

THE LIVINGSTON RIPLEY WATERFOWL CONSERVANCY

Research • Education • Conservation Action



AUTUMN 2009

NEWSLETTER

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LRWC RESEARCHERS TRAVEL TO GREENLAND

The term “going green” had a special meaning for the Livingston Ripley Waterfowl Conservancy (LRWC) this summer, as Director Sue Sheaffer and LRWC Research Scientist



White-fronted goose with a satellite transmitter.

Rich Malecki joined a 13-person expedition to Greenland. The expedition partnered the LRWC with participants from the National Environmental Research Institute (Denmark), the Joint Nature Conservation Committee (UK), the Wildfowl and Wetlands Trust (UK), the Department of Environment, Heritage and Local Government (Ireland), BirdWatch Ireland, and the U.S. Department of Agriculture. The expedition was part of a collaborative research effort for the declining population of Greenland white-fronted geese (*Anser albifrons flavirostris*). Our role was to outfit geese with satellite transmitters that will track their migration over the Greenland ice cap during the fall when they return to their wintering grounds. The information collected from these birds will allow us to identify important habitats and stopover locations along the way that need to be protected.

Although most populations of greater white-fronted geese are doing just fine, the relatively small population (currently <30,000 birds) that breeds in Greenland has been a conservation concern for many years. These

birds winter exclusively in Ireland, Scotland and Wales, and are one of the rarest species of geese to winter in the United Kingdom. This population has declined by almost 30% over the last 10 years, yet the causes of the decline are not known with certainty. Suspected are late spring weather conditions that have limited annual reproduction, and increased competition for nest sites on the breeding range from an expanding population of breeding Canada geese (*Branta canadensis*) that are now found in southwestern Greenland. The focus of the expedition was to capture and mark not only white-fronted geese, but also Canada geese.

The transmitters for this project are solar powered, with a built-in solar panel across the top of the unit to keep the battery charged. Inside the transmitter there is a GPS receiver to record the daily locations of the birds, and a satellite transmitter that



Breeding geese inhabit the isolated lakes surrounded by steep hills in southwestern Greenland.

sends the data to an orbiting satellite. There also is a small microprocessor that can be programmed to tell the unit when to collect a GPS location and when to download data to the satellite. The technology is pretty

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LRWC RESEARCHERS TRAVEL TO GREENLAND

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amazing, as the entire transmitter weighs only 45 grams. The transmitters are programmed to collect six GPS locations each day, and the locations are downloaded to an orbiting satellite every three days. The data are subsequently emailed to the LRWC office, where we can monitor the



© Paul Wolf

The edge of the Greenland ice cap was only a few miles from our camp.

movements of the white-fronts anywhere they go.

Breeding pairs of Greenland white-fronted geese inhabit the small isolated lakes interspersed among the steep hills of southwestern Greenland. This region is above the arctic circle, and during the summer it is light 24 hours a day. The lack of helicopter availability in Greenland meant that, in order to capture geese for banding, we had to hike to a



© Jan Skiver

A surprised caribou watches the activity.

field camp and locate geese on foot. The trekking in southwestern Greenland is difficult for even the experienced hiker, as the steep hills and uneven terrain of the tundra made for difficult walking. The scenery, however, was

spectacular, as we were privileged to share our campsite with a variety of wildlife including long-tailed ducks, common loons, arctic foxes, and even the occasional musk ox and caribou.

Capturing geese in Greenland proved to be a difficult task. The nets, poles, and portable kayaks used to capture the geese, plus all the banding equipment, had to be carried to each banding location. The geese molt their flight feathers during July, which meant that they were flightless and could be herded like sheep.



© Jan Skiver

A common loon visits the shoreline of our campsite.

Catching birds involved surrounding a lake with people to hold the geese on the water, setting up the nets and catch pen, inflating the kayaks, and then using kayaks and people on shore to move the birds towards the catch pen at the end of the lake. Although most of the geese were cooperative, those sneaky white-fronts were masters of the surprise escape move.

