



GRASSLAND BIRD TRUST NEWSLETTER

FEBRUARY 2022

News on the Wing
Delivered to Your Mailbox

FROM THE BOARD

We don't know about you, but grassland birds kept our spirits soaring* during a difficult year. There's always something to inspire at the Important Bird Area in Fort Edward, whether it's a snowy owl floating ghost-like over frozen fields, or a kestrel swooping, talons first, straight into the summer grasses.

It wasn't an easy year for anyone, but we at Grassland Bird Trust (GBT) managed to get a lot done, and have fun along the way. Read on to hear what we have been up to and what we have planned for you, our dear supporters, in 2022! (*Puns *always* intended.)

Grassland Bird Trust, Inc. is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit land trust conserving critical habitat for endangered, threatened, and rapidly declining grassland birds. Visit GrasslandBirdTrust.org to learn more.

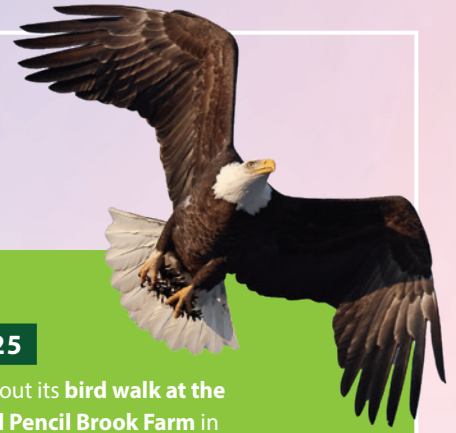
All wildlife photos courtesy Gordon Ellmers. Copyright © 2022 by Gordon Ellmers.

2021 HIGHLIGHTS



MAY 8

Global Big Day Event at Hicks Orchard was attended by over 60 people who enjoyed expert-led bird walks, delicious food, and live bird presentations at the gorgeous Hicks Orchard in Granville. On the same day, the **Brooklyn Bird Club raised \$11,000 for GBT** land conservation through their annual Birdathon fundraiser!



MAY 25

GBT sold out its **bird walk at the beautiful Pencil Brook Farm** in South Cambridge led by Steve Sanford, retired New York State Chief Ecologist.



MAY 26

GBT signed an agreement to **lease 44 acres of GBT's land to Eden Renewables**, a developer of pollinator-friendly, biodiverse community solar farms based in Troy, NY, for the next 20 years. With GBT's help, Eden will maintain this land for the sole purpose of maximizing its value as habitat for grassland birds.



AUGUST 1-2

A sold out **"Farm to Table Feast"**, hosted by Sandy and Paul Arnold at the spectacular Pleasant Valley Farm, was attended by over 100 people over two days, and raised almost \$11,000 for GBT.

SEPTEMBER 18-19

The GBT Board attended a **two-day retreat** to establish a five-year Strategic Plan.

SEPTEMBER 25

"Introduction to the Science of Birds" presentation at the breathtaking (we're running out of adjectives for these farms) Chestnut Ridge Farm in Cambridge, NY, was attended by dozens of eager and enthralled ornithological students.



DECEMBER 14

GBT named **Samantha Carouso Peck** Executive Director to follow founder Laurie LaFond's 11-year tenure at GBT.

RAPTOR SURVEYS

In between, GBT hosted **bird walks at the Alfred Z. Solomon Viewing Area** in Fort Edward and conducted raptor surveys. These surveys contribute to a national database on the status of grassland birds and help advise renewable energy companies on minimizing the impact of Washington County solar projects on grassland birds.

As we look ahead to 2022, we are on solid financial footing and look forward to a year of fun events to support the survival of these precious grassland birds and their habitat.

LOOKING AHEAD TO 2022

Not going to Florida this year? Lucky you! February is chock full of GBT birding opportunities!

FOREST WINTER BIRDING

There will be winter birding with expert guide Sue Van Hook, co-sponsored by GBT and our friends at the Agricultural Stewardship Association, **every Saturday morning in February**, 9 a.m.–10:30 a.m. at the Cambridge Community Forest, 15 Rockside Drive, Cambridge, NY.



To register, go to <https://www.agstewardship.org/events/> or scan the QR code for direct link.



GRASSLAND WINTER BIRDING

SOLD OUT!

