

UNITING PEOPLE AND SCIENCE FOR CONSERVATION



ANNUAL REPORT | 2014

MISSION

THE VERMONT CENTER FOR ECOSTUDIES
ADVANCES THE CONSERVATION
OF WILDLIFE ACROSS THE AMERICAS
THROUGH RESEARCH, MONITORING AND
CITIZEN ENGAGEMENT.



Blue Jay - Mt. Mansfield, Vermont

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Cover photo:
*Palm Warbler, a welcome sight
to New England in early spring.*
© Kent McFarland

FROM THE BOARD CHAIR



DEAR VCE FRIENDS AND SUPPORTERS,

I received an animated call from a friend last week letting me know that VPR's Outdoor Radio series is the station's best program ever. What an inspiring phone call! I continue to marvel at what VCE and its lean staff of 13 has accomplished over the past year. We have worked hard to engage the public in novel and exciting ways. When a constituent recounts her discoveries via a comment on the website or at a monthly Suds and Science event, we know our presence is being felt. VCE's unqualified success is due in large part to thoughtful communication and careful stewardship. As we continue to grow, we recognize that broadening our constituency will expand our reach as a vibrant, essential voice in the world of conservation science.

This past November, VCE held our first offsite retreat for Board, Advisory Council and staff. Tucked into a farmhouse on a quiet road in nearby Barnard, this lively and diverse group convened for what proved to be an energizing 24 hours of presentations, discussions and conversations. In a family-like setting, we forged new and closer bonds, while critically examining our individual and collective visions for VCE. Strong affirmation for the clarity of our mission underscored this powerful and inspiring gathering. Fellow Board member Jared Keyes summarized a meaty discussion about agenda-neutral science and conservation outcomes. In his words:

"VCE carefully retains scientific integrity by not guiding our research toward specific outcomes; our commitment to robust science is built on a firm belief that objective data are the key to informed decision making for conservation. The language and reality of integrity are critical in our communications."

I am humbled by the scope of what this fine group of scientists has achieved, and I look ardently to its future. On behalf of the Board of Directors, I sincerely thank VCE's many generous supporters. You are at the heart of our success. I encourage each of you to continue to engage with, and advocate for, this wonderful organization. Your involvement and support affirm our mission and energize our work.

PETER BROOKE

"I am honored to be a part of this unique organization and am humbled by its ambitions, its scope, and its impact."



VISION 2020

► CONSERVATION SCIENCE

Peer-reviewed publications are a key currency among scientists, and a measure of our contribution to scientific progress. Since 2008, VCE staff have authored or co-authored 40 peer-reviewed publications. By 2020, we will publish 50 more, with VCE staff as first authors on 25.

► CONSERVATION OUTCOMES

By 2020, VCE's commitment to deliver collaborative, evidence-based solutions for conservation will redouble, as we spearhead regional efforts to narrow the gap between science, policy, and on-the-ground benefits for species and their habitats.

► CITIZEN SCIENCE

Our corps of 800+ citizen naturalists is the nexus where we unite people and science for conservation. By 2020, this community will grow by 50%, to 1200, include more youth, and complete a major new biodiversity mapping project.

► OUTREACH

Our 2014 expanded outreach initiatives (e.g., our new website and "Outdoor Radio" program) met with resounding success; our constituents are demanding more. By 2020, our capacity for public programming will increase with the addition of a staff naturalist/outreach coordinator.

► FINANCES

We will continue our trajectory of measured and strategic growth. Retaining current donors and recruiting new supporters, building our planned giving program, and diversifying our funding sources will all be key. By 2020, our Bicknell's Legacy Society will have >50 members and a plan will be in place to establish an endowment.

► A PLACE TO CALL HOME

By 2020, we will have an explicit plan for new VCE headquarters, dictated by our mission, core values, and anticipated growth.

