third New York State Ornithological Association Breeding Bird Atlas, a state project I described in the last issue. I had stopped to record two singing birds, a [veery](#) and a [scarlet tanager](#), and, when I looked up, I found myself captivated by the bright eyes of a little black animal only about ten feet away from me. Its six-inch body was coiled around a dead tree snag perhaps three feet above my eye level.

Black indeed. Partly because I did not know what species it was, I carefully noted its characteristics. Its entire body including its tail was black except for a tiny white bib. Its eyes signaled a combination of fear and aggression, but these extremes were moderated by its cute ears facing me like round TV signal receivers.

When after several minutes, I finally conceded to the little winner of the staring contest and moved on, it remained just as still as when I first saw it, its eyes following me down the trail. No more than a dozen yard on I realized that I could have photographed it with my cell phone and turned back, but it was gone.

What species was it? It was certainly weasel-sized, but in summer ermine and long-tailed weasel coats are brown with whitish bellies. I am convinced that my little friend was a baby mink.



"American Mink" by Pdreijnders – Own work. Licensed under Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 3.0 via Wikimedia Commons

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## FINWR Board of Directors

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Thomas Roster  
*Refuge Manager*  
Paul Hess  
*Wildlife Biologist*  
Mike Senske  
*Maintenance Worker*  
Kate Brenner  
*Wildlife Refuge Specialist*  
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### Refuge Contact Info

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### Overlook Newsletter

is provided 4 times per year.  
**Article submissions for each newsletter are the second Friday of:**  
\* **January (Winter)**  
\* **May (Spring)**  
\* **August (Summer)**  
\* **October (Fall)**

## President's Message

In this year's summer *Overlook* issue, you will read how despite the COVID-19 pandemic, the Friends of Iroquois are coordinating with the dedicated Iroquois staff members Tom, Paul, Kate, Sasha, Mike, Eric, Jessika and Brian and Fisheries Outreach staff with whom we work closely.

The Friends of Iroquois Website is now featuring interesting weekly articles by Friends members for your reading pleasure. Are you an aspiring writer who enjoys Iroquois in a way you would like to share with our membership? Please let us know! We invite guest writers to join us by contacting us at [writers@finwr.org](mailto:writers@finwr.org)

In coordination with the Refuge staff, we recently made the decision to forego an autumn *Spring Into Nature*. Even though many of the high-quality *Iroquois Observations* programs we planned for 2020 have to be shelved until next year, some IO activities will take place, so check back with our online presence often. Because it is a special year (our 20<sup>th</sup>) for *Iroquois Observations*, we had attendance sticker cards designed and planned special year-end prizes for participants who attended the greatest number of 2020 IO activities. Never fear, we will carry over those plans to 2021!

Our 2020 *Iroquois NWR Amateur Photo Contest* is still happening. The **deadline is August 31**. Entries to this contest will be judged online by our Board of Directors and selected INWR staff. Winners will be announced at our annual meeting in November and winning photos will be featured at [www.FINWR.org](http://www.FINWR.org). You can currently see last year's winners here. <https://finwr.org/past-photo-contests/>

Reflect on the Refuge from your viewpoint photographically and send in your favorite Iroquois photos! There are three categories including young photographers. (To be sure your entry was taken on the refuge, check the INWR website map.) Submission information is online at our website. Photos from all seasons are welcome, and remember, August 31 is right around the corner!

**Please follow COVID -19 safety recommendations posted while using trails so that everyone stays well.**

Best wishes,

*Celeste Morien*  
FINWR President



While we know you will continue to remember us with your generous donations, we encourage you to use **Amazon Smile**. The Amazon Smile website donates 0.5% of the price of your eligible purchases to the charitable organization of your choice when you shop securely at <https://smile.amazon.com/>. **Every 0.5% counts! That means we receive \$1 for every \$200 spent.**

### Support the Friends of Iroquois National Wildlife Refuge, Inc. in 2020 Membership Levels:

Family	\$25.00	Please send contribution to:
Raccoon	\$50.00	Friends of Iroquois National Wildlife Refuge, Inc.
Otter/Red Fox	\$75.00	1101 Casey Road
Bluebird	\$100.00	Basom, NY 14013
Heron	\$200.00	We can use your volunteer time also!!
Bald Eagle	\$500.00	
Double Eagle	\$1,000.00	Contributions are tax deductible

