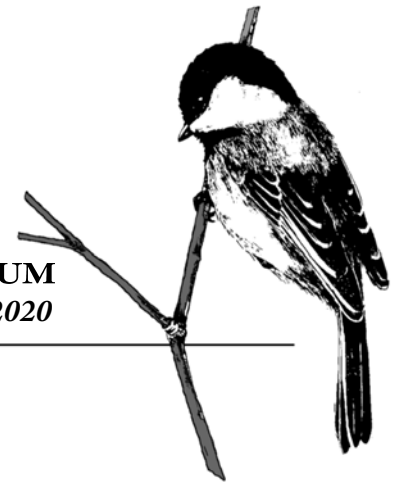


Chip Notes

NEWS AND VIEWS FROM THE BIRDS OF VERMONT MUSEUM
Volume 34

Summer 2020



LITTLE MUSEUM IN A BIG PANDEMIC

from the Director, Erin Talmage

There have been many changes in the world since we last published a newsletter. We started the year with big plans and a calendar full of workshops, bird walks, an art show, and plans for an ice cream social to celebrate what would have been Bob Spear's 100th birthday.

But as we all know, in early 2020, the SARS-Cov-2 virus (and the disease Covid-19) swept across the world. In March, businesses, schools, and nonprofits across Vermont, including the Museum, shut down. We were fortunate that the Museum was in its "closed" season, and we could fairly easily shift to remote or separate-day work. We missed our school groups and monthly bird walks and had to cancel a few late-spring events.

But for the first time in over three decades, the Museum did not open on May 1st for visitors and spring bird walks. Groups and gatherings carried enough risk and uncertainty that we, following state guidance, did not go birding together. Instead we—staff, volunteers, the Board, members—birded with family groups, our "quaranteam" members, and alone. Instead of traveling to birding spots around the world, many of us stayed home and birded from balconies, porches, backyards, and neighborhoods. We were happy to see small family groups using our trails. Many of us increased our reliance on online communication to share bird sightings and bird stories.

The Museum has been lucky. Over the last ten years, with the help of some generous donors and our fiscally responsible Board, we built up enough resilience to weather this storm so far. We worked hard to limit costs: restricting expenditures, reducing staff time. We explored the opportunities for small businesses put forth by the government. We are deeply grateful for the flexibility of those who agreed to give presentations, lead walks, and teach workshops, as we continually changed our schedule of events. Vermonters as a whole worked together; both percentages and actual numbers of cases remained low, enabling many places to reopen in staged phases. For those of you who have been able to donate and renew your memberships, we are profoundly grateful. For those of you financially impacted by the pandemic, we understand and hope your difficulties are short-lived.

This is one of the first newsletters in which we do not list upcoming events. We have events all summer and fall, but as safety is our first concern, we are keeping the schedule fluid. It can be found online at <https://birdsofvermont.org/events/>.

The pandemic is not the only safety concern for birders, and recent events help us understand and improve. Although birding is for everyone, not all birders feel safe or



Birding is a great activity during a pandemic (and any time). It can improve mood, spark imagination and curiosity, include exercise, be easily done with physical distancing, be educational, be relaxing...

... continued on page 4

100 YEARS OF BOB SPEAR

What forces shaped the young boy born on February 21, 1920 in Burlington, Vermont?

Bob's early experiences were grounded in the outdoors, enhanced by a near-symbiotic relationship with nature and a thirst for adventure. His burgeoning interest in nature was nurtured from the very beginning, especially by his mother, Dorothy, a school teacher, and his father, Robert N. Spear, Sr., a dairy farmer. The young Spear family lived in Wyben, Massachusetts for a number of years during Dorothy's tenure teaching in a one-room schoolhouse. There, Bob was introduced to Anna Botsford Comstock's *Handbook of Nature Study*, courtesy of his mother's science curriculum. He read about living as an Indian in the wild and surviving on one's own resourcefulness while devouring Ernest Seton Thompson's *Two Little Savages*. He became familiar with the natural history of birds and mammals through stories for children written by Thornton W. Burgess. Bob credited his mother "with instilling in him not only a love for nature but an awareness for detail in the natural world around him."

Bob was a self-taught woodcarver and birdwatcher who was also fascinated by butterflies and moths, which he collected and drew or painted images of to study. Drawn to taxidermy at the age of twelve, Bob ordered instructions by mail and procured the proper equipment with the help of his mother. He whittled away on blocks of basswood, creating birds and butterflies as he became more familiar with them.

#AskBob

Q: How did you earn your first dollar?

