



THE BELTED KINGFISHER

DELAWARE-OTSEGO AUDUBON SOCIETY, INC.

COMING ACTIVITIES

JANUARY 2010

1/2: Fort Plain Christmas Bird Count (Tom Salo, contact).

1/9: Eagle Trip, led by Andy Mason.

1/15: Program: Reptiles, Hellbender and Amphibians of Delaware and Otsego Counties (bottom right).

1/17: Waterfowl Count (Andy Mason, contact).

1/19: Board Meeting, Elm Park Methodist Church.

FEBRUARY

2/16: Board Meeting, Elm Park Methodist Church.

2/19: Program: Stanley Sessions, PhD on Environmental Toxins, with focus on Amphibians.

MARCH

3/19: Program: Peter Fauth presents his research on Wood Thrushes and Veeries.

SEE PAGE 4 FOR DETAILS

Birding Through an Artist's Eye



Eagle Owl, by Dave Kiehm

As long as I can remember birds have fascinated me more than any other wildlife. I can still remember clearly the first time I saw an Indigo bunting. This brilliant blue bird landed just a few feet from me as I was with friends walking along a small stream in SE Penna. I was awestruck as the bird flitted from branch to branch in a wild rose bush. My friends moved on and could not understand my fascination with "just another bird".

As I became more aware of the avian life around me, I was also seeing them as more than beautiful featured creatures. I was intrigued by their shape, pattern, attitude and lines. The shape of the beak, the

(Continued on Page 5)

REPTILES, HELLBENDER AND AMPHIBIANS OF DELAWARE AND OTSEGO COUNTIES

(Editor's Note: DOAS programs for January and February 2010 will focus on creatures in Delaware and Otsego Counties that could be negatively impacted by the Gas Drilling/Hydrofracking process.)

On Friday, January 15, 2010 Paul Novak, Wildlife Biologist with NYSDEC Region 4, will review the occurrence of various species in Delaware and Otsego Counties based on results from the NYS Reptile and Amphibian Atlas effort. Paul will also talk about recent studies on Hellbender, and one or two other species.

Paul Novak is responsible for Wildlife Diversity work in the Upper Hudson Watershed.

He received his BS and MS in Wildlife Biology from Cornell University. Paul previously spent 15 years as a Zoologist with the NY Natural Heritage Program where much of his work involved rare animal inventories of NYS Wildlife Management Areas and NYS Parks, including surveys for various amphibians and reptile species.

The program will begin at 7:30 PM at the Elm Park Methodist Church, 401 Chestnut Street, Oneonta. Refreshments will be served. For further information, contact Program Director Eleanor Moriarty at 607-435-2054, email ellie2@directv.net.

All DOAS Programs are free and open to the public.

PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

Tom Salo

NATURAL GAS EXTRACTION

Exploration and extraction of natural gas is coming to our area on a large scale. The development of new and troubling technologies for removing gas from shale has made this area a viable "play". The gas is normally locked up inside the shale. It can be released by fracturing the rock using high volumes of water under great pressure. This "hydrofracturing" or "fracking" can be combined with horizontal drilling, allowing large areas to be covered.

Concerns about fracking are many. Large volumes of water are needed - one or two million gallons per well per fracking. This locally drawn water is then mixed with thousands of gallons of chemicals before being injected into the ground. The identity of the chemicals in this mix is generally not released to the public. Where this has been done elsewhere, there have been numerous problems with contamination of ground and surface waters. Where fracking has damaged water supplies, the chemicals found in the damaged wells include a number of toxic organic solvents. Radioactive isotopes and natural gas from natural sources can also be released from these subterranean rocks.

After the fracking process, some of the contaminated water is pumped out of the well to release the gas. This water needs to be properly treated. Between removal from the ground and shipping for treatment, it must be stored. We need to be concerned about contamination from this waste water at every step in the process.

Domestic and municipal water supplies are at risk. So are wildlife. Water levels can drop from the large withdrawals, and surface waters can be contaminated by the process water. However, other impacts will also affect wildlife and habitat. Hundreds of wells are anticipated for our area. Besides the well pads themselves, this will require many roads and pipelines. All this development will result in the fragmenting of habitats across the region. Many of our interior forest birds need large tracts of contiguous forest to maintain their populations. Fragmented habitat encourages nest predators and parasites.