# Meeting The Staff Virtually At Iroquois NWR

Staff at Iroquois NWR decided (some to their great dismay) a great way to stay connected with the public was to introduce ourselves to them. Interns and staff, new and old, created videos describing what they do at the refuge, how long they've worked there, why they love it, and some described how they've been passing the time during quarantine. The videos were placed on Facebook weekly for #StaffSaturday. The videos have had 4K minutes of view time since being posted. You can see them all on our Facebook page @IroquoisNationalWildlifeRefuge or by clicking this link:\

<https://www.facebook.com/watch/IroquoisNationalWildlifeRefuge/320457342256478/>



Meet the Staff - Tom Roster ...  
a week ago · 435 Views  
24



Meet the Staff - Kate Brenner ...  
2 weeks ago · 1.3K Views  
52



Meet the Staff - Mike Senske ...  
3 weeks ago · 631 Views  
40



Meet the Staff - Paul Hess ...  
5 weeks ago · 2.2K Views  
68



Meet the Staff - Jessika Bulera ...  
6 weeks ago · 395 Views  
Josh Lipnicky and 13 others



Meet the Staff - Eric Schaertl ...  
7 weeks ago · 337 Views  
13



Meet The Staff - Sasha Azeez ...  
8 weeks ago · 229 Views  
7



Meet The Staff - Brian Capron ...  
9 weeks ago · 298 Views  
14

Photo Caption: Screen shot of the Meet the Staff videos on Iroquois NWR's Facebook page (Kate Brenner, USFWS).

## A Swallow Hollow Experience

Swallow Hollow Trail has seen a huge jump in visitation since the pandemic. This can make the trail crowded at times and discourages people from stopping. The team at Iroquois National Wildlife Refuge created a virtual tour of the trail through ArcGIS StoryMaps that was released to the public on May 19, 2020 in honor of the refuge's birthday (62 years young). It's a photo-centric trip around Swallow Hollow Trail that discusses a brief history, the different habitats you'll encounter, and some of the species within those habitats which visitors may see along the way.

You can experience it here: <https://storymaps.arcgis.com/stories/c73071ebfc29468191011c6e5b29241c>



*Photo caption: A screenshot of the opening of A Swallow Hollow Experience (Kate Brenner, USFWS)*

## Virtual Juneteenth Festival

The Juneteenth Festival is a celebration of freedom and emancipation. NY State is currently allowing gatherings of 25 people or less, so this year's **Juneteenth of Buffalo Festival** was celebrated virtually on June 19<sup>th</sup>. HAF Intern Sasha Azeez drafted a video outline, and the INWR staff collectively created a video for the festival's Agricultural Pavilion. The Agricultural Pavilion is a place for African American communities to learn about and lift up the African American contributions and innovations in agriculture, nature, and conservation. In Iroquois NWR's Juneteenth video staff discussed the refuge, the Buffalo Urban Partnership, and the importance of Juneteenth.

## Latino Conservation Week 2020

**Latino Conservation Week** (July 18-26, 2020) is an annual celebration created by the **Hispanic Access Foundation** (HAF). During Latino Conservation Week, events and activities throughout the country are held to promote conservation efforts and provide an opportunity for Latinos to show their support for conservation activities. This year HAF Intern, Sasha Azeez, conducted a virtual soap making class that tied in conservation and sustainability. Twenty people signed up to participate, and had soap making supplies shipped to their front door. This virtual event took place on July 25th from 1-2 pm. (POC: Sasha Azeez)



*Photo caption: The Camacho family participating in the Latino Conservation Week workshop (Kelly Camacho).*

## Pollywogs: A Cool Name For Tadpoles

Although Iroquois NWR didn't have the opportunity to do egg mass surveys this year, there was still value in assessing the dip net survey results of our vernal pools. During the first two weeks of June, staff visited 17 pools, four of which were already dry, in both grassland and forested habitat around the refuge. Weather conditions, pool turbidity, pH, water temperature, vegetation, and number of wood frog and blue salamander (Jeffersonian complex) larvae found was documented for each pool. This year we were lucky enough to see some gray treefrog tadpoles or pollywogs. Very Cool!



Photo Caption: Gray treefrogs, wood frogs, and blue salamander found during dip net surveys (Kate Brenner, USFWS)

## Mapping Phragmites On Land And Water

During the summer of 2019, herbicides were deployed to snuff out pockets of ever-virulent *Phragmites australis* as part of the refuge's effort to combat the spread of invasive species. The follow-up work being conducted this summer involves refuge staff using GPS to map the destroyed stands and estimate their size and density. Later in the summer, staff will return to these treated locations and note the size and density of any new *Phragmites* stands, and thus estimate the efficacy of one year of herbicide treatment against *Phragmites australis*.