A: Cutting and splitting wood.

Upon the early death of his mother, sixteen-year-old Bob, his sister, and their father moved back to Vermont to a farm in Colchester. Bob attended and graduated from Winooski High School in 1937 after which he helped his father work the farm and manage the dairy herd.

One winter day, a stray parakeet flew into the woodshed where they were occupied with the daily tasks. The lucky parakeet

was readily taken in as a pet by Bob, who seized the opportunity to fashion a carving of the bird as well as a mate, using white pine. At eighteen years old, Bob realized that "carving birds would be better than trying to make dead things look alive again." While Bob eagerly embraced wood carving with simple tools, he did not abandon the practice of preserving animal skins. Rather, he employed taxidermy to build a collection of bird and mammal skins as study tools.

Bob joined the U.S. Navy and began ten months of advanced training before assignment for duty as a radar technician, maintaining the new technology of World War II. Following naval service, Bob joined the General Electric Company in Burlington working as a technical specialist. Much to his manager's apparent disapproval, Bob and several co-workers regularly spent their lunch break in Bob's car while he carved Black-capped Chickadees, which he later sold in local gift shops. Over his twenty-year career with GE, Bob carved and sold over a thousand birds.

In 1962, Bob formed a local chapter of the National Audubon Society. About this time, he was greatly concerned about the consequences of habitat loss due to commercial development on farm and grassland areas, as well as on the birds which

... continued on page 7

#AskBob

Q: What is your favorite childhood memory?

A: Working on a collection of butterflies and moths.



Almost every picture found of Bob Spear shows him working!

THE CARVER'S DAUGHTER

Part 19: The Darkest Room

In the midst of the coronavirus pandemic, where people around the world are focused on staying inside with their families, I've been thinking about how rooms can be confining and reassuring at the same time. As lovers of birds and lakes and mountains, it's a little odd how some of my father's and my happiest moments together were inside a room about ten feet square with no windows and only a dim red light. And it smelled like chemicals, to boot.

My father wasn't usually much of a Christmas shopper—his usual practice was to take me to a bookstore and let me pile books on the counter until he said stop, which worked really well for both of us. But one year when I was in middle school, there were tons of presents addressed to Gale and me, all wrapped in colorful comic paper, which was his and Gale's style. There was also a can of dark red paint. Gale was as baffled as I was. I started with a small one and unwrapped a package of wooden tongs with yellow, red, and blue plastic tips. They were kind of small for salads, I thought. Then Gale unwrapped a package of three shallow white pans too small for washing dishes in. I was thinking maybe my father was suddenly interested in miniature kitchens for some reason, if there even was such a thing. (Notice how my mind always runs toward food.) I'd long ago stopped being surprised by the things my father was suddenly interested in... you know, like build-it-yourself museums and stuff.

The next gift was a rectangular box that contained a timer. My mind was seriously going down the kitchen-route now. Gale, however, gave a knowing sort of laugh and opened the biggest one. The mystery was suddenly cleared up. The box clearly told us it contained a darkroom enlarger.

"Oh," I said. "A darkroom?"

At the same time, Gale said the obvious. "But we don't have a darkroom."

My father nodded toward the can of paint. "Thought we could turn the back entryway/laundry room into a darkroom. No one ever uses it. You know, take the window out of the door and put in a table and some shelves. A piece of carpet on the floor to make it warmer. Paint it. It'll be perfect because it's already got a big sink."

Fortunately, Gale didn't mind having her house remodeled without prior discussion, and the next gift she unwrapped was a bottle of nice wine, so that was all good.

We spent the next hour unwrapping weird things like a light-tight metal cannister to develop film in, boxes of photo paper with the words DO NOT OPEN IN LIGHT on them, and many bottles of chemicals and glass beakers to measure them with. My last present was a point and shoot camera and a role of black and white film. "Use it up by next weekend," my father said, and showed me how to load it.

I'd never taken any photos in my life, and I wasn't sure I'd find twenty-four things in a week that were interesting enough to photograph, but I figured I'd give it a try.

By the next weekend, my father had turned the little entryway that nobody used into a darkroom. He'd boarded up the window in the door, turned a piece of old countertop into a table, mounted shelves, found a used dresser to be used for storage, laid piece of scrap carpeting on the floor, and painted the walls with the soothing, deep red paint.