For local taxpayers, road damage can be a major expense. Moving large heavy equipment and water-laden trucks can cause serious damage. Other social impacts include degradation of scenic beauty and rural character, and negative impacts on tourism, property values, and agriculture. The noise from drilling can be a problem. Long-term noise from compressors can negatively affect quality of life for nearby residents. In many parts of the country, those compressors are diesel engines running full time and spewing pollutants.

At the October 20 board meeting, the Board of Directors approved a policy opposing hydrofracturing gas exploration and production in New York. It includes the following statement:

"The practice of injecting large quantities of toxic substances into the earth to physically fracture it and permanently leave behind damaged geology and foreign substances is an assault on the very resources that sustain life. This damage will remain for millennia, and will threaten unseen future generations, as well as present-day humans and wildlife. Even with the most stringent controls and oversight, this activity is an unacceptable danger to our planet, with no environmental benefits. As such, we oppose hydrofracturing gas exploration and production in our region and elsewhere. We call upon the state of New York to permanently ban this practice."

Tom Salo

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COVER ARTWORK BY DAVE KIEHM

CONSERVATION AND LEGISLATION

BY ANDY MASON

YEAR-END REVIEW

This is the season for looking back on the past 12 months, so let's see how the environment fared in 2009.

Federal—President Barack Obama took office in January amidst great hopes from the conservation community for a new approach to the environment. Obama had focused on energy issues and climate change during the campaign, but he did not have a long environmental resume.

After nearly a year, the best that can be said is that the record of his administration is mixed. As we know, Washington has been preoccupied with a depressed economy and battles over health care legislation, so perhaps the President has not yet been able to devote significant attention to the environment. He shortly will be attending the Copenhagen summit on climate change and has signaled his intention to commit to relatively strong limits on greenhouse gas emissions. If these are real measures, it will be a significant change from the Bush administration's rhetoric on the issue.

The President's choice to head the Interior Department, Ken Salazar, has been a disappointment. One of his first actions was approving the transfer of wolf management to several western states that immediately began an all-out assault on this still at-risk species. Most recently Idaho announced plans to kill 220 wolves this hunting season alone. Salazar has ignored broad public support for wolf protection.

On the plus side, the Obama administration has moved to reenact the Roadless Rule that protects undisturbed areas in the national forests. This hard-fought rule had been unraveled during the Bush years.

Congress has moved ahead positive legislation on limiting greenhouse gases, and shifting the nation toward renewable energy. This summer the House passed a cap-and-trade global warming reduction plan to reduce economy-wide greenhouse gas emissions 17 percent by 2020. This legislation also included renewable requirements for utilities, and incentives for energy efficiency in homes and buildings. The Senate has yet to act on energy legislation, and likely will not do so until 2010.

NY State—As with a new administration in Washington, hopes were high in Albany, as Democratic majorities controlled both houses of the state legislature for the first time in decades. Many beneficial environmental measures had been stalled in the Republican Senate, and environmentalists looked forward to breaking this long logjam.

However, politics reared its ugly head, and the closely-divided Senate devolved into a chamber of legislators

switching teams for personal gain, with parliamentary maneuvering and legal action resulting in a stalemate for most of the 2009 session.

One bright spot to come out of this mess was passage of the Bigger, Better Bottle Bill that added water bottles to the state's container deposit law. Although delayed for several months by court challenges, the measure is now in place, and will reduce litter and promote recycling in the state.

Also passed by the legislature and signed into law by Gov. David Paterson was the Green Jobs/Green New York Act described in last month's column. The bill creates jobs that will reduce energy use and costs for citizens and small businesses. It also includes revolving loans and green jobs training programs for weatherization projects.

Still in limbo in Albany are bills to protect smaller wetlands, to deal with growing e-waste, and to require cleaner diesel fuel.

Local—Although technically a state matter, the action by the NY State Department of Environmental Conservation to ban open burning of trash statewide had its genesis and much of the effort to bring it about right here in Otsego County and surrounding areas. Banning burn barrels has long been a struggle for local environmentalists, and activists such as Martha Clarvoe, Michael Whaling, Mary Ashwood and others kept this public health danger in front of decision makers. Local and state legislators ignored the toxins rural residents were exposed to, and DEC is to be commended for finally taking action.