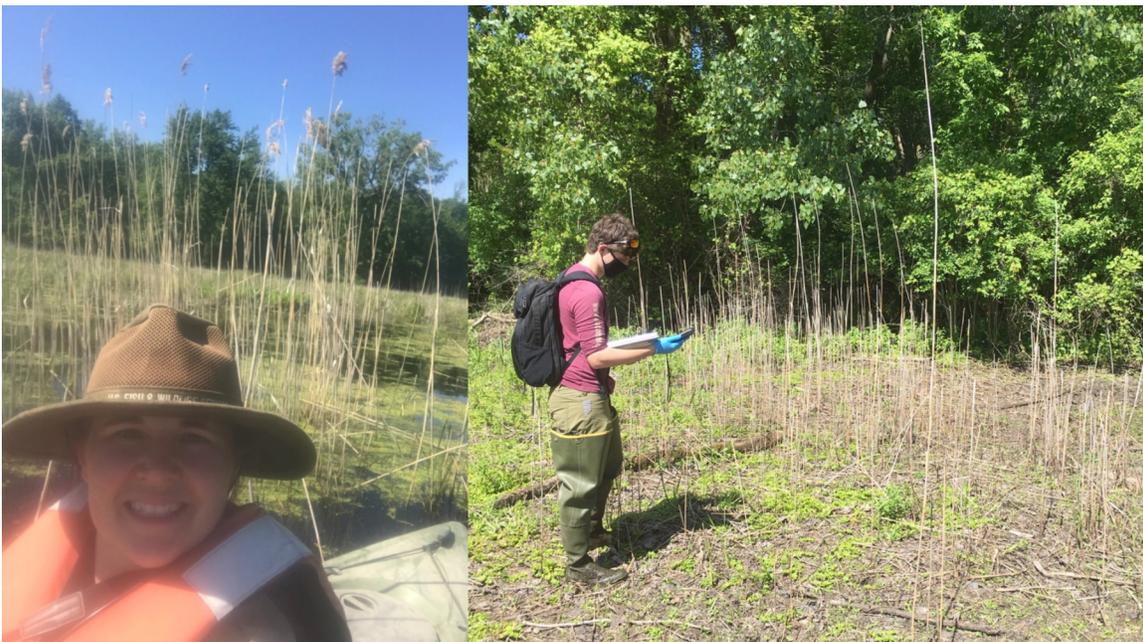


Photo Caption: Wildlife Refuge Specialist Kate Brenner (left) and American Conservation Experience Biological Science Intern Brian Capron (right) map Phragmites. (left: Kate Brenner, USFWS; right: photo by Paul Hess, USFWS).

## Lending A Hand To Count A State Endangered Species



Every three years the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC) counts nesting black terns wherever they breed in the State. In June, Refuge staff assisted DEC staff with the count on their management area. Fifty-eight terns were counted, which is lower than the previous survey, but near the long-term average. Although they are colonial nesters, this year the terns were spread across several different wetlands and it's possible that we missed some of the birds during the survey. The results show that black terns continue to successfully nest in the complex and the breeding population in the area remains stable.

*Photo Caption: Black Tern Feeding Chick (Marie Reed)*

## Buffalo Urban Wildlife Refuge Partnership Green Team And Invasive Species

On July 29th HAF intern Sasha Azeez, Visitor Services Specialist Eric Schaertl, and Refuge Manager Tom Roster greeted 15 students from Groundworks Buffalo's Green team. The students started the day off by learning about purple martins from volunteer Carl Zenger. This was followed by an invasive species presentation by HAF intern Sasha Azeez. Then the students were split into two groups, with one group led by HAF intern Sasha Azeez to remove invasive honeysuckle, and the other group led by Visitor Services Specialist Eric Schaertl and volunteer Dave Shepherd on a species identification walk on Iroquois' HQ trail. They then swapped activities towards the middle of the day. At the end of their time at Iroquois the green team had learned much about the effects of invasive species.

