

Injured American coot spotted in Bangor bog

BY AISLINN SARNACKI
BDN STAFF

Have you ever heard of an American coot? I hadn't until I joined a few birder groups and saw photos of the bird, which has quite a dramatic look. It's a plump, dark grey bird with a bright white triangular bill, red eyes and a long neck that it likes to bob around a lot, like a chicken. Even more odd, the coot hangs out in the water a lot, swimming around and feeding on aquatic plants in the company of ducks.

"Chicken duck" would be an appropriate nickname, I think.

I'd never seen an American coot until yesterday, when I took a tip from a friend and visited a bog in Bangor to find the migrating bird. It was still there, swimming around with a group of

green-winged teals, little ducks with beautiful green feathers tucked in their wings and, for the males, adorning their heads.

The American coot hadn't moved on yet, but for an unfortunate reason. It appeared that the bird had an injured wing. A number of local birders had already called Avian Haven, a bird rehabilitation facility in Freedom, to see if it could be helped. The Avian Haven staff and volunteers were working on orchestrating a rescue effort.

As I watched the American coot, I met a volunteer with Avian Haven who was watching over the bird with binoculars to see where it would roost for the night. She also was trying to determine the extent of the injury. The bird was holding the wing off to its side and couldn't fly, but it was at



AN INJURED AMERICAN COOT STANDS ON A VEHICLE TIRE IN A BOG IN BANGOR ON THURSDAY, AFTER FEEDING ON AQUATIC PLANTS IN THE BOG. THE BIRD IS ON THE RADAR OF AVIAN HAVEN, A WILDLIFE REHABILITATION CENTER IN HOPE THAT MAY BE ABLE TO HELP THE BIRD.

least moving around, dunking its head into the water to eat plants and hopping up on half-submerged trees and old car tires to bask in the sun.

When I really think about wildlife rehabilitation, it's a hard concept to wrap my mind around. I ask myself, is it really worth the time and money to save one bird? A

bird that isn't even endangered? When saving that individual won't even make a dent in the population of that species?

I stood there, watching the American coot as the sun slowly sank behind the trees, thinking about how much trouble it would be in when the bog soon iced over and it couldn't fly to a warmer place. I absolutely wanted to save it.

And I wasn't the only one. Other birders wanted to save it, too. I thought back to about a year ago, when I wrote a story about wildlife rehabbers in the state for the BDN Maine Outdoors. When writing the story, I met with a number of these rehabbers and asked them, why do you do this work? Why raise an orphaned baby squirrel whose mother was flattened by a vehicle? Why save a duck that's been tangled in fishing line?

The wildlife rehabbers had

different yet similar replies. They do it because the vast majority of the injuries they see are caused by humans. Therefore, it's our job to do what we can to help.

It all came down to the Golden Rule: If you break it, admit it. And if you can't fix it, find someone who can.

Also, by helping these individual animals, we can learn more about the species and help others learn more — and, therefore, care more — through social media. Avian Haven has an extremely active and popular Facebook page on which they share with the public their successes and failures, with photos and stories about the injured birds.

Would it be a disaster if the American coot in Bangor dies? If people simply can't save it? No. But I'm rooting for it to be rescued, rehabilitated and released back into the wild.

Hike

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Dictionary. Over the years, the Viles Arboretum has expanded to house a number of fascinating plant collections, including a rock garden of alpine plants, the state's largest public hosta garden, an heirloom apple tree grove, flowering trees, an American chestnut collection, a lilac garden, a nut tree collection and stands of various conifers and deciduous trees.

A few highlights of the property include "The General Sugar Maple," a giant old sugar maple near the parking area; Viles Pond, home to turtles, waterfowl and wading birds; and a stand of white pines that as seeds orbited the Earth 93 times, traveling 2.4 million miles, in 1991 on the space shuttle Atlantis.

There also are several historical landmarks on the property.