Also on the local scene, plans to explore and produce natural gas from hydro-fractured wells is proceeding. The consensus of environmental groups, including DOAS, is that this activity cannot be carried out safely, even with strict oversight—which is unlikely under the state's planned regulations.

What does 2010 hold?—With economic recovery a large question mark, and other matters such as health care and continuing military actions dominating government, it is difficult to predict.

There is momentum for action on climate change and energy in Washington, but how that will translate into legislation remains to be seen.

If the state legislature can resume some sort of normal function, it may make some progress on environmental issues, but the deep state financial deficit could override everything else.

Thank you for your efforts for our natural world over the past year--we all look for a brighter future!

HERE COMES THE GREAT BACKYARD BIRD COUNT!

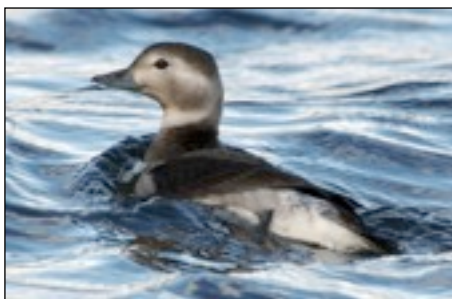
This February 12-15 the thirteenth annual Great Backyard Bird Count (GBBC), sponsored by National Audubon and the Cornell Ornithology Lab, will again give us a chance to discover our neighborhood birds under the mantra "Count for Fun, Count for the Future!" As participating "citizen scientists", beginners to experts of all ages will add to the national avian database. Participants can take part from home or anywhere else (not just from a feeder area), keeping a separate list for each day and location. Observers simply count the highest number of each species they see at any one time on one or more of the designated 4 count days, and then enter each day's tally separately on the GBBC website: www.birdsource.org/gbbc. You can also view your and others' results and see lists and maps online, continually updated throughout the count. Participants are also invited to submit their best digital photos taken of birds from their own GBBC, as explained on the GBBC web site, which also gives complete instructions for the count.

John Davis
607-547-9688
davi7js4@hughes.net

WATERFOWL COUNT

The NY State Ornithological Association's annual statewide waterfowl count is scheduled for Sunday, January 17, 2010 (**please note corrected date**). DOAS covers Otsego Lake and the Susquehanna River above Unadilla, the Unadilla River, and the Cannonsville Reservoir and the W. Branch of the Delaware River.

Anyone interested in helping with this census please contact Andy Mason, (607) 652-2162, AndyMason@earthling.net.



*Old Squaw (Long-tailed Duck),
by Dave Kiehm*

EAGLE TRIP SCHEDULED FOR JANUARY 9, 2010

Saturday, January 9, 2010 is the date for the annual DOAS field trip to view wintering Bald Eagles. The trip visits rivers and reservoirs in Delaware County where the birds concentrate to feed. Recent trips have turned up 20+ eagles.

Other raptors and waterfowl are usually sighted on this trip. We will also stop at a local restaurant for lunch, for interested participants.

The trip will leave the Dietz St. parking lot, across from the YMCA in Oneonta, at 8 a.m. Carpooling is strongly encouraged and participants can be picked up en-route in Delhi and Walton. Return to Oneonta will be mid to late afternoon.

For further information, contact Andy Mason, (607) 652-2162, AndyMason@earthling.net.

HAWKWATCH NEWS

An excellent 2009 season has continued at the Franklin Mt. Hawkwatch at the DOAS Sanctuary, with the total raptor count at 6200+ as of early December. The 6000 threshold has been reached only twice before in the hawkwatch's 21-year history.

The highlight of the year came on November 6, when Steve Hall tallied 46 Golden Eagles passing the lookout. This is the third highest daily count for the species, topped only by 51 in 2003 and 71 in 2005. These mega-flights of

goldens are quite remarkable: often the bulk of the birds are seen in a 2 or 3 hour period.

The second half of November brought a slowdown, as warm weather and a lack of strong cold fronts limited the strong NW winds that provide good movements at Franklin Mt.

Counting will continue through December; however coverage will be reduced somewhat to the most promising days. A season wrap-up will appear in next month's *Kingfisher*.