FROM THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR



© MELISSA MACKENZIE

2014: A TRANSFORMATIVE YEAR FOR VCE

We grew, solidified, and matured, while conducting topnotch conservation science. As I reflect on VCE's 7-year history, I see a healthy balance between professionalism and personability. Our reputation among scientists, naturalists, and conservationists is solid. Effective communication is a VCE hallmark, a key element in our work and our values. As we continue our scientific pursuits, building and stewarding relationships with our volunteers, partners and donors will remain an unwavering priority.

As we report our 2014 accomplishments on the following pages, my thoughts turn to the future. At our retreat last fall, I proposed some preliminary ideas— my "Vision 2020," which we will refine as a staff next year, as we craft our 2017-2021 strategic plan.

In each area—conservation science, conservation outcomes, citizen science, outreach, finances, and headquarters—we will establish ambitious and realistic goals that challenge us to innovate and lead in wildlife conservation. We will find new and meaningful ways to engage the public in this work and to secure VCE's future through strategic and measured growth.

VCE is, and always has been, about people. As we eagerly look to the future, we never lose sight of the friends and partners who have helped us get this far. The energy and commitment you bring to the work we do together propel our vision of "Uniting People and Science for Conservation."

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read "Chris Rimmer". The signature is fluid and stylized, with a large initial "C" and "R".

CHRIS RIMMER

"Building and stewarding relationships with our volunteers, partners, and donors will remain an unwavering priority."

EVOLUTION AT VCE

A central tenet of evolutionary biology—punctuated equilibrium—holds that species evolution occurs via geologically brief, rapid, and rare events separated by long periods of relative stasis. This novel idea, proposed in 1972 by Niles Eldridge and Steven Jay Gould, contrasted sharply with the traditional view of evolutionary change as a continuous, gradual process. The punctuated equilibrium theory suggests that, while change does occur during prolonged periods of stasis, major, enduring, and directional progress takes place during bursts of widely spaced events.

2014 brought a burst of punctuated evolution for VCE. Founded in 2007 by a group of six biologists, we operated during our formative years under a simple yet successful model. Our entrepreneurial biologists conducted independent conservation research, aided by hundreds of citizen scientists and a business manager who wore every

hat under the sun. VCE staff pooled efforts and resources to publish not only scholarly papers, technical reports, and training manuals, but newsletters, blogs, a website, and articles for the popular media.

During those first six years, we—in close concert with our legion of citizen naturalists—achieved notable impacts for conservation. Our work expanded from projects centered in Vermont and the Northeast to investigations and conservation efforts that span the entire geographic range of migratory species' lives. This “full life cycle” approach to conservation engages partners in wintering areas and along migratory pathways, enabling us to build an impressive network of projects and partnerships across the hemisphere. In recent years, VCE scientists have assumed leadership roles in collaborative, science-based conservation planning at regional, national, and international scales.



While VCE biologists were busy producing results and building a coalition of scientific collaborators, word spread about our intriguing and important work. The public wanted more. VCE's constituents far and wide clamored to learn about our cutting-edge wildlife discoveries. Requests for outreach programs and public speaking engagements far outpaced our scientists' capacity to deliver.

VCE's first six years saw donor numbers grow from 500 to 900, as our supporters' enthusiasm tracked the trajectory of our work. Our operating budget doubled, as did income from grants and contracts, and additional biologists came on to support new projects. VCE operated in the black every year, even building a cash reserve to buffer public funding vagaries and the ebbs and flows of an inherently uncertain economy. Our workload was bursting at the seams; we needed a transformative adjustment.

Enter the evolutionary "burst" of 2014, a year that brought key structural changes to VCE, enabling the growth and maturation that we ambitiously laid out in our 2012-2016 strategic plan. We hired an Associate Director in January, a Director of Science in November, and an Administrative Assistant in early 2015. These measured changes removed administrative work from the biologists' plates, allowing them to concentrate on science. The result? An organizational structure that will allow VCE to realize our vision for conservation, while retaining our core focus on science—after all, 11 of our 13 staff are trained biologists—and providing the critical administrative support to underpin that science for years to come.

2014 brought key structural changes to VCE, enabling the growth and maturation that we envisioned in our 2012-2016 strategic plan.