Our efforts were centered in prime breeding habitat



© Jan Skiver

Musk ox wander by (...they go ANYWHERE they want!)

for white-fronted geese; however, this year the numbers of white-fronts were dramatically down from previous years. At the end of the three-week trip, we had only

marked two adult white-fronts with satellite transmitters. Whether the white-fronts have experienced a shift in their

collared Canada geese from Greenland, so keep your eyes peeled this winter for these long-distance migrants.



Geese were corralled into nets using people on land and in kayaks.

breeding distribution, or if the apparent lack of breeding birds was related to a continued decline in population size, remains to be seen. However, the lack of breeding birds highlights the ever increasing need for continued research



A crafty white-fronted goose sneaks past Olivia Crowe of Bird Watch Ireland as she herds the geese.

efforts for this population.

In an effort to answer questions about the potential impact of Canada geese on the white-front breeding areas, we captured about 150 Canada geese and marked them with yellow plastic neck collars. These birds were also tested for the presence of avian influenza, as part of a world-wide effort to monitor the spread of this disease. Last winter there were several sightings on the Connecticut coast of

It is disappointing when things don't go as planned, and you don't get to deploy all of your transmitters. However, just like the local ducks that give it another go when they lose their first nest of eggs, we are going to try again. Our trip to Greenland opened several doors for the LRWC overseas, and we are planning to travel to the wintering grounds in Ireland where the Ireland Department of Environment, Heritage and Local Government has offered to trap white-fronted geese in early December. Our goal will be to deploy an additional four satellite transmitters in Ireland. This will allow us to track these birds throughout the annual cycle, providing information to guide

critical management initiatives for this population across its range.



Research Scientist Dr. Richard Malecki outfits a white-fronted goose with a satellite transmitter.

Check out more photos of the Greenland expedition, coming to www.lrwc.net, October 15, 2009

FROM THE DIRECTOR

To the casual visitor, summer appears to be a relatively quiet time at the Livingston Ripley Waterfowl Conservancy (LRWC). The brightly colored males of spring have molted into lackluster, brown birds that sometimes are barely distinguishable from their female counterparts. Cute, downy ducklings turn into scruffy looking juvenile birds as they acquire their first adult plumage. Hot summer days make even the most tropical species head for the shade, and the air is notably silent after the symphony of mating calls that overwhelmed us during the spring breeding season. Public tours are suspended during July and August, and the frenzied activity of spring gives way to a time of rest, rejuvenation and reflection.

As I reflect over the past year, I realize it has been a spectacularly busy one at the LRWC. We had a banner year in the aviary, as we had over 40 species successfully breed, producing 180 young birds. The LRWC has continued to maintain a reputation as one of the finest breeding facilities in North America for rare and endangered waterfowl. However, the LRWC is no longer just about captive birds.

The past year we conducted major research efforts in the field involving the use of satellite transmitter technology to monitor movements and distributions of waterfowl. Recent developments in technology have produced satellite transmitters equipped with GPS instruments that are small enough to fit on the back of a duck. This technology has revolutionized how we study waterfowl migrations and distributions, and can be used to improve our knowledge of how changes in waterfowl distributions relate to contemporary changes in landscapes and the environment. LRWC researchers are currently working with several state, federal and private wildlife agencies to develop a large-scale monitoring effort to evaluate the annual movements and distributions of mallards across mid-continent North America. The information collected from mallards will be used to guide management initiatives for the restoration and conservation of critical wetland habitats for many waterfowl species throughout North America.

We also expanded our research effort overseas as LRWC researchers recently traveled to Greenland to deploy satellite transmitters on white-fronted geese. Although we were able to mark only two birds while in Greenland, we will be travelling to Ireland later this year to place transmitters on an additional four birds from this population. The Greenland population of white-fronted geese has been of conservation concern for many years, and the information gathered from birds carrying satellite transmitters will allow us to identify critical habitats that need to be protected.