And for a double header on **February 19**, spend the afternoon with expert guides Bo Harris and Rich Speidel at the Little Theatre on the Farm.



Winter birding at the **Important Bird Area in Fort Edward** is your best chance in the Northeast to see a flock of short-eared owls swooping just a few dozen feet over your head at dusk. You won't be warm, but if you're lucky enough to see it, you won't be disappointed and you'll never forget it.

UPCOMING SPRING EVENT

And then! GBT will be celebrating **Global Big Day on Saturday May 14, 2022**. Global Big Day is when people all around the world go birding together! Managed by the Cornell Lab of Ornithology, it is one of the world's biggest citizen science projects. Last year, nearly 52,000 people in 192 countries identified over 7,200 bird species.

Come celebrate Global Big Day 2022 with GBT at Hicks Orchard in Granville, NY. There will be guided bird walks, live bird presentations, great food, and the spectacular spring landscapes of Hicks Orchard to enjoy. Watch our *Guided Walks & Events* page on our website for details: <https://www.grasslandbirdtrust.org/upcoming-guided-walks-and-events/>.

Scan the QR code to watch our *Guided Walks & Events* page for more birding opportunities in the next few months!



Stay tuned as we hatch more events later in the season!

DONATE TODAY!

Visit [GrasslandBirdTrust.org/donate](https://www.GrasslandBirdTrust.org/donate) or scan the QR code.

Any donation of at least \$25 will unlock a one-year GBT membership for you and your family.





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DID YOU KNOW?

As of January 2022, wintering **snowy owls** are being sighted almost daily at the Important Bird Area near Fort Edward.



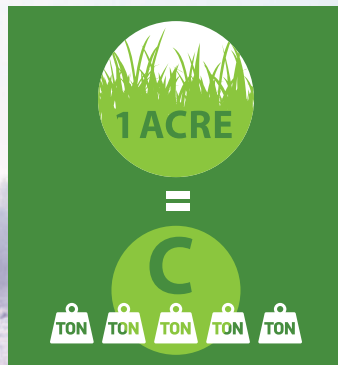
11% of the **bobolinks** in the United States breed in New York State, then migrate thousands of miles south to wintering grounds in South America.



There are fewer than 100 **short-eared owls** remaining in New York State.



Some grassland birds find food in the grasslands by **smelling for freshly-cut grass**, looking for prey disturbed by tractors. (We'll have more for you on that in a future newsletter.)



Grasslands store carbon underground and are just as important as forests for purposes of **combating climate change**. An acre of grassland can store up to five tons of carbon according to the USDA.

EXPRESSING OUR GRATITUDE TO LAURIE LAFOND, FOUNDER OF THE GRASSLAND BIRD TRUST



Laurie LaFond founded the Grassland Bird Trust in 2011. Founders are a unique species. They begin with a vision of what they want to achieve. Many of them start companies and are in it for the money. Nothing wrong with that, but we're talking about the subset of people who start not-for-profits. Setbacks and challenges arise. Many, even most, give up.

Now we're down to a very small group of people who have a vision to do good in the world, who act on it, and who refuse to give up. Year after year. Laurie LaFond is a member of that very small, elite club.

This unusual mixture of vision and steely determination help to explain how Laurie achieved so many objectives critical to the survival of grassland birds in our region.

Without Laurie, there would not have been Winter Raptor Fest events that drew thousands of people to the Washington County Fairgrounds to learn about grassland birds and become supporters of her vision.

Without Laurie, there would not have been 78 acres set aside forever in the Important Bird Area near Fort Edward to preserve increasingly rare habitat for grassland birds, or an additional 180 acres of critical habitat acquired by the DEC with GBT's assistance.

Without Laurie, there would not have been critical legislation passed in New York State requiring the State to pay taxes on lands it owns in the Washington County Important Bird Area in the towns of Fort Edward, Argyle, and Kingsbury. Without this legislation, these towns could not have afforded to preserve these critical lands.

This is only a small sample of all that Laurie accomplished.

“We wish to thank Laurie for her vision and leadership since 2010 in forming the Trust and for her many contributions, including spearheading the development of the Alfred Z. Solomon Grassland Bird Viewing Area in Fort Edward, NY. On my first birding walk with GBT (then called Friends of the IBA) in June 2017, which started at the viewing stand, Laurie was already pressing me into service as a volunteer. By August, I said yes and never looked back.”