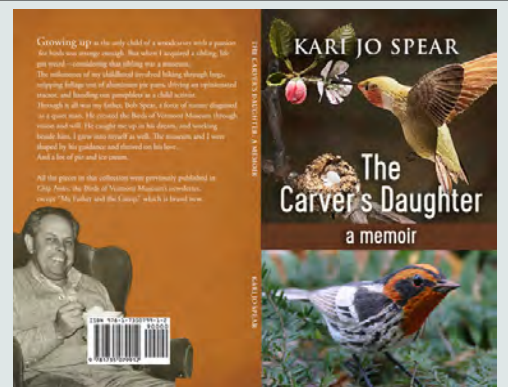
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The Carver's Daughter: a memoir

Kari Jo Spear, daughter of Bob Spear, has recently published a new book: *The Carver's Daughter: a Memoir*.

Copies can be purchased at the Museum and in select local book stores.
E-books are available.

August 22, 2020 • Kari Jo will do a reading of her new book at the Museum. In honor of Bob Spear's 100th year. Ice cream will be served. Visit www.birdsofvermont.org/events/ for details.



Little Museum in a Big Pandemic

continued from page 1

welcome. The first Black Birders Week happened in early June, raising awareness about the large numbers of birders of color, and offering many opportunities to hear their stories. In addition to this particular week, we have continued to learn through reading, listening, and talking with each other. The pandemic can provide a time of reflection and action, as we come to understand how social justice is inextricably tied to environmental justice. We need to work together, helping protect each other and the birds we love.

As we go birding, let's remember to be grateful for the existence of birds, for living where there are birds, and for the privilege to have the opportunity to bird. Share a moment of reflection on each action, take time to welcome all birders, and continue listening to each other's stories and to sounds of birds.

We plan to be here, to still open our doors every spring for the next 30-plus years. For everyone. Come along with us.



The Carver's Daughter

continued from page 3

"Watch this," my father said proudly, closed the door, and turned off the single overhead light. For a second, we were in total darkness, then he flicked on the safelight, which was a little panel he'd mounted on the wall. It glowed an eerie red.

"Cool," I said, squinting at my hands, which now were red, too. As was the rest of me, and my father.

"Your eyes will adjust," he said happily. "Got your film?"

I handed it to him.

"Great. If we develop it now, it'll be dry enough to print after lunch."

We turned the regular light back on, and I helped him mix up the chemicals, pouring from the bottles into recycled gallon milk jugs, all the time learning new names like stop-bath and fixer and photo-flo, and what each one did. As soon as they were ready, it was time to take my film out of its canister and wind it onto the

... continued on page 5

2020 Raffle! *Northern Reflections—Loon Family*

Northern Reflections - Loon Family by Robert Bateman is known as "The Royal Print". The original painting was a gift by the Canadian Government to His Royal Highness Prince Charles, the Prince of Wales on the occasion of his wedding to Lady Diana. This is a signed and numbered limited edition print by Robert Bateman, framed.

Release Year: 1986 • Size: 20 x 30.25

Form: limited edition print on paper, framed

Edition Size: 8631 numbered and hand signed by the artist

To enter the raffle, photocopy or cut out this ticket, fill it out, and send it in with \$1 to enter. Or send 6 (six) tickets in with \$5, for extra chances to win.

Send tickets by *October 15* for the drawing on November 1

Birds of Vermont Museum, attn. raffle

900 Sherman Hollow Road

Huntington, Vermont 05462

Will not be shipped; must pick up • Estimated value: \$900



2020 Raffle: *Northern Reflections* s/n print by Robert Bateman

Name:

Address:

Phone / Email:

Please be sure we can read your writing. Thanks!



The Carver's Daughter continued from page 4

spool that would go into the light-tight developing canister. I was happy to let him do it, since it had to be done in total darkness. I settled down on a stool to wait as he turned off the light.

"You know," my father said into the darkness.

"What?" I asked.

"They smell the same way they always have. The chemicals."

The smells in the darkroom were sharp and astringent, biting at the inside of my nose, but they weren't unpleasant. Definitely something I'd never smelled before. "So you used to have a darkroom?" I hadn't thought about how he knew how to do all this stuff.

"Well," he said, "I hung up some black curtains in the corner of the cellar of a house I lived in. Nothing nice like this, with running water. I think my old equipment got lost in a move."

I remembered that my father had an old photo album with black and white photos of his canoe, his friend Charles, and his old horse. I hadn't known he'd printed them himself. He didn't talk about certain things in his past much—his mother's early death, a stepmother, his own first marriage that hadn't gone well, and a second marriage to my mother hadn't worked out too well either—and I respected that.