*Photo caption: The senior green team learning on an identification walk with volunteer Dave Shepherd (Eric Schaertl, USFWS)*

*For more info:*

<https://www.fws.gov/urban/wildlifeRefuges.php>



## Sorting Out Our Waterbird Nests

For decades, the refuge's waterbird nesting colony consisted of only great blue heron nests. Nest counts were conducted in the winter when they were easier to see and all nests were assumed to be from herons. Starting in 2019, refuge staff began an annual summer nest survey to determine exactly what species were nesting in the colony and which were most abundant. This year's survey was completed on 29 JUN 20. The data show that great blue herons occupy about 45% of nests, egrets about 15%, cormorants 10%. In both years a single black-crowned night-heron nest has been counted. Several nests are unoccupied or unattended during the survey and they make up the additional 30% of nests. It's encouraging to see these species expanding their nesting range onto the refuge and turning the waterbird colony into an avian melting pot.



*Photo Caption: Black-crowned night-heron in the marsh (Kathy Robinson)*

## Cavity Nesting Birds At Iroquois 2020

*by Carl Zenger*

The cavity nesting bird season is still underway at Iroquois NWR. The **Tree Swallows** are about done but the **Purple Martins** are still feeding young and the **Bluebirds** are still laying eggs. This season has been the most unusual of any I have had in the 20 years that I have been here. First we had the lockdown due to the Covid 19 virus. Fortunately we got all the bluebird boxes repaired and ready for use before the lockdown on March 19<sup>th</sup>. We also put up all the purple martin gourds and houses ahead of time to be ready if and when a lockdown did happen. This left us in a good position to be ready for the birds when they returned from their migration. This worked out really well as we didn't return until June 15 to monitor the cavities and gourds. We found many non-native species had moved in and displaced our native birds from nesting. We also found nests where bluebirds and tree swallows had nested and apparently been successful. The purple martins were just starting to nest so we were able to track and monitor them during their complete cycle.

We have had some weather events that impacted the birds. First in May we had 2 weeks of cold wet weather. This affected the bluebirds the most and we found several dead chicks in abandon nests. There was some impact on the tree swallows as some dead young and abandon eggs were found. The martins have had to struggle through the hottest July on record. This caused several of the young to jump from the nests prematurely. By doing this they would not survive.

Overall we are going to have a fairly good year. In the next newsletter I will summarize the final results of this year and let you know how it all turned out. Let's hope that the next few weeks are kind to the birds and they can successfully raise the remaining young and get them off to their wintering areas.

# ANTS SOCIAL DISTANCE?

by Dorothy Rapp



One early morning at the end of July I decided to explore the handicap trail leading from the Refuge Headquarters. I wanted to see what a young person or someone at wheelchair or stroller height would notice. Eight in the morning outdoors on this trail brings the eternal optimism of a fresh new day wide open to the skies. Walk ten feet and you will have joined a young cotton tail and seen a dozen or more plants and animals within arms reach and grasses taller than myself, with spectacular arrays of vibrating seeds. A monarch butterfly landed on a milkweed so I checked other milkweeds along the path - no monarchs but a commonwealth of animals hosted by this plant

- the eponymous milkweed bugs [large] , japanese beetles, dog bane beetles, snails, slugs, dew-spangled spider webs, frog hoppers and then, the pest-of-honor, yellow oleander aphids with their symbiotic ants.

These herding ants “milk” the aphids for their excreted honeydew and return the favor by grooming the aphids of parasites and discouraging their predators. Chemicals on ants feet keep the aphids subdued during their ministrations. Some ants carry off aphid eggs for the winter ready to start a new aphid herd next season. What really caught my attention was the number of ants scurrying over leaves, stems or pods and I thought of a recent article describing social distancing in infected ants; no social distancing here! However, this is not where functional distancing might happen. The study showed that experimental fungal infection of forager *Lasius niger* [aka garden ant] led to a rapid and strategic social distancing. The foragers self-isolated, spending more time away from the colony and nurse ants developed risk-averse behavior, moving their brood further into the nest. Other studies showed that there is increased interaction among cliques - foragers with foragers and nurses with nurses, but not between the two cliques with the collective result that the queen and the next generation were protected.

The garden ant article also quoted a study finding that house finches avoided “sick” birds that had been injected to become lethargic and the degree of avoidance correlated with the activation level of their immune system. The Cornell Ornithology Laboratory indicates that the devastating mycoplasmal conjunctivitis infection rate of house finches has equilibrated to 5-10%. It would be interesting to know if finch social behavior contributed to this stability in addition to any role played by people modifying feeder station density and sanitation.

After this refuge visit I researched further into social distancing in animals and, on-line, discovered a burgeoning literature documenting behavioral responses to horizontal infections in animals, inviting comparisons with our own social responses to the current COVID19 situation.