Hawk Watching on Putney Mountain

HIGHLIGHTS



© KENT MCFARLAND

“Well-deserved publicity. I am proud to be associated with VCE!” —VCE SUPPORTER

FOOD WEB TOXINS

◀ With collaborators at Dartmouth College, VCE is examining the effects of landscape characteristics on mercury accumulation in vernal pools and assessing the toxin’s bioavailability to breeding amphibians and the terrestrial food web.



PROTECTING NESTING LOONS

VCE launched a 3-year effort to replace over 260 worn and outdated loon nest warning signs on lakes and ponds across the state, with the help of many volunteers, donors, the State of Vermont, and private foundations.

© JEFF NADLER



© TOM BENSON

DOCUMENTING THREATENED SPECIES

▲ Due to declines in Whip-poor-will populations throughout Vermont, the species is now listed as threatened in the state. In 2014, VCE conducted surveys in West Haven, Fair Haven, and the surrounding areas of Vermont to better define their distribution.



© JONATHAN VAN BILSON

UNITING PEOPLE AND SCIENCE

▲ VCE is leading the development of a network of grassland landscapes and cross-sector collaborators in the Midwest. Together, their work will support bird conservation objectives and the ecological, economic, and societal benefits of native, restored, and surrogate grasslands.

CONSERVATION PLANNING

▼ The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service selected VCE to write the blueprint for the conservation of Bobolinks not only across North America, but in South America as well—one of the first such conservation plans to span continents.

CAPACITY BUILDING

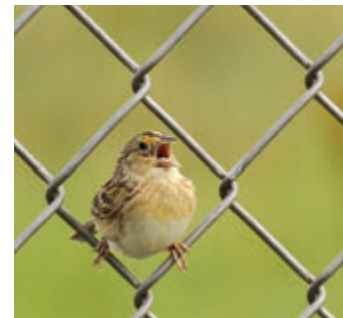
▼ In an event titled, “One Bird, Two Worlds,” VCE hosted partners from across the Dominican Republic involved in habitat conservation for Bicknell’s Thrush, and led them to our long-term study site atop Mt. Mansfield.



© DOUG GIMLER



© CHUCK GANGAS



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MIGRATION ECOLOGY

▲ As part of VCE’s full life cycle conservation efforts for grassland bird species, VCE is discovering the migration routes and wintering sites for Upland Sandpiper, Grasshopper Sparrow, and Bobolink. To track them during migration, we’re fitting birds with high-tech backpacks called geolocators at six military installations—home to extensive grasslands—across the U.S..

OUTREACH

▼ VCE and Vermont Public Radio team up to unite the sounds and science of nature on “Outdoor Radio,” an innovative, monthly public radio feature.



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HIGHLIGHTS



© KENT MCFARLAND

“Compelling story, well told. Your excitement really comes through.”

—VCE SUPPORTER

CITIZEN SCIENCE

✓ VCE coordinated year two of the Rusty Blackbird spring migration blitz, in cooperation with the International Rusty Blackbird Working Group and eBird, to identify critical habitat across the North American migration pathways of this bird that has declined by 90% since the mid-1900s.



© ROBERT THOMPSON

SPECIES PROTECTION

◀ Three bumble bee species were listed as threatened in Vermont following VCE's 3-year survey documenting significant recent declines in these species.

CRITICAL HABITATS

➤ In response to illegal habitat destruction and illicit commercial agriculture within Sierra de Bahoruco National Park, a UNESCO Biosphere Reserve on the Dominican Republic, VCE is working with local partners to engage the government and save the crown jewel of the country's protected areas and core Bicknell's Thrush habitat.



© HÉCTOR VILORIO

“Besides work that broadens knowledge of some of Vermont's showier insects, VCE has been critical in advancement of other, perhaps less eye-catching, taxa.”

—SCIENTIFIC COLLEAGUE



© KENT MCFARLAND

© JAMIE SYDORIAK



HABITAT MANAGEMENT

▲ VCE and its collaborators are reaching out to land-owners of Upper Valley VT and NH grasslands, providing them with management options that protect grassland birds and meet landowners' goals such as hay production and aesthetics.