The LRWC also maintained an active educational program, both on and off site. Our most popular program, Incubator in a Classroom, had a record participation by local classrooms in 2009. We also maintained a Duck Nest Box program, where high school students helped install and maintain nest boxes for wood ducks and hooded mergansers. Our General Bird Education program traveled to summer camps and after school programs, teaching elementary school children about bird life and conservation. Duck Day, our annual open house in June, attracted the largest number of visitors to the LRWC, second only to a growing number of group tours and school field trips. This year we had over 1,000 people visit on Duck Day.

We recently finished construction of a new enclosure designed to meet the specific needs of sea ducks, and we are eagerly awaiting the scheduled fall arrival of several sea duck species that we have acquired for this special enclosure. The new enclosure will allow us to increase the size and diversity of our sea duck collection, which in turn will greatly enhance educational opportunities for visitors and students. Because of the difficulty in monitoring and collecting essential data from wild sea ducks, a captive environment which promotes the natural behavior of these rare birds will provide opportunities for research on behavior, physiology, ecology, and other aspects of sea duck life history. The LRWC sea duck enclosure will be the foundation for the development of research initiatives for several species of sea ducks.

As for the quiet days of summer, the fall has ushered in the return of the brilliant plumage for many species, and courtship activity is already picking up. Large flocks of migrating waterfowl can be seen overhead, with occasional visiting migrants dropping by the open aviary ponds for a brief rest. As the cycle of life continues among the different waterfowl species, the staff at the LRWC will continue to look for new and exciting ways to enhance our commitment to the protection of waterfowl and their habitats through research, conservation action and educational outreach. If you would like more information about our program, visit our website to learn how you can support our research initiatives and educational programs and become a part of our ongoing efforts.

Dr. Susan Sheaffer
Executive Director

MALLARD SATELLITE TELEMETRY STUDY UPDATE

Mallards are an abundant species of duck and widely distributed across North America. In recent years, there has been much interest in the development of a large-scale study of mallard movements, distributions and habitat use in

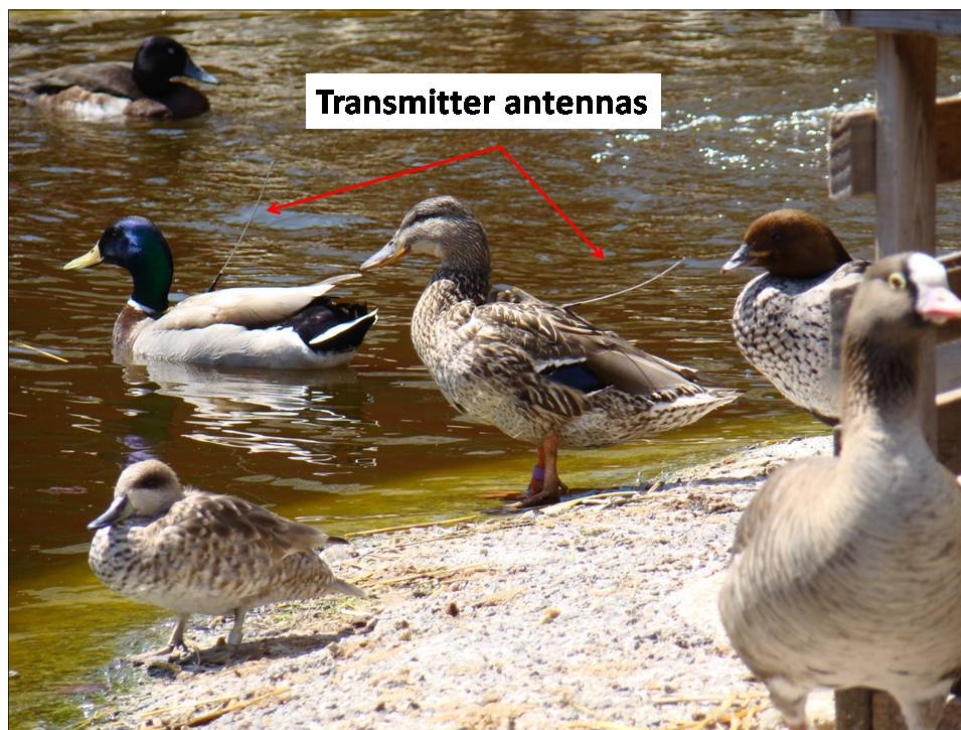
mid-continent North America using solar-powered GPS satellite transmitters. Such a large-scale study would provide an unprecedented evaluation of how ducks use the habitats that have been restored, protected and maintained for waterfowl under continental habitat conservation programs, including the North American Waterfowl

