

Good afternoon. Thank you to the members of the House Committee on Natural Resources, Fish, and Wildlife for this opportunity to provide testimony on H. 683. My name is Cory Ross. I am a graduate of Oregon State University with a degree in Fisheries and Wildlife Sciences. Over the past several years I have worked as a field technician on a range of avian research studies, including threatened and potentially endangered species. Currently I am the District Manager for the Windham County Natural Resources Conservation District. I also serve on the board for the Southeastern Vermont Audubon Society and am the coordinator for the Brattleboro Christmas Bird Count.

I come before you today to speak in support of House Bill 683. We've heard testimony about the legal and ecological implications surrounding this bill as well as on the economic impacts of bird watching in Vermont.

I would like to take a moment to talk about the important roles that birding and bird organizations play in our communities. I moved to Vermont about five years ago. If you've ever moved to a new state you may understand how challenging it can be to make connections in that first year. My local Audubon chapter was the first place where I felt at home here in the Green Mountain State. Being invited to a potluck at someone's home after the Christmas Bird Count was a warm and welcoming experience that still stands out in my memory. Over the past five years I have become very active in our local Audubon. We are not a large chapter, nor a wealthy one. We do not own any properties. However, the passion the members of this group feel for birds and birding has built a strong community. In this digital age people may feel more isolated than ever. There are not enough opportunities for inter-generational connections to be made. One of the most important roles we play as an organization is to provide a place of fellowship for people in our community.

While we *are* sometimes out at first light chasing a rare bird, there is much more to our organization than birding. We meet once a month for a beer or a soda, some peanuts and some friendly conversation at Vermont's oldest brew pub. Monthly meetings at the library engage folks in bird gossip about what we've seen at our feeders and then guest speakers share stories and photos of far-off places they've been birding or the results of research and monitoring efforts right here at home for a threatened species. At every one of these programs a frequent

refrain is: Vermont's birds are in trouble – members ask: what can we do to help our declining bird populations? We are a laid back and informal organization but our members are deeply passionate about leaving the next generation thriving bird communities. Folks notice and remark that they no longer hear the song of the Whip-or-will down by the river, and they count fewer and fewer Evening Grosbeaks at their bird-feeders with each passing year. Many of our members keep diligent lists at their properties – recording the arrival date for migratory birds. Often these properties have been in the same families for generations. It does not go unnoticed when the hermit thrush fails to return to nest where its always been in the past. There is a special connection to the land that exists here in Vermont. In my role as coordinator for our local Christmas Bird Count I get to see the level of dedication and pride our members feel towards keeping track of bird numbers each winter. This past year was certainly no different – our count day weather started with ice rain, changed to heavy rain and then transitioned into a dense fog. It was hardly anyone's idea of perfect day to be outside. And yet we had 29 field observers drive 191 miles and walk 10 miles, tracking down 3,124 individual birds of 59 different species. The bird count itself is a remarkable example of citizen science. This year was the 58th year that a bird count has been conducted in Brattleboro, with the first count taking place in 1903. It speaks volumes about the importance Vermonters place on birds that this tradition continues to be as strong as it is. There are certainly plenty of scientific and ecological reasons to act today to protect Vermont's birds. These are valid and we should take these seriously. Yet an added reason that should not be overlooked is the importance of birds and birdwatching to our local communities and to the culture of Vermont.

Next, I'll share some additional comments from members of the birding community of southeastern Vermont:

Cat Abbott from Dummerston said: "I see birds as ambassadors from the natural world. So many other taxa are quiet or secretive or nocturnal, but birds are out there going about their lives often in full view of anyone who chooses to pay

attention. They visit our feeders and dazzle us with their beauty, they nest in the boxes we provide and allow us to watch them raise their families, they serenade us. To say there is a lot of bad news out there in terms of ecological loss and biodiversity threats is an understatement. Yet helping birds provides an avenue for each of us to do something positive and feel like our small actions are part of the solution. Planting native plants, making brush piles, leaving dead snags, buying bird-friendly coffee, keeping cats indoors, are all concrete actions we can feel good about taking to help birds. When I see that first scarlet tanager of the spring, I am both awestruck knowing that that bird has just journeyed from Amazonia, and heartened thinking that my wood lot is providing healthy habitat. When I hear that first wood thrush of the spring, just arrived from Nicaragua, I feel like an old friend has returned. These are highlight events for me and how I mark the seasons. Cat then shares the words of two “non-birders” she has been working with to document their rare bird sightings for the Vermont Records Committee).

A Brattleboro resident who has hosted a Baltimore Oriole at her bird feeder for the past three winters calls the bird “an incredible blessing...certainly a divine gift.”

A Guilford community member spoke effusively of an Eastern Towhee she observed: “The Towhee was so cute and round and fluffy in the cold! I’m an extremely novice bird watcher. I’m an herbalist and plant person, but I’ve loved watching the change in birds over the years as my gardens and orchards grow”.

Finally, Helen Merena of Brattleboro shares that: “Birds are important to me because they are an easy way to connect to nature. Even when I lived in apartments I’ve always had bird feeders to bring cheer and peace and a bit of undiluted nature to my surroundings. Birding with others gets me deeper into nature and connects me with that same peace and cheerfulness in a broader way because of what I learn from others. Trips to the northeast kingdom, spring walks

and owl prowls are examples of how nourishing it is to be in nature with like-minded folks.

Hopefully some of these testimonials help convey the interconnectedness, with nature and with each other and the sheer joy that birds bring to Vermonters. I urge you to adopt this bill and do what we here in Vermont can do to protect the spectacular avian diversity Vermonters are so lucky to enjoy. Thank you for your time.