In the early 1800s, the area was owned by several neighboring farms, according to the Viles Arboretum website. From 1835 to 1905, the State Hospital (now Augusta Mental Health Institute) purchased and consolidated the farms into a "hospital farm," which provided crops and livestock, as well as occupational therapy and exercise for hospital patients. Evidence of this history remains on the land. For example, remains of a piggery is visited by one of the trails.

A detailed trail map posted on the kiosk to the left of the visitor center helps visitors find these landmarks, as well as specific gardens and groves of interest.

When the arboretum was established in the early 1980s, it was initially called Pine Tree State Arboretum. In 2010, the arboretum was renamed the Viles Arboretum to honor William Payson Viles (1906-86) and



A SHORT BOARDWALK IS LOCATED IN THE TRAIL NETWORK OF VILES ARBORETUM NEAR THE COMMUNITY FORESTRY COLLECTION OF TREES IN AUGUSTA.

Elsie Pike Viles (1914-2013), who were instrumental in establishing the arboretum, and who provided guidance and financial support as the property developed over the years.

In recent years, under the arboretum's "Shifting Gears Initiative," the arboretum has added a wealth of artwork to the gardens, including many large stone sculptures. There also has been installation of interpretive panels for 20 of the botanical collections, as well as a new plant labeling process, making it easier for visitors to learn about the variety of plants on display.

Recreational uses of the land vary from hiking to horseback riding, and in the winter, the trail network is a popular place for snowshoeing and cross-country skiing. Dogs are permitted if on leash at all

times. Hunting and smoking is prohibited. The arboretum board also asks that visitors refrain from climbing on sculptures or picking apples.

The grounds are open to the public for free daily, dawn to dusk, year round. A donation container is located near the kiosk. For information, visit vilesarboretum.org or call 626-7989.

Personal note: On Columbus Day, I drove south to Augusta to meet a biologist for a story I'm working on for the next edition of the Bangor Daily News Maine Outdoors magazine. Whenever I have to travel more than an hour for an interview, I try to take the opportunity to visit a trail or some sort of outdoor locale. So I asked the biologist to meet me at Viles Arboretum, a place I'd had my eye on for a while.

I figured, because of all the different trees growing there, the arboretum would be a great place to visit during the autumn, when leaves on many trees are changing vibrant colors. (Did you know that the needles of evergreens are actually leaves, just hardy ones capable of surviving the cold because of their waxy coating?) I was right. The maples and oaks were starting to show off fall foliage, despite the fact that it felt like summer on that particular day. It was 70 degrees. Can you believe it?

The biologist and I sat on a stone bench surrounded by a variety of trees — English oak, honeylocust, northern catalpa among them — and chatted in the sun. (And don't think I can identify those trees by eye. I looked at the identification tags dangling from their branches.)

After the interview, I hit the trails and managed to find many of the major landmarks. One of my favorite places was the conifer collection, which included a droopy tree called a weeping white pine. The space shuttle trees were pretty cool, too.

While exploring, I stopped to chat with a man sitting on a bench at the edge of Viles Pond. He enjoys visiting the arboretum to go birding, he said. With all the different habitats on the property, including fields dotted with nesting boxes, it seems like a great place to spot birds. While I wasn't actively looking for birds, I noticed the shrill call of a pileated woodpecker, as well as a group of friendly chickadees and nuthatches in the shaded hosta garden. I also spotted two Eastern painted turtles sunning on a log in the pond. As soon as they saw me, they hit the water.

For more of Aislinn Sarnacki's adventures, visit her blog at actoutwithaislinn.bangordailynews.com. Follow her on Twitter: @1minhikegirl.



SNOW GEESSE NEST IN THE HIGH ARCTIC AND WINTER IN THE SOUTHERN UNITED STATES.