Management Plan (NAWMP). The LRWC is currently the coordinating agency for the initial phases of this project, which involves testing the transmitters, designing the harness attachment, and developing the field methods and study design. Our partners in this effort include all the mid-continent state wildlife agencies and their waterfowl biologists, Ducks Unlimited, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the Canadian Wildlife Service, and the Science Support Team for NAWMP. The ultimate goal of the project is to further our understanding of how changes in waterfowl distributions relate to contemporary changes in landscapes and the environment, which ultimately will improve the design, coordination, and implementation of future conservation strategies not only for waterfowl, but for many species that depend on wetland ecosystems.

To date, much of the preliminary work for this project has focused on using captive birds to evaluate how different models of transmitters perform when placed on the back of a duck using a Teflon-ribbon backpack harness. If you visited our aviary in 2009, you might have noticed the antennas protruding off the backs of several of our mallards and black ducks. Although our Aviculturist Ian Gereg

jokingly refers to these as our “remote-controlled birds”, these birds are actually providing us with valuable information about how well the latest models of solar-powered GPS satellite transmitters work when attached to

a live duck. Unlike the transmitters for the larger white-fronted geese, the smaller transmitters for ducks weigh between 22 and 30 grams. You also might have noticed several plastic boxes mounted on milk crates scattered about the aviaries last spring. These boxes also contained transmitters, which were used to generate control data for comparison with



LRWC mallards sport the latest in satellite transmitter technology.

the data from the transmitters on live birds.

This fall we will be continuing our work with captive mallards to evaluate the fit and tolerance of two different backpack harness designs. Tentative plans are for a limited release of transmitters on wild mallards in 2010, at which time we will be finalizing the proposal for the large-scale study.



Black duck with a satellite transmitter.

2009 BREEDING SEASON HIGHLIGHTS

The LRWC had another exciting and productive rearing season, with over 40 species of waterfowl breeding in 2009. One of the notable achievements of the year included our continued success with the endangered red-breasted goose (*Branta rufficollis*). We



Red-breasted geese are everywhere this year!

produced thirty-eight young red-breasted geese in 2009, up from our previous record of thirty-two in 2008. We also had success breeding several other species of concern, including the endangered Meller's duck (*Anas melleri*) of Madagascar, the critically endangered Laysan duck (*Anas laysanensis*) of the Hawaiian Islands, and the threatened lesser white-fronted goose (*Anser erythropus*) of northern Eurasia.

Our growing collection of sea ducks was also productive this year, with the successful rearing of six species, including another great year with common eiders (*Somateria mollissima dresseri*). Many of the young sea ducks reared this season will be integrated into our newly constructed sea duck enclosure that will be used to promote conservation awareness and research initiatives for this poorly understood and under-studied group of waterfowl.



Common eiders and their ducklings.

INCUBATOR IN A CLASSROOM

The LRWC's Incubator in a Classroom program continued to grow in popularity in 2009, with over five-hundred students in eight schools participating, including four new schools in Litchfield, Morris and Torrington.