Andy Mason

Please Note: DOAS field trips are open to the public. Participants should meet at the stated time and location -- please be prompt. We encourage carpooling: please help with expenses if you are in someone else's vehicle. Most trips include a moderate amount of easy walking; leaders will note any strenuous hiking. Please expect to provide your own food and drink unless a food stop is indicated. In case of bad weather, check with the leader about cancellation.

YOUNG BIRDERS CLUB VISITS FRANKLIN MOUNTAIN

The NY State Young Birders Club (YBC) paid a visit to the Franklin Mt. Hawkwatch on November 15 to view migrating raptors. DOAS is a partner organization of the YBC and, as part of that effort, sponsors one field trip a year.

Unfortunately, it was a poor day for hawks at the lookout, so the kids did not get to experience the real Franklin Mt. However, it was a



NY State Young Birders Club members (l-r), Hope Batcheller, Kelleen Summa, and Cassie Peltier discuss raptors at Franklin Mt. on Nov. 15th

pleasant day weather-wise and, with many other visitors present, the birding conversation and camaraderie were enjoyed by all.

We will schedule another visit next fall and hope for a few Golden Eagles.

The YBC is a special project of the NY State Ornithological Association, and is open to young birders aged 10-19. In addition to partner organizations such as DOAS, the club also has supporting adult memberships to benefit this worthy effort.

If you know a young birder who may be interested in joining the club, have them visit www.nysyoungbirders.org. For more information on becoming a supporting adult, visit www.nybirds.org/ProjNYSYBC.htm.

Andy Mason

FAMED HOG ISLAND REOPENS

The National Audubon Society will reopen its legendary Hog Island Camp for four adult ornithology sessions and one teen bird studies session during the summer of 2010. Dr. Steve Kress, Audubon's VP for Bird Conservation, will direct the sessions, joined by some of the country's top ornithologists who will serve as instructors, including Kenn Kaufman, Pete Dunne, and Scott Weidensaul. Additionally, said Dr. Kress, there will be two totally new sessions offered in association with Elder Hostel (now Exploritas) where participants will assist Project Puffin biologists to census gulls, eiders and cormorants at nearby seabird nesting islands. Participants in the September session will learn about land and seabirds through bird banding and

presentations, and will assist with a habitat management project for endangered terns and storm-petrels at Eastern Egg Rock.

Known to thousands as the Audubon Camp in Maine, Hog Island was closed during the summer of 2009 to permit planning for the future. This process led to Project Puffin bringing back the popular ornithology programs for adults and teens. The adult programs are for both beginning and avid birders who would like to learn more about Maine birdlife and the biology of birds. The teen session is for 14-17 year olds with a keen interest in birds.

For more information on dates, visit www.projectpuffin.org. Also explore the Friends of Hog Island site, www.naturecompass.org/fohi.

(Birding Through an Artist's Eye, Continued from front page)

structure of their feet and the size and color of their eyes were of major interest to me. I did not know it then but I was thinking more as an artist would see a bird than just a casual bird watcher.

It was not long until I started to try and capture what I was seeing on paper and canvas. My early artwork revolved around animals, landscapes and birds, anything that reflected my love of the outdoors. I remember one of my first art awards in our elementary school contest. It was for a colored pencil drawing of a duck swimming on a lily covered pond. I have been hooked ever since!

Today I have grown more serious about my art and birding. I still find myself looking at birds as subjects for my paintings. It does not matter if the birds are "common" or "exotic" because all have qualities that beg to be translated on paper. Every painting I complete only pushes me to do more. Like the joy of seeing a "new" bird, finishing a protracted painting leaves me not tired or burned out, but refreshed and motivated to start a new one. I work very hard to make my paintings look alive and accurate. It does not mean I want my finished pieces to look like a photograph when I am done, but I know the audience I am painting for are keen observers who understand the look and nature of most birds. In the end it is these avid birders that have made me a more focused and intense bird watcher. This in turn has hopefully made me a better artist.

Dave Kiehm

FAVORITE PLACES SERIES: SOUTH HILL STATE FOREST

For the past five years, I have been doing the Christmas count primarily in the Davenport Area. It is through this event that I discovered the wonderful South Hill State Forest off Turner Hill Road.

Driving south from Oneonta, the way to this gem is through Davenport on Route 23, turning left at the Mobil Station onto Mill Road. Cross over Charlotte Creek, go up the hill and bear right to Turner Hill Road on the left. If you are fortunate, you might spot the Bald Eagle that is occasionally seen in this area. Once on Turner Hill Road, bear left at the fork in the road. Drive for about 2.1 miles to the entrance of the Forest. This area is alive both in winter and in the Spring.