Annual flight of the snow geese

When Canada geese come to Maine, I go to Canada. As winter approaches, migrating Canada geese fill certain ponds and fields in the state, especially in Aroostook County. Ponds in Caribou, Mars Hill and Washburn fill up with honkers. By day, the geese feed in agricultural fields post-harvest. By night, they will often gather in towns where they are safe from hunters and predators. It's quite a display. As impressive as the numbers can be, the abundance of Canada geese pales in comparison to the snow goose invasion of Quebec City. Up to a hundred thousand geese can gather at one time. It's a world class spectacle. So, over Columbus Day weekend, a small group of Maine Audubon members from the Penobscot Valley Chapter met at Fields Pond for a five hour expedition to Quebec.

Snow geese nest in the high arctic and winter in the southern United States. There are two races. The greater snow goose summers in northeastern Canada and winters along the mid-Atlantic coast from New Jersey to South Carolina. The lesser snow goose lives farther west, and winters in the southwestern states and Mexico. It's the greater snow goose that gathers in such impressive numbers in Quebec.

There are between 800,000 and one million greater snow geese in the world. We know, because almost every single one of them passes through one spot on the planet: Cap Tourmente on the St. Lawrence River. It's a Canadian National Wildlife Refuge located 25 miles northeast of Quebec City. Cap Tourmente was established as a refuge in order to protect the few remaining snow geese that still existed a century ago. Hunting pressure had reduced their numbers to only about 3000. In the United States, the hunting of snow geese was banned in 1916.

Today, their numbers have recovered, and hunting resumed in 1975. In fact, the population has increased rapidly over the last three decades, possibly because climate change has warmed the high arctic, lengthening the growing season. Snow geese are voracious vegetarians and will devour just about any arctic plant, consuming every part of it, even the root.

It is one plant in particular that draws the snow goose to the St. Lawrence River: the American bulrush. It grows in great quantities near Quebec City. The root is a starchy tuber, rich in energy, the ideal fuel for long migrations. The geese stop at Cap Tourmente in both directions as they fly

to and from their seasonal territories, fattening up for several days before moving on.

Snow geese have a special adaptation that allows them to feed on tubers. Their bills are serrated, and they can clip off vegetation. In fact, upon arrival in the fall, the geese quickly snip off all of the bulrush stocks, which float away with the tide. The geese then plunge their heads into the mud to pull up the roots.

Cap Tourmente's sediments are rich in iron. After a few days, the heads of snow geese are stained a rusty color. The color persists until they next molt, which isn't until the following summer. That's a long time to stay stained. It's so distinctive that biologists can tell which birds have just arrived and which have been feeding for several days.

From early September through October, wave after wave of geese pass through Cap Tourmente. Those without offspring arrive first, taking less than a week to fly all the way down from the arctic. Those with families take up to five weeks, stopping along the way to nourish the kids. Favorable winds start the birds moving. Those that have had enough time to refuel continue south, replaced by newly arriving birds. Bad weather can bottle up the geese for a while, so numbers fluctuate.

During our visit to the refuge this year, unseasonably cold weather had reduced the flock to about 5000. Overnight, the weather warmed, the winds shifted, and by afternoon of our second day, refuge scientists estimated that the flock had suddenly grown to 23,000. Through late afternoon, we watched continuous V formations arriving from the north. The next morning, we watched a sky full of V formations heading south.

Most of these birds miss Maine. Their route tends to follow the Connecticut River, with stops in Vermont and Pennsylvania. However, small flocks do wander into Maine, and there are usually a few around somewhere. Be on the lookout. If you see flocks of large white birds out in a corn field, take a gander.

Bob Duchesne serves as vice president of Maine Audubon's Penobscot Valley Chapter. He developed the Maine Birding Trail, with information at mainebirdingtrail.com. He can be reached at duchesne@midmaine.com.

Things to Do Outdoors

ALTON — Last full moon paddle of the season, 5-6:30 p.m. Sunday, Oct. 25, Hirundo Wildlife Refuge, Gate 3, 35 Hudson Road. Reservation or cancellation requested by Oct. 24 by calling 394-2171. Bring a flashlight. Suggested donations are \$5 for adults, free school-aged children.