A minute later, he flicked the light back on and we left the memories in the dark as we began to develop the film. There were four different chemicals that had to be poured one at a time into the canister, and my job was to agitate it gently while the chemicals did their thing to the film inside. Gale came by and asked if we were ever going to come out for lunch, and I realized I'd so lost track of time that I hadn't realized I was hungry. That was a first, for sure.

Finally, I got to open the canister, take out the spool, and unwind my film, or roll of negatives, my father now called it. I'd been secretly afraid it would all be solid black or solid white, but no, it was divided up into twenty-four little rectangular frames, each with black and white images that I could see when I held it up to the light.

"Looks good," my father said, and we headed off to the outside world that had windows and daylight and tuna sandwiches.



An hour later, we were back in the darkroom, this time with the safelight on and a towel shoved under the crack at the bottom of the door, and we settled down on our stools around the table, facing the enlarger and the three plastic pans. The enlarger looked like a stork with a long neck. My father fed one end of the roll of negatives, now dry, into the head of the stork. A bright light shone through the first frame, projecting a negative image on flat, white surface below. Once he had it all set up to his satisfaction, he turned off the enlarger's light and opened the box of photo paper for the first time, then put a piece into the frame. I don't think either of us breathed while he set the timer, which clicked on the enlarger for about ten seconds to expose the paper to the image it would bear for the rest of its life. Hopefully.

"Now the magic." My father slid the piece of paper into the first tray—the one that contained developer—and I carefully agitated it back and forth the way he'd instructed me. Eagerly, we watched for an image to appear on the paper.

Nothing happened.

Five minutes later, still nothing had happened. The paper remained white.

"Huh," my father said. "Pretty sure we did everything right." I could see him going back over all the steps in his head, and I kind of wondered if the bad things in his past had gotten in the way of his memory. After a moment, he laughed and said, "I bet it was supposed to be shiny side up. It's been a while."

So we tried it again with a new sheet of paper, this time with the shiny side up when he exposed it. Almost as

... continued on page 7

BORDERS: ILLUSIONS THAT CONSTRAIN US

Borders: illusions than constrain us is our 2020 art exhibit, where we invite creators and viewers to ask (and possibly answer) “What do borders mean for birds and which of these are constructs of our imagination?”

What borders do birds encounter? Our maps do not typically reflect the territories they perceive, the ranges they travel, or the barriers they come across. How do birds’ boundaries connect to human borders? To those of other species? Edges of things—physically, spatially, temporally—raise questions, not least of which is “Is it really there?”

We ponder this, wondering, how do and how will these encounters and connections change us, birds, and the borders themselves? How do you answer these questions?

Thirty-six artists, photographers, and poets had their work selected for this year’s show. Creators include beginners and established professionals of all ages. Visitors are invited to explore the visual and written art at their own pace, to be inspired, to ask questions, and to browse through the book of artists’ statements.

Artists and photographers include:

Alexandra Ottas	Chris Selin	Kateland Kelly	Miriam Adams
Alison Forrest	Dana Walrath	Katherine Guttman	Nancy Stone
Aly DeGraff Olivierre	Deana Allgaier	Kelly Bixby	Nicole Knowlton
Barbara K. Waters	Diana Dunn	Lily Hinrichsen	Nikolas Kotovich
Betty (BJ) Wood Gray	Diana Osborn	Linda & Kerry Hurd	Prudence M
Carol Kiewit Leinwhol	Geoffrey Swanson	Madara Tropa	Rebecca Rosenthal
Carol MacDonald	James Frase-White	Marcia Vogler	Sharon Radtke
Carol McDowell	Jane Ploughman	Maya Fried Akazawa	
Caroline Siegfried	Juniper M	Meili Stokes	

100 years of Bob Spear

continued from page 2

foraged, nested or hunted there. He actively protested the planned proliferation of building sites along Interstate 89’s corridors. By the middle of the decade, Bob engaged in active protests against a proposal to transform Camel’s Hump Mountain into a ski area. His activism, along with that of other concerned citizens saw the Vermont State Forest and Parks Board members reject the proposal, favoring instead an alternative plan of preserving Camel’s Hump as a mountain park. Through legislative action in 1969, the mountain park scenario became reality in 1969.

During this period, Bob began photographing birds and compiling lists of bird species which he encountered while hiking, hunting, and exploring in Vermont’s diverse habitats. While Bob’s carving process began with a simple jackknife and whittling techniques, he eventually switched from basic hand knives and tools to employing power

tools in the late 1970s. His highspeed power chisel proved to be a boon to increasing efficiency and output. Bob preferred working with basswood for his carvings with its fine grain and absence of resins that might affect the paint. Bob liked using tupelo and jelutong woods for carving as well.