On route to the entrance to South Hill Pileated Woodpeckers are frequently seen, along with Ruffed Grouse. At the entrance to the State Forest, the trail is perfect for snowshoeing, and is very quiet. Ravens are heard but not seen. Flocks of chickadees and juncos can be found, and among them are often Golden-crowned Kinglets. White- and Red-breasted Nuthatch can be heard and seen. In mid-May the trails are alive with varieties of warblers, vireos and sparrows, thrushes, Eastern Wood-Pewee, Winter Wren, Downy and Hairy Woodpeckers, Yellow-bellied Sapsuckers and Brown Thrashers. The species are numerous and well worth a long walk through the trails. The habitat is filled with diversity and the trails are easy to walk.

From South Hill Forest, if you continue along Turner Hill Road for about 2 miles it will turn into Davenport Road. In the winter, you are likely to see American Tree Sparrow and Winter finches during irruption years. Coming down from this area, you pass a number of open fields that are hunting grounds for the Red-tailed Hawk. Kestrels perch on wires in late Spring and in Winter; Rough-legged Hawks and, once in a great while, a Northern Harrier can be spotted.

When planning your visit, be aware of time frames for hunting, as this is State Land. In the Spring, I would suggest a visit from mid-May on.

Eleanor Moriarty

SPLIT ESTATES FILM SHOWING

Our DOAS chapter purchased the DVD "Split Estates" for showing in the community. A group of about 75 viewed it November 7 in Cooperstown, and a lively discussion followed.

"Split Estates" reveals the details of gas drilling in Garfield County, Colorado and the San Juan Basin through interviews with homeowners, politicians, gas company personnel and health leaders, and through watching the drillers working close to the homes and wells.

The natural gas drilling boom hit the Rocky Mountain west several years ago and has caused devastating effects to health, property and lives. Most landowners didn't realize they owned only the surface rights to their land, and that they would have no control once the drilling began.

Lives were quickly altered. The clear mountain water became polluted, and the breathtaking vistas were changed forever as the land filled with gas wells, trucks, noise, new roads, pipelines,

and fouled air. Some families became seriously ill, children especially, and had to move away to regain some semblance of health. Some lost everything in the moves.

This industry is exempt from many environmental protection laws like the Clean Water Act, so feels free to leave the country pockmarked with abandoned homes, polluted wells and streams, and a devastated countryside.

Here in New York State we are facing a similar prospect, as natural gas drillers are preparing to drill and hydro-frack hundreds of wells. We DO have an opportunity to protect our land and health, and to preserve the beauty of upstate New York. We DO OWN our mineral rights, and need to protect our homes and land. We CAN protect our civil liberties, our communities, and our health!

One of the best ways to do this is to educate and inform others about the massive hydro-fracking push throughout our area.

The DVD, from *Bullfrog Films*, is available to borrow for showings. (No admission can be charged.) Contact Jean Miller at 607-432-5767 or at millerj4@hartwick.edu for further information.

Jean T. Miller



*The Ross 1 well site on Crumhorn Mountain,
photo taken 9/18/09.*

THE EASTERN HELLBENDER

One of the most interesting and least known species in our area is the eastern hellbender. We are at the extreme northern edge of the range of this largest salamander in North America. It is a totally aquatic amphibian which breathes mostly through its skin, but also with small gills. Growing to over 2 feet long, hellbenders are a cryptically colored species that is rarely seen. They live locally in the Susquehanna and Unadilla Rivers and some tributaries. Hellbenders need cool, clean moving water.

The decline of this species has been documented for decades. Numbers are dropping. Kim Corwin told me they found no juveniles when she took part in surveys covering parts of Butternut Creek in the 1990s. Only older adults were found. This same result has been repeated in other places in New York. They may no longer be reproducing.

New York State has listed *Cryptobranchus alleganiensis* as a species of Special Concern. In response to the declines, the DEC recently convened a panel of experts to draft a recovery plan for the species.