*ants herding aphids*

One early visit to the Refuge lifted spirits, captured interest and prompted research to know more - a good day.

# The End Of Night

Excerpts from an interview with author Paul Bogard

**How does light pollution affect birds?** Most songbirds migrate at night. There are instances of large numbers of birds being drawn toward very bright lights and either crashing into buildings or circling until they die of exhaustion. Many of the birds that hit windows during the day were actually drawn into the city by the lights the night before. Once there it can be hard for them to find their way out.

**Is the problem getting better or worse?** Everywhere is getting brighter, and nowhere is getting darker so it's fair to say that the challenge facing migrating birds is getting worse.

**What difference does a program like Audubon's "Lights Out" make?** It can make a big difference. That's one thing about light pollution--it is readily within our ability to control. By definition light pollution is the overuse and misuse of artificial light at night. We could help birds tremendously simply by making sure our lights are aimed down where we need the light, rather than up into the sky where it does no one any good, or horizontally into our eyes where it causes glare. Once people realize how much light we waste (at least 30%) they usually understand how stupid it is. We can have thoughtful, intelligent lighting at night and help birds, other wildlife and people too.

**Is light pollution only a "big city" problem?** No, it's everyone's problem. Virtually every city or town of any size has the same recipe for light pollution - inefficient fixtures that send light where we don't need it (into the sky, into our neighbor's homes). The only difference is that big cities have more lights. But lights in the countryside have the potential to have greater ecological damage because there is more wildlife nearby. Also, artificial light affects humans wherever they live. Our bodies have not evolved to be exposed to artificial light at night, and that's true whether you live in a city or a small town.

**Does "lights out" at home make a difference for birds?** Absolutely. Every light contributes to the problem, and every "lights out" decision contributes to the solution. We also need to think about insects. More than 60% of invertebrate species need darkness to live and breed. Without it, they suffer and so, in turn do many birds (and bats) that rely on these species for food. So even a "yard light" or "security light" that attracts insects can be impacting the health of bird populations.

**What actions can people take to help reduce light pollution?** First of all, become informed. There are so many reasons that our overuse and misuse of light is dangerous and costly. Once you learn these reasons, the way we use light seems ridiculous. Second, take control of your own lights at home by installing shielded fixtures, turning unnecessary lights off at night, or using motion sensors. Third, become active in your community by helping to create or enforce a lighting ordinance that creates the kind and level of lighting you want in your community. We're going to have light at night – we love it, we want it – so the question is, what kind of lighting? Will it be wasteful, irresponsible, un-neighborly light? Or will it be thoughtful and intelligent, even beautiful light?

**Are LEDs going to help or hurt?** LEDs will soon be everywhere, so this is a vitally important question. LEDs hold both promise and peril. Promise because they are so much more efficient than electric lights and can be controlled far more easily--we can raise and lower their level of light through the night, for example. But peril because 1) they could simply mean more light everywhere, and 2) the type of LEDs most communities are installing are heavy in "blue-rich white light," which is the worst kind of light for us (and other forms of life) to be exposed to at night. If we must use light at night, it's best to use lights made from the warmer end of the spectrum, the reds and oranges, rather than blue light. I fear that because we are not changing our thinking about lighting – essentially that more light is better – that the coming of LEDs will only make the problem of light pollution worse.

**Protecting the night sky starts with YOU!**

- 1 Light only what you need**  

- 2 Use energy efficient bulbs and only as bright as you need**  

- 3 Shield lights and direct them down**  

- 4 Only use light when you need it**  

- 5 Choose warm white light bulbs**  

- 6 Join IDA!**  
We need your help to continue the fight against light pollution.  


The complete article can be found at <http://mn.audubon.org/light-pollution-solutions>

For more info, visit: <https://www.darksky.org/our-work/grassroots-advocacy/resources/public-outreach-materials/>

[Sky-Glow Satellite imagery of INWR](#) (internet link) shows a mixture of good and poor lighting in the surrounding area.

**THE OVERLOOK NEWSLETTER**  
**Friends of Iroquois National Wildlife Refuge**  
**1101 Casey Road**  
**Basom, NY 14013**



FRIEND'S NAME  
STREET ADDRESS  
CITY, STATE 00000

***Time is running out. The deadline is August 31<sup>st</sup>!***

**Iroquois National Wildlife Refuge** and the  
**Friends of Iroquois National Wildlife Refuge**  
announce their **Tenth Annual Amateur**



# PHOTO CONTEST

*This year's photo contest is dedicated in memory of Kathy Owen.*