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This article was published in the February 02, 2012, edition of *The Bar Harbor Times*. Highlights in Rich's column this week focus on a Dovekie in Manset, Maine, and the ducks of the Somesville mill pond, including three American Wigeon and five banded Mallards.

Nature Notes

By Rich MacDonald

As a longtime nature writer, I am enamored with language and words. There may be no better way to appreciate vocabular nuances than through our youth. On January 21, John Avila and I took our preschool-aged children, Lucian and Anouk, on an ice-fishing adventure to Lake Wood. Anouk thought it was the funniest name. "That's like saying Ocean Tree or River Bush," she laughed. We did not catch any fish, but did see Coyote tracks.

There have been regular reports of Coyote activity around Town Hill in recent weeks. They are fascinating creatures. Eastern Coyote are considerably larger than those of the West, typically weighing between 32 and 38 pounds compared to the 22-30 pound range of those in the West. Genetic studies of Eastern Coyote reveal considerable amounts of wolf in their ancestry. In a study of 100 Coyotes in Maine, 22 had at least 50% wolf ancestry and one was 89% wolf. Opinions are mixed in the scientific community whether the Eastern Coyote (*Canis latrans*) has any domestic dog (*Canis lupus familiaris*) in its heritage, but there are traces of both Red Wolf (*Canis rufus*) and Gray "Timber" Wolf (*Canis lupus*). This led New York State Museum curator Roland Kays to jokingly suggest Eastern Coyotes be renamed *Canis soupus* for their diverse genetic soup.

While Coyotes are the most common of our two local, wild canids, Ed Hawkes recently had a Red Fox in his yard near the head of Mount Desert Island. They are significantly smaller than Coyote, weighing about 12 pounds. We are in the middle of fox mating season, so an increase in the number of sightings is to be expected, with kits typically born in March and April.

This is also a good time to search for the elusive Snowshoe Hare. Their fur coat, molted twice yearly, provides seasonal camouflage. In the summer, their pelage is brown, in winter it is white. So it was, on January 22, with the lack of snow, a flattened fauna Snowshoe Hare on Route 3 near Northeast Creek was in stark contrast to the otherwise drab landscape.

Surely I am not the only one who has trouble adapting to the changing calendar each year. Looking through my field notebook for this week's column, I found all my January entries tagged 2011. Oops! Seems every year I make this error. Back in my days of working on Federally-funded research, correcting such an error was an onerous process: you struck the error with a single line, wrote the correct entry nearby, then initialed and dated the correction. I no longer follow the Federal standard, but I did change all of the erroneous 2011s to 2012.

The award for Mount Desert Island's avian highlight these past two weeks goes to the cooperative Dovekie frequenting the Manset shoreline since January 23. That is when *Maine Birding Trail* author Bob Duchesne first spied this small alcid. Alcids, or family Alcidae, includes puffins and guillemots. Dovekies are the smallest and most abundant alcid. Being so abundant, they have long featured in the diets of northern peoples. The Inuit even used highly water repellant Dovekie skins to make clothing. This pelagic bird breeds in the high Arctic, primarily Greenland, and spend the rest of its life offshore from Greenland to Virginia. In the Gulf of Maine, they are typically a winter bird seen dozens of miles offshore. Generally, the best place to seek them locally is along Ocean Drive from Sand Beach (where three were observed last January) to Otter Cliffs.

Three American Wigeon on the Somesville mill pond, adjacent to the library, were another good find. They have been there for weeks and were seen as recently as January 31. They are known among hunters as "Baldpate" for the stripe of buff-colored feathers spanning the crest of its head. Wigeon breed along the northern portions of the continent, from the Bering Sea to Hudson, and winter in the southern two-thirds of the U.S. They are found almost annually here on MDI in ones and twos. The presence of three wigeon is unusual in Maine. Of course, increased numbers of this dabbling duck may become the norm as their population continues to increase and expand eastward.

Fifty-nine Mourning Doves at the home of Ed and Deb Hawkes January 18 was a significant number. Today, we are accustomed to seeing this gently cooing dove at our feeders. One hundred years ago, any Mourning Dove sighting elicited excitement in the birding community. Among the early records I have come across was

“one seen by J.R. Wakefield at Southwest Harbor, Aug. 27 and 28, 1891. An adult male shot by C.F. Batchelder at Seal Harbor, Aug. 12, 1902.” (This bird is now in the collections of the United States National Museum). James Bond, writing in 1958, described the bird as a “transient and rare summer resident.” In 1967, he wrote that “although frequently encountered in late summer, few of these doves breed on Mt. Desert and their cooing is seldom heard here.” By 1982, Ralph Long stated that “during the past ten years this dove has become a well established summer resident.” Look for Mourning Doves to begin building nests as early as late March.

On January 28, on The Natural History Center’s weekly Saturday morning birdwalk, William and Kyle Nichols observed five banded Mallards at the Somesville mill pond, four of which they were able to read and report on-line to the Bird Banding Laboratory. Three had been banded on Somes Pond January 7, 2011. What was particularly exciting, though, was finding a male that had been banded 1,500 miles away in Pipestone, Manitoba, as an “ASY” August 23, 2003. In the parlance of ornithologists, ASY means “after second year,” so the bird was at least two years old at the time of banding. That means the Pipestone Mallard is now at least 11 years old.

Banding has been done formally and cooperatively in the United States and Canada for over 100 years. According to the Bird Banding lab, banding is an “indispensible technique for studying the movement, survival and behavior of birds.”

For me, one of the messages from this week’s report is the importance of always looking carefully at the birds...you never know when something interesting may show up.

Rich MacDonald runs The Natural History Center in Bar Harbor. If you would like to share your observations of the natural world that is Mount Desert Island, contact him at rich@thenaturalhistorycenter.com.