Hellbenders face multiple threats. Habitat is paramount. Even where water quality has remained

high, streams and rivers can be impacted by land use, agricultural practices, gravel mining, stream channelization and recreation. Siltation, water temperature increases, excess nutrients, and impacts to the bottom structure of the river cause problems. Hellbenders need rocks to hide under. Machinery and cattle walking in a creek can impact the animals directly, as can ATVs crossing streams. Even small boats and canoe paddles can harm them. The damage to their cover rocks from machinery can cause long-term harm when it destroys necessary habitat.

Most first-person accounts I have heard were from people who caught them while fishing with bait. Hellbenders have been wrongly persecuted because it was mistakenly believed they compete with people for game fish.

Introduced invasive species may be causing problems. Hellbenders catch food by waiting and allowing it to approach very close. Their main menu item is crayfish. A recent invader of the Upper Susquehanna Watershed known as the rusty crayfish is displacing our smaller native species. It behaves differently from native crayfish. A native crayfish will flee from

predators. Rusty crayfish stand their ground and defend themselves. Research is needed to determine how hellbenders react to this new species.

Once the DEC's recovery plan is completed, efforts to increase the population can commence. This may include raising young in safety and "restocking". Hellbenders are habitat specialists with a tendency to stay in one area. They won't move far so there is little possibility of them repopulating an area. Even though we have no expertise, DOAS is considered part of the recovery team. We are hoping that, once specific actions to help hellbenders can be identified, we can provide support with habitat improvement and public education.

For more information on eastern hellbenders, DEC has a fact sheet at <http://www.dec.ny.gov/animals/7160.html>. You also might find the site www.hellbenders.org interesting. For more information on all types of herps, I recommend [The Amphibians and Reptiles of New York State](#) published in 2007 by Oxford University Press. James P. Gibbs is the lead author of this excellent book.

Tom Salo

DOAS MEMBERSHIP APPLICATION

Membership in the Delaware-Otsego Audubon Society includes 9 issues of our newsletter, [The Belted Kingfisher](#). Cost is \$15 annually or \$25 for two years. Please make your check payable to "DOAS" and mail payment with this form to: DOAS Membership Chair, PO Box 544, Oneonta, NY 13820-0544.

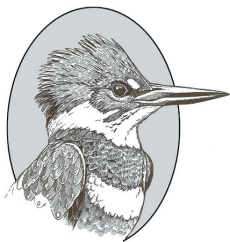
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OCTOBER-NOVEMBER BIRD SIGHTINGS

Fall feels so mild this year, allowing birders to take long strolling walks hoping to catch that special bird, or to observe the last of the beautiful migratory flocks.

Dorian Huneke saw a dozen or more White-crowned Sparrows at her feeder in Treadwell on 10/18. Quite the birding treasure. On 10/30 Kathy Mario captured the blend of tan colors of a Brown Creeper in Delhi, and Tom Salo focused on a pair of Northern Harriers cruising the withering fields in W. Burlington.

On 11/2 Kathy Mario also saw about fifteen American Robins feasting on berries and hanging out in the woods near her home in Delhi. My husband, Gerry Cahill, claimed to have seen a lone Fox Sparrow feeding below our feeder behind our house in Treadwell on 11/5. Every time he called me over to sneak a peak, the Fox Sparrow apparently scooted out of sight. He really did see the bird but I just totally missed out. However, I was surprised to see a lone female Northern Cardinal below the feeder on several occasions. That's a real special treat for me since we never have cardinals in our yard. While searching for

her dog, Martha Frey saw a Barred Owl, which flew in front of her truck in Middlefield Center and then proceeded to perch on a branch near the road for a great birding look (11/11). Several former students of Sandra Bright stormed into her classroom to encourage her to come and see a Bald Eagle on a street in Oneonta. She scurried quickly down the road in skirt and heels and was pleasantly surprised (11/12). On 11/15 Vivienne Clark saw an immature Red-tailed Hawk sitting on a twisted branch of an old tree across from her house in Pierstown (11/15). John Davis had his first of the year American Tree Sparrows in Cooperstown on 11/17. At Glimmerglass Park, Becky Gretton saw two Golden Eagles circling around the main parking lot, flipping over with their talons extended on 11/24.

If you have bird sightings to report, please contact me dbenko@frontiernet.net, 6815 Co. Hwy. 16, Delhi, NY 13753, 607 829-5218 by January 13, 2010 for the next issue of *The Belted Kingfisher*.

~ Dianne Benko