Aviculturist Ian Gereg teaches local students about incubation.

The program provides students with an opportunity to experience the egg incubation and hatching process firsthand, right in their classroom. They also get to watch the chicks during their important first week of life. Along with the always exciting hatch day, students especially enjoy using the egg candler,

a device that allows students to peer through the shell at the developing chicks. Periodic visits by LRWC 'eggsperts' during the incubation period help the students understand the embryo development occurring inside the eggs and provide an opportunity for question and answer sessions regarding egg structure, development, and avian life cycles.



The chicks begin to hatch.

SEA DUCKS ARE COMING TO LRWC!

This summer the LRWC began construction of a special enclosure suited to the needs of sea ducks. Sea ducks are some of the least studied and most poorly understood of all waterfowl species. They face serious threats as global



Excavation of the new pond begins.

warming and human activities continue to take their tolls on the arctic breeding grounds and coastal wintering areas. The construction of an enclosure designed to meet the specific needs of sea ducks will allow the LRWC to keep these unique ducks for captive research and conservation awareness programs.

Excavation work for the enclosure pond was graciously donated by John Fairbairn of J & M Landscape Design in Woodbury, with the assistance of long-time volunteer Clint Herdman. John and Clint are both waterfowl aficionados and active members of the Connecticut Waterfowlers Association. Construction of the enclosure began shortly after the pond excavation, and the enclosure is scheduled for completion later this year. A large portion of the construction costs were funded by two generous grants from the Sidni K. Undercuffler Memorial Trust Fund of the Watertown Foundation, which promotes conservation, preservation, and the management of our natural resources. Additional donations from the Connecticut Waterfowlers Association and the American Pheasant and Waterfowl Society will be

utilized to help stock the enclosure with waterfowl, including long-tailed ducks, king eiders, spectacled eiders, and white-winged scoters.

Our goal is to create a unique educational exhibit that contains the 14 different species of sea ducks. Whoever coined the phrase "if you build it they will come" had no clue about the high cost of acquiring hard-to-raise sea ducks. If you are interested in helping us stock our sea duck enclosure, visit our website and check out the Adopt-a-Duck section of the Sea Duck



Our common eiders test out the new enclosure.

Conservation Program. Donations to cover acquisition costs for a specific pair of sea ducks will provide you with the unique opportunity to name your ducks. In addition, we will send you a certificate of adoption with interesting facts about the species you select, updates on your ducks every six months, and an invitation to the grand opening ceremony of the sea duck enclosure.

SUMMER INTERNS

Two local students, Dale Eriksen and Kevin Jurkiewicz, spent their summer at the LRWC this year as part of our internship program. LRWC internships focus on teaching students sound aviculture skills and techniques. During their time with us, Kevin and Dale also assisted in a variety of other activities, including the construction of aviaries, guiding visitors at our annual Duck Day, and banding wild ducks and geese with the Connecticut



Dale Eriksen

D.E.P.'s Wildlife Division. Both young men are interested in continuing their work with waterfowl and wildlife in their future careers. Thank you Kevin and Dale for all your hard work!



Kevin Jurkiewicz

Special thanks to the American Pheasant and Waterfowl Society and the Leslie E. Tassell Avicultural Foundation for their sponsorship of our summer internship program this year.

DID YOU KNOW?

🦆 LRWC Research Scientist Dr. Richard Malecki was part of a team of waterfowl experts that provided valuable insight about the origins of the Canada geese that collided with US Airways Flight 1549 in January 2009. When a recently published report relied on an analysis of feather fragments to conclude that the birds had nested in northern Canada and were not from one of the local nesting populations, concern was raised that airport managers might misinterpret the findings. The waterfowl experts demonstrated that the conclusions of the report were not definitive. Feather fragments can be used to identify the region where geese have molted, which is not always the same region where they go to breed. Many Canada geese from the local populations that nest in the US often make a late summer migration to northern Canada to molt. This important fact means that the Canada geese involved in the collision could have been from either a migratory or a local resident population, and highlights the need for airport managers to continue to address bird strike hazard issues involving local populations of Canada geese.

