

# Common Ground: Fascination of Birds

by Jane M. Vossler

"I have always been fascinated by the familiar call of the birds in autumn...It causes me to look skyward and wonder...Where are they headed? How do they know when to go? Who's in charge of the travel plans?" wrote artist Lori Hinrichsen of Montpelier in her artist's statement for the Birds of Vermont current art exhibit, Common Ground.

Her work is simple but striking. It's made of embroidery floss stitched onto paper in three different colors to show the east, west, and central migratory routes taken each fall by 3.5 billion birds that travel south out of the boreal forests and across political and geographical borders toward their winter habitats.

Up until 100 years ago, the migratory birds Hinrichsen wrote about were under attack with many hunted for sport or for their feathers to be used by an insatiable fashion industry. As a result, a number of species were near extinction.

The National Audubon Society and other organizations and individuals pushed for a federal conservation law to protect the birds. In 1918 the Migratory Bird Treaty Act (MBTA) was signed into law and codified a treaty with Canada. One of the oldest wildlife protection measures, it makes it unlawful to capture, sell or kill migratory birds, although it does allow for regulated hunting and other exceptions. Nests, eggs, and feathers are also protected although it's possible, explained Erin Talmadge, executive director of Birds of Vermont Museum "for institutions like ours to get permits for nests and eggs."

In 1936, a similar treaty was made between the US and Mexico. Over the years, amendments have added more birds to the protected list including native birds that do not migrate. Today over 1,000 species are protected.

According to the National Audubon Society, the MBTA has led to positive results over the last century and has saved "millions, if not billions, of birds." The snowy egret was near extinction when the Act was passed, and it's now doing well. The wood duck and the sandhill crane were also saved from extinction, and a lot of tern species are doing better.

To read more about the history of the MBTA and the current threat to undermine it by the Trump administration go to <https://www.audubon.org/news/migratory-bird-treaty-act>.

Common Ground celebrates the 100th anniversary of the MBTA. Erin Talmadge, explained the title of the exhibit, "Migratory birds cross boundaries, and we have to find common ground with other cultures and countries to protect them."

Several years ago, knowing that the 100th anniversary of the MBTA was coming up in 2018, Allison Gergely, Museum educator, had the idea for an art exhibit to celebrate the Treaty and the good that has come from it. A call was put out to artists and over 150 pieces were submitted. From these a group chose 44 pieces to display. The pieces they chose range from

outdoor metal sculptures to handmade books, watercolor, oil, colored pencil and acrylic paintings, photographs, fiber art, collages, a wood carving, and block prints. The variety of media makes the exhibit especially rich.

Enriching the exhibit is a notebook filled with artists' statements. As you peruse the exhibit, be sure to take the notebook with you. Reading the artists' words about why and how they created the work will enhance your connection to the art.

Many of the works focus on the history of migratory birds and the importance of working together for their benefit.

Amy Alfieri of Hinesburg's title for her block print on paper says it all, *A HAT IS NO HOME*. In the late 1800s, an estimated 5 million birds were killed for their feathers each year worldwide according to the American Ornithologists' Union.

Meili Stokes writes about her celebratory art piece, *THE LONG DANCE*, "I use colorful patterns and folk-art images to envision an optimistic, long-term relationship between humans and earth."

Other works focus on one migratory bird, each chosen by the committee for a particular reason.

Corinna Thurston did a black and white drawing of an Arctic tern, a bird that not only has the longest migration of any bird with a round trip of around 44,000 miles each year, but also was one of the most affected by the taking of birds for feathers for fashion in the late 1800s.

An interactive exhibit called *SELFIE WITH SNOWY* shows a painting of a snowy egret and suggests

that you take a selfie of yourself wearing a hat with a paper feather in its band to represent the vast number of egrets killed to satisfy the demands of fashion. The artist, Elizabeth Spinney, says her work is meant "to celebrate the conservation success of the MBTA and snowy egrets."

A photo of migrating sandhill cranes by Mike McClaskey is an interesting choice for the show because McClaskey writes, "I contribute many of my photos to data bases that researchers use to track changes in our environment." It's a great example of art and science working together.

If you go, be sure to check out two works—one by a Huntington resident and the other of the youngest artist in the show. Alison Forrest of Huntington has a tapestry in the show made of wool and wood depicting a wooded habitat. Tiny ceramic birds hanging in the sky add to the creativity of the piece.

The youngest artist is seven-year-old Juniper Murray of Essex. She sketched birds on basswood and then burned in the designs. She wrote in her artist's statement, "I like birds, and I like when communities work together to help birds."

These are only a few of the works of art you'll see when you visit the Birds of Vermont Museum's show. Maina Handmaker, who created three sets of cards with a photo of a migrating bird on the front and its migratory route on the back, sums up the show in her artist's statement: "Whether shorebirds or songbirds, these great travelers connect us. They push us—to break the boundaries we've built between cultures, communities, and countries—and to work together to protect them."

The show runs through October 31. It's a treasure not to be missed.