– Keith Swensen,
GBT Chair and President

GBT is delighted to announce that an **anonymous gift of \$10,000** has been made to GBT in honor of Laurie's vision and accomplishments.



DONATE TODAY!

Donate Today! Visit [GrasslandBirdTrust.org/donate](https://www.GrasslandBirdTrust.org/donate) or scan the QR code. Help us protect endangered birds and their habitat.



INTERVIEW WITH SAMANTHA CAROUSO PECK, OUR NEW EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR



Most of you have heard by now that the **Grassland Bird Trust has a new Executive Director**. In case you didn't see it, here's the news release: <https://www.grasslandbirdtrust.org/recent-news/announcement-of-new-executive-director/>.

Sam has a Ph.D. from Cornell University where her research and teaching focused on bird learning, development, and communication. We sat down with Sam for a little Q&A.



Q: How old were you when you developed an interest in birds and what sparked that interest?

A: I read "Mr. Popper's Penguins" when I was seven and became obsessed with all things feathered. That obsession was cemented for life at age nine when my family moved to South Africa and I met real, black-footed penguins on a Cape Town beach. A penguin walked up to me, picked up one of my shoes, and waddled off with it into the ocean, never to be seen again. I was utterly delighted (my parents, maybe less so).

Q: When and why did you decide to get a Ph.D. studying ornithology?

A: I took a course on Animal Behavior in college and was hooked. I had no idea people could have careers studying the mysteries of animal minds! I learned how much we have in common with birds, as well as how little we understand them. After studying vocal learning in African grey parrots as an undergrad, I knew Cornell would be the best place to study social and vocal learning with world-class ornithologists.

Q: What aspects of ornithology interest you the most?

A: Definitely bird behavior and cognition. We don't give "bird brains" the credit they deserve. Some bird species rival great apes in terms of their intelligence. For example, Japanese carrion crows place walnuts at crosswalks so that cars will break the shells, and then wait for the lights to stop traffic before collecting the nuts. Since birds perceive the world so differently from us, we have no idea what other amazing behaviors might be going unnoticed.

Q: Where have you birded?

A: All over the world! From the Sonoran Desert to the Florida everglades, the Caribbean to the Mediterranean, South Africa to Southeast Asia. Birding in Australia always feels a little like cheating – all I had to do was look out my back window to see a veritable rainbow of parrot species. I've never been to the Amazon rainforest though I hope to someday.

Q: Where's your favorite place to bird? Never mind. We'll answer that one for you: the Important Bird Area up at Fort Edward!

A: A note from Sam: There's no better place in the world to see some of my absolute favorite birds: owls!

Q: Who is your favorite bird and why? (We're not talking species here. We're talking about an actual, individual bird. And no, it doesn't have to be a grassland bird – yet.)

A: My very favorite bird was Alex, the famous African grey parrot (featured in *People* magazine no less!). I was lucky enough to work with Alex at Brandeis, and I credit him for my fascination with bird brains. Alex, using his vocabulary of over 100 English words and intelligence of a four-year-old child, bossed me around, scolded me, tricked me, and taught the other parrots in the lab to do the same. When he felt like it, he could be affectionate, empathetic (he taught himself to say "sorry" in the correct situations), funny, and brilliant. When he did not know the word for something, he created his own (e.g. "yummy bread" for "carrot cake"), spontaneously grasped the concept of zero, and could identify colors, shapes, numbers, and materials. He revealed to us a previously unknown potential for animals to understand and communicate with us.

Q: What would you like to see the Grassland Bird Trust do in 2022?

A: My greatest passion is for outreach and education, so my primary goal is to offer more opportunities for our community to learn about nature, birds, and the incredible things they do. This means more events, activities, citizen science, bird walks, and bird talks! In particular, I want kids to have the same opportunity I had to get excited about animals and conservation from a young age. But of paramount importance is to maintain and build upon the Trust's mission of conserving the habitat of grassland birds, both by continuing our work in the Washington County Important Bird Area, and working to conserve more land to ensure future generations get to experience our amazing threatened and endangered grassland species.