© SUSAN HINDINGER



DIGITAL DATA REVOLUTION

VCE and partners launched *eButterfly*, an ambitious online project allowing scientists and the public to report, store, organize, and view vast amounts of data on butterfly distribution across North America.



LONG-TERM TRENDS

▼ Our Forest Bird Monitoring Project is now one of the continent's longest-running studies of forest bird population trends. VCE is mining the project's 25 years of data to determine where forest-interior bird diversity might be most at risk. Look for the "Status of Forest Birds" report in late 2015.

DATA COLLABORATIVES

▲ VCE is compiling a master database of known and potential vernal pool locations from Nova Scotia to Virginia, working with partners in every state and province in the region. It's an important first step in regional conservation of these vibrant and over-looked wetlands.



© KENT MCFARLAND

"An astounding and absolutely inspiring bit of research. Keep up the great work!"

—VCE SUPPORTER

COLLATERAL CONSEQUENCES

Long-term Monitoring
and Opportunistic Results



© JEFF NADLER



© MIKE BLUST

RVATION

Long-term monitoring flies in the face of cultural trends favoring instant gratification and immediate answers. Annual objectives? Keep it going. Deliverables? Ask again in 20 years. This is not the glamorous, tidy work that makes headlines and entices funders. Why then do we bother?

Not all questions can be answered in a one-year study. Patterns and processes that unfold over years or decades come to light only with long-term investigation, and that requires an unwavering commitment to conduct the same study year after year.

Mountain Birdwatch (MBW) is a citizen science project launched by VCE biologists in 2000 and coordinated by us every year since. With the exception of a major redesign in 2010, MBW has repeated the same protocol for 15 years (and will for at least 15 more). Our objective is to illuminate long-term trends in vulnerable montane bird populations across northeastern North America.

Like any project worth its salt, there were explicit goals and measurable scientific objectives from the start. But serendipity and opportunity have amplified MBW's value over time, in ways no one could have anticipated at the start. Indeed, these "collateral outcomes"—the on-the-ground conservation the project enables—may represent the most practical and

enduring value of any long-term dataset. However, because these outcomes are by their very nature indefinable as objectives at the outset, too often long-term monitoring projects are undervalued and difficult to fund.

Here is a sample of conservation results made possible by MBW data:

- A 12,000-acre, high-elevation tract in Maine was protected by the Trust for Public Land, which used MBW data to justify the land's overall conservation significance and establishment of a 4,000-acre mountaintop ecological reserve. MBW helped TPL mobilize over \$7.6 million for the project.
- MBW data has been used in siting wind and radio communications towers in Maine and New York, to minimize impacts to critical montane bird habitat.
- The Audubon Society used MBW data to inform designation of Important Bird Areas across the Northeast, garnering special protection for these sites.

➤ Conservation strategies and land management decisions across northeastern North America have been made based upon habitat models developed and ground-truthed using MBW data.

We can measure MBW's "collateral conservation" as opportunities arise, and be confident that the full suite of conservation outcomes the project generates will hinge upon, and surpass, the objectives defined at the start. With the continued support of donors and citizen scientists, and commitment of VCE biologists to deliver the data to conservation practitioners, this unique, long-term dataset will guide and inform conservation of the Northeast's montane forests for decades to come.

Monitoring on Mt. Mansfield



FINANCIALS



© DENIS FORTIER

PROFIT AND LOSS STATEMENT

2014*

2013

INCOME

CONTRACTS/GRANTS.....	\$491,094	\$380,253
PROGRAM INCOME.....	\$13,459	\$8,648
DONATIONS.....	\$608,003	\$446,111
INTEREST.....	\$628	\$409
OTHER.....	\$7,960	\$2,046
TOTAL INCOME.....	\$1,121,144	\$837,468