Retiring from GE in 1972, he followed through on his interest in joining the environmental movement. Bob cofounded and directed the Green Mountain Nature Center (just up the road from the site of the future Birds of Vermont Museum). Bob was active in the operations and oversight of the Nature Center until 1978. At that point, Bob devoted his life to producing a collection of bird carvings for display in habitat-specific settings. He endeavored to do natural history museums one better by replacing traditional stuffed specimens with lifelike birds in action mode. Bob later noted that schoolchildren who viewed taxidermy

#AskBob

Q: Do you hoard anything?

A: Tools.

The Carver's Daughter continued from page 3

soon as he put it into the developer, it began to change. Before my eyes, the view out my bedroom window came to life—the lawn, the row of daffodils, the birch trees, the pines in the background. I was almost speechless as I used the not-for-salad tongs to move the print into the stop bath and then into the fixer, where it would happily float while we moved on to my next negative. As the afternoon drew on, my house joined the view out my window, and then my cat, my dog, my friends at school, the barn across the road, and the sunset. Twenty-four moments of my life that I could save forever.

It was kind of hard to leave the warm, quiet, red-glowing room at the end of the day and go back out into the stark outer world where unpleasant things could happen. But my father handed me a new canister of film. I was already thinking of new things to shoot, new angles to shoot the old things, new ways to get my friends to pose.

Maybe I could get a series as my dog ran closer to me, and maybe I could get that cute expression on my cat's face when he heard the can-opener.

"You really want to spend another day in there next weekend?" Gale asked.

"Of course," I said.

She rolled her eyes, but my father just laughed.

Years later, a student I was working with signed up for a photography class. On the first day, the art teacher brought us into the darkroom, and I had to stop inside the door for a moment and just breathe. The chemicals still smelled just the same—sharp and astringent and biting at the inside of my nose.

—Kari Jo Spear 

#AskBob

Q: What's your most humbling experience?

A: Dealing with the problems encountered at the town, state, and federal levels of trying to found an educational nonprofit organization.

birds responded with much less enthusiasm and interest than when encountering the carvings. The carvings were deemed more durable, less likely to become dirty, and allowed for realistic facial expressions, achieving particularly


fierce looks on hawks. The production and presentation of the collection enabled visitors to explore a "living museum" where they would be able to see Bob crafting birds from carved bodies, legs, wings, and more, as well as making display elements from chunks of wood, sheets of fine-gauge aluminum, soldering wire, turkey hackles, and cattails.

Bob's planned sequence for carving the collection began with all the nesting songbird species in Vermont, followed by the array of extinct and vanishing species (currently exhibited as "endangered or threatened"). After this, Bob crafted the migratory birds who move through Vermont, with the resident birds of Vermont closing out the scheme for the first sets of displays.

How, despite a lack of formal training or art instruction, had Bob learned to use the dozens of tools in his workshop, master painting, construct the museum, and gain expertise about all 258 species within? His reply? "I just figured it out."

And why birds? Bob's motivation was clear, "I'm interested in all of nature, but to me, birds are special, they represent freedom, they can fly, go wherever they want... I know they fly and swoop just to stay alive. But I'm convinced that some of their aerial acrobatics are pure joy." Bob's personal study and recording of local birds led to his published compilation: *Birds of Vermont*, one of the first books documenting our resident species.

Bob and his partner, Gale Lawrence, and an abundance of family and friends, brought the Birds of Vermont Museum into being. During the Grand Opening celebrated in June, 1987, 500 visitors were given a tour of the workshop and growing collection of birds and prey species. Attendees enjoyed free ice cream from Ben and Jerry's, especially Bob's favorite flavor: Cherry Garcia.

During the debut, Bob carved continuously when not leading nature walks. As both carver and guide, Bob ensured, both on that day and throughout the 33 years (and counting) of the Birds of Vermont Museum's presence, public connection to the land, the birds, and the importance of preserving Vermont's wilds. 

#AskBob

Q: If you could do it over...?

A: I would have devoted a greater part of my life to conservation education."

Birds of Vermont Museum
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Huntington, Vermont 05462
www.birdsofvermont.org

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- Puzzles?
- Bird crafts?
- Foldable Field Guides?
- Bumper stickers?

Stop by our new online gift shop often! In addition to these items, we work to add more items a few times each month. <https://birdsofvermont.org/gift-shop/>

*Volunteers always needed
Join us online, too*



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