BANGOR — Chef Michael Frigm's class on cooking venison, 1-4 p.m. Saturday, Oct. 24, Eastern Maine Community College, Rangeley Hall, end of Sylvan Road. Cost is \$40 per person. Participants will receive a packet containing detailed recipes and instructions for each of the three dishes the chef cooks. Register by calling 974-4621 or in person at EMCC's enrollment center in Katahdin Hall.

BRADLEY — Maine Forest and Logging Museum interactive, woods-based art installation, "Creative Change in the Forest," 10 a.m.-4 p.m. Saturday, Oct. 24, Maine Forest and Logging Museum and the Penobscot Experimental Forest, Government Road, off Route 178. Free. Discussions about decom-

position, seed dispersal and regeneration of the forest. Hands-on creative activities for all ages and opportunity to help construct a giant pinecone led by Grace Bartlett, Maine master naturalist and sculptor. For information, visit maineforestandlogging-museum.com.

BUCKSPORT — Bucks Mills Rod and Gun Club annual opening day hunters' breakfast, 4-9 a.m. Saturday, Oct. 31, at the clubhouse, 359 Bucks Mills Road. Cost is \$8 for adults, \$4 children under 12. For more information, call 469-2195 or email cthry@msn.com.

CORINNA — Hunters breakfast, 4-8 a.m. Saturday, Oct. 31, Corinna Fire Department, 37 Exeter Road. Menu of baked beans, eggs, ham, homefries, homemade doughnuts, Texas toast. Cost is \$5 for children age 12 and younger, \$7 for anyone age 13 or older. Rifle raffle.

DEXTER — Hunters breakfast, 5-9 a.m. Saturday, Oct. 31, Dexter Grange, 6 Church St., across from the library. Menu includes eggs to order, sausage, bacon, sausage gravy, biscuits, pancakes, french toast, homemade white or oatmeal toast, homefries, coffee, orange juice.

Cost is \$6 for adults; \$3 for children ages 6-11, free for children 5 and under.

EAST MILLINOCKET — East Millinocket Fire Department hunter's breakfast, 5-8 a.m. Saturday, Oct. 31, at the fire station. Benefits scholarships, fire prevention, smoke detector programs, a children's fun day at Summerfest and other related activities. Cost is \$6 for adults, \$4 to children age 15 and under. Open to all. For more information, call 746-5355 or email eastmill208@gmail.com.

HAMPDEN — Haunted Trails fundraiser, 5:30-7:30 p.m. Saturday, Oct. 24, on three-quarters of a mile on the south loop of the Reeds Brook Trails. Kid-friendly loop, also. Cost is \$5 per person or \$15 per family to be used to cut a 1K trail to connect north and south loops of Reeds Brook Trails. Free parking at Reeds Brook Middle School and Hampden Academy. Concessions available. Additional donations accepted. For more information, visit facebook.com/events/1489637264687889/.

HARTLAND — Hartland-St. Albans Lions Club's hunters/community breakfast 5-8 a.m. Satur-

day, Oct. 31, at Grace Linn Methodist Church on Commercial Street. The menu will be eggs to order, ham, homefries, baked beans, pancakes, toast and beverage. Cost is \$6.

LIMERICK — Maine Life Gate Church's annual free hunters breakfast, 4:45 a.m. Saturday, Oct. 31, at the church, 19 Foss Road.

MILLINOCKET — Annual hunter's breakfast with all the fixings, 5-9 a.m. Saturday, Oct. 31, American Legion Post 80, 970 Central St. For more information, call 723-8088 or email dvh80@beeline-online.net.

OLD TOWN — Halloween at Hirundo Wildlife Refuge, 1-4 p.m. Saturday, Oct. 24, Parker Reed Shelter, Gate 1, 1107 West Old Town Road. Fall animal art, preparing and raising a "share-crow" made from natural materials, bobbing for apples and hay bale rolling contest. When shadows grow larger, do the Haunted Walk, listen to a scary story by the campfire and step into the Tent of the Future. Suggested donation is \$5.

For a complete listing of calendar items or to submit your event, visit www.bangordailynews.com.