🦆 LRWC volunteer Clint Herdman was the artist who designed the 2009 Duck Stamp for Connecticut. His realistic and intricate drawing of a black duck is on display at the LRWC office, and surely will be enjoyed by many for years to come (...we're not giving ours up anytime soon!). Congratulations, Clint!

🦆 LRWC Aviculturist Ian Gereg has started the second year of his research for a Master of Science Degree in Wildlife Management at the State University of New York



in Syracuse. Ian's research involves evaluating feather development and molt chronology in young waterfowl. Research into early development, behavior, and molt cycles will improve our understanding of the natural history for several waterfowl species that have been poorly studied. Don't be surprised to see a few odd-colored ducklings around the aviaries, as a harmless and temporary dye is helping Ian document juvenile molt cycles for a variety of species.



Volunteer Clint Herdman with his winning black duck print.

🦆 The LRWC was featured in a segment of the regional television show *All Things Connecticut*. The episode featuring the LRWC aired on Connecticut Public Television stations in May. If you would like to view the video, check it out at <http://www.cptv2.org/allthingsct/positively-connecticut/waterfowl>.



Volunteer Clint Herdman shot these photos of a bobcat on the LRWC grounds last winter.

BIOLOGICAL CONTROL GOES BATTY AT THE LRWC

Mosquitoes are a continued nuisance at the LRWC, not only for the discomfort they cause to the staff and volunteers, but also because of the health hazard they pose to captive waterfowl. Mosquitoes can transmit West Nile virus to both birds and people. In order to control the mosquitoes at the LRWC, this year we erected 28 nest boxes designed for small birds and 6 bat houses for roosting bats. Volunteer Tim Nicholson from Bantam Boy



Bat box on the LRWC rearing barn.

and roosting sites for bats, they help to insure that the LRWC is visited by species that are known to eat lots of mosquitoes.

This past summer the bird boxes were occupied by

Scout Troop 29 assisted with the construction and placement of the boxes and houses this spring. Many of the bird boxes can be seen along the perimeter fence of the LRWC aviary. These structures not only provide attractive nesting sites for local song birds

titmice, bluebirds, wrens, and several broods of tree swallows. Our bat houses were not occupied this year; however, it is not uncommon for newly erected bat houses



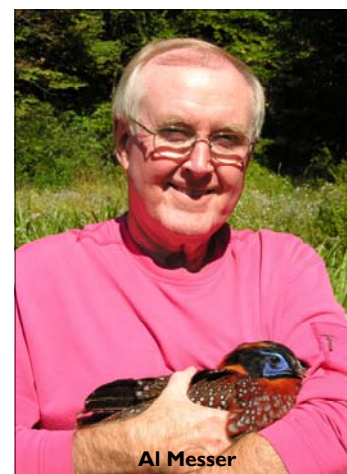
An adult red bat with her young hangs from the aviary netting.

in local barns and attics during summer, red bats roost in trees and are listed as a species of special concern in Connecticut. What a rare treat to observe these special creatures, which are more efficient at controlling mosquitoes than a bug zapper.

to remain empty for at least a year before the bats move in. In addition, the disease "white-nose syndrome" has dramatically reduced bat numbers in local hibernacula during the winter months. Although our bat houses were empty this summer, we were fortunate to have over a dozen red bats (*Lasiurus borealis*) literally hanging out in the LRWC aviary. Unlike the more common brown bats which roost

VOLUNTEER PROFILE

We'd like to take this opportunity to thank long-time volunteer Al Messer for his assistance. Over the past few years, Al has spent his Monday and Friday mornings routinely helping with daily bird care at the LRWC aviary. From feeding young ducklings to catching swans, Al has done it all. Al first learned of the LRWC when he arrived for a guided tour. Over the years Al's zeal for birds and aviculture has followed him home, where he now keeps a beautiful collection of pheasants. Al also has been involved in the LRWC's annual Duck Day festivities for several years, volunteering to educate and entertain visitors to our waterfowl rearing barn and aviaries. This year, Al began assisting with our increasingly popular Incubator in a Classroom program, acting as a classroom 'eggspert' in local schools. Many thanks to Al for his years of dedicated service to the LRWC!