EXPENSE

PERSONNEL EXPENSES.....	\$677,247	\$603,524
BUSINESS EXPENSES.....	\$2,780	\$22,596
CONTRACT SERVICES.....	\$135,444	\$47,188
GENERAL OFFICE.....	\$43,469	\$40,350
MAILING COSTS.....	\$6,932	\$7,904
TRAVEL COSTS.....	\$33,771	\$30,654
MEETING.....	\$10,766	\$4,922
DEPRECIATION.....	\$6,293	\$4,444
FACILITIES EXPENSE.....	\$34,075	\$25,725
INSURANCE.....	10,865	\$11,086
BANK FEES.....	\$2,339	\$1,826
SUB GRANTS.....	\$46,370	\$31,005
OTHER.....	\$3,988	\$480
TOTAL EXPENSE.....	\$1,014,339	\$831,705
NET INCOME.....	\$106,805	\$5,763

BALANCE SHEET

2014*

2013

ASSETS

CURRENT ASSETS.....	\$644,878	\$426,051
EQUIPMENT.....	\$24,292	\$6,502
TOTAL ASSETS.....	\$669,170	\$432,553

LIABILITIES

CURRENT LIABILITIES.....	\$129,545	\$2,836
CAPITAL LEASE.....	\$3,242	
TOTAL LIABILITIES.....	\$132,787	\$2,836

NET ASSETS

UNRESTRICTED.....	\$368,539	\$358,204
TEMPORARILY RESTRICTED.....	\$167,844	\$71,513
TOTAL NET ASSETS.....	\$536,383	\$429,717

TOTAL LIABILITIES AND NET ASSETS*	\$669,170	\$432,553
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* The figures that appear in the financial summary shown are derived from the 2014 consolidated financial statements that have been audited and have received an unqualified opinion.

BICKNELL'S LEGACY SOCIETY

VCE recently formed the Bicknell's Legacy Society, to honor friends and supporters who have provided for VCE's future through their estate plans. Making a bequest, designating VCE as a beneficiary of an insurance policy or retirement plan, and establishing a charitable annuity or trust through a community foundation are all options for planned gifts. BLS donors are ensuring that VCE's innovative blend of conservation science and citizen engagement will continue to work for wildlife for generations to come. For more information about joining the BLS, visit www.vtecostudies.org/give/planned-giving.

BICKNELL'S LEGACY SOCIETY

Anonymous (2)
George Clark
Ann B. Day
The Whit and Closey Dickey Fund
at the New Hampshire Charitable
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Paula Gills
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Julie Nicholson*
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Lorna Chang Post
Charles and Clare Rimmer
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Elizabeth Ruml
Jen Stamp and Thomas Anderson
Peter and Mary Stangel

*deceased

"I think very highly of the work you all are doing. Please keep it up!"

—BLS MEMBER

DONORS

LEADERS

\$10,000+

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Anonymous Fund at the Boston Foundation
Binnacle Family Foundation
The Bobolink Foundation
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Riverledge Foundation
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\$5,000 to \$9,999

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Otter Creek Audubon Society
Darlene and Ernest Palola
Alexander S. Parr
Jan Parsons
Dr. Karyn M. Patno

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**“This has me
captivated. The
more I learn
about birds, the
happier I am.”**

—VCE SUPPORTER

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Mark S. Pecker and Elizabeth A. McGee
Marne Perreault
Dr. Robert and Jane Perrin
Dave and Ellie Peters
Gerald and Susan Peterson
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The Julie Nicholson Citizen Scientist Award honors Julie Nicholson's extraordinary passion and commitment to birds and wildlife conservation through her many years of tireless work as a citizen scientist. It is given annually to an individual who exemplifies Julie's dedication to the cause of citizen science and conservation.

Marv and Sue Elliot shared the award in 2014. They are long-time volunteers whose dedication to birds made the second Atlas of Breeding Birds a success and helped conserve part of the West Rutland Marsh. Marv and Sue have chased birds, butterflies, and all manner of critters for VCE's citizen science projects. Sue leads the species count on the iNaturalist Vermont Atlas of Life leaderboard, having identified over 1600 species in almost 5,000 observations!

“Vermont is the perfect place for citizen science projects, with its small size and environmental ethic, and with so many birders and naturalists all over the state, there are endless opportunities for learning new things.” —SUE ELLIOT

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