Al Messer

DUCK DAY 2009 REVIEW

The sky was blue, the air was warm, and the LRWC's fourth annual Duck Day experienced record attendance. Over 1,000 people attended the festivities. Special events included the always popular puppet show by



Emeritus Professor Alphonse Avitabile amazes the crowd with a swarm of bees.

renowned puppeteer Jim Napolitano and a live demonstration of canine retrieving ability conducted by Larry Hindman of the Maryland Department of Natural Resources. We had several new attractions this year,



Erin O'Connell displays a turkey vulture.

including an amazing display of swarming honey bees by Alphonse Avitabile, which was featured the next day on the front page of the local paper. The Audubon Sharon exhibit drew a standing-room-only crowd for Erin O'Connell's program featuring Connecticut's birds of prey. Our new waterfowl coloring booth was packed with kids, producing 150 crayon masterpieces which covered the tent wall by the end of the day.

Duck Day was filled with hands-on educational and fun activities related to waterfowl, wildlife, and habitat conservation. The LRWC's rearing barn and aviaries were open to attendees interested in learning about our captive waterfowl collection and breeding program. Exhibiting organizations included Ducks Unlimited, Connecticut Department of Environmental Protection, Connecticut Waterfowlers Association, Litchfield Hills Audubon Society, White Memorial Conservation Center, and several wildlife carvers and artists. The day was full of sunny dispositions and smiling faces, and even the exhibitors got into the spirit of things by donating several items for giveaways to the crowd during the day.



Larry Hindman teaches basic retrieving commands.

We would like to thank our dedicated volunteers for their indispensable assistance which produced a highly successful Duck Day, and our presenters and exhibitors for their time and effort in making the event fun and educational for all.



The new LRWC coloring booth was a big hit.



Eager kids watch for rubber ducks racing down Butternut Brook.

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Ms. Caroline Niemczyk
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Mr. Ira Shapiro
Mr. Olaf Soltau
Mr. Maximilian Tieman



The Livingston Ripley Waterfowl Conservancy
 P.O. Box 210
 Litchfield, CT 06759

We would like to thank all of our donors and volunteers for their generous support during 2009.

TOURS

Guided tours are offered on Sundays at 2:00 P.M. during the months of May, June, September and October. Admission is \$10.00 per person and children under the age of 10 are free. Tour pre-registration is required. Group tours can be arranged on request by calling the Conservancy at (860) 567-1691. We look forward to welcoming you!

DIRECTIONS

From Litchfield Center, take Rte 202 west towards Bantam. Travel 0.8 miles to the traffic light (just past Stop & Shop on left) and turn right on Milton Road. Take third left onto Duck Pond Road, a small dirt road. Proceed 0.5 miles, crossing a small bridge, to the Conservancy driveway on the right marked with a wooden sign for LRWC.



**The Livingston Ripley
 Waterfowl Conservancy**



10 Duck Pond Road • P.O. Box 210
 Litchfield, CT 06759
 860-567-2062 • Fax 860-567-4369
 info@lrwc.net • www.lrwc.net

MEMBERSHIP

To become a member of the Conservancy, please fill out the following form, cut along dotted line and send with your check or money order to the address at the left.

\$25 Annual membership

Want to contribute more?

Select amount: \$50 \$250 Enter an amount
 \$100 \$500 _____

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 City _____ State _____ Zip _____
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Visit our website at www.lrwc.net