

NOTES ON A BREEDING BIRD CENSUS IN MONROE COUNTY

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The Genesee Ornithological Society is conducting a breeding bird census this season in its recently acquired sanctuary property at Reed Road swamp, Monroe County. This is a club project that is giving such enjoyment to the many GOS members participating that we feel we must tell about it, even before the final results are in. Reed Road Swamp is a heavily wooded swamp dominated by red maple, American elm and red ash, with thick and, in places, nearly impenetrable undergrowth of spicebush and hickthorn. The story of the acquisition of the area by the GOS is told in the last issue of *The Kingbird* (Klonick, A. S. 1951. Acquisition of a Natural Habitat Area. *Kingbird* 1 [2]: 19-22).

An attempt to initiate the project last year was unsuccessful chiefly because the tremendous amount of work involved in preparing for the actual census-taking was not realized. Committees were appointed and there was much talk of censusing the whole 80-odd acres. That this was not feasible became apparent too late in the season for much of anything to be done about it.

This year the committee began laying its plans in January and before the snow was all gone the preliminary work of laying out and marking the study area was finished. This was accomplished by a series of weekend "bees" when members appeared on the scene with brush hooks, hatchets, paint pots and brushes and were immediately set to work using them. The area was laid out in 192 foot squares, six squares wide (east to west) and nine squares long (north to south). Underbrush was cut only where absolutely necessary to make blazes and markers visible. Even this gave rise to some criticism by those who felt the area should be left absolutely untouched. As the season advanced, however, such criticism soon died down. The undergrowth grew and the leaves came out so that it became a real feat of woodcraft to follow many of the lines and even now, after the lines have been walked many times, a compass is a very convenient instrument to have along.

Early coverages of the study area by the committee and a few others individually were adequate to catch the early nesters but with the onset of the breeding season it was evident that more coverage on a definite schedule would be necessary. At the May meeting, members were asked to sign up for a definite day of the week on which they would be responsible for seeing that as much of the study area as possible was covered. People were somewhat reluctant to sign up, what with the May migration coming on and all the other demands that beset the active birder at that season. Eventually five of the seven days of the week were signed up for by parties of two to five people. Mimeographed charts laid out in numbered and lettered squares corresponding to the study area were provided each observer. A "dry run" was held late in May and there it was found that the estimated time for walking all the lines was much too optimistic. Originally figured at about two hours, it proved to require nearer four or five hours to do the

whole area thoroughly. So observers were instructed not to try to skim over the whole area at one trip but to do only as much as possible in the time available and to cover the rest on the next trip. Thus, although a complete coverage of about five times a week had been scheduled, at least two complete coverages a week were made during June and these should prove adequate.

The surprising thing to everyone, however, was how utterly fascinating "walking the lines" proved to be. The positions of each song heard, each bird seen, each nest found were plotted on the charts with appropriate symbols and as one walked up one line and back along the next it was really thrilling to see how the various songs would fall into their proper places on the chart, presumably corresponding to the territory of a nesting pair of birds. This fascination was heightened on the second trip as the territories were further confirmed. At the June meeting of the Society many of the conversations overheard had to do with the Northern Waterthrush at E-6, the Winter Wren at C-3, the Yellow-billed Cuckoos at A-5 and so on. Some 30 species of birds have appeared on the work sheets of the observers, although the final results undoubtedly will show that not all these can be considered as nesting within the area.

"Walking the lines" is not an easy task. The underbrush is really thick in many places. There are fallen trees and brush piles and muddy holes to negotiate. And there are mosquitoes in such quantities that all bird songs are heard against the background hum of billions of them. That people can come out of such a place "bedabbled with dew and torn by briars" and bitten by bugs and still assert that they have had a thoroughly enjoyable time speaks highly for the sport of Breeding Bird Censusing. Later in the season, coverage of the area will be lessened, possibly only two or three trips in August to catch the late nesters and second broods. After the leaves have fallen a club hike will be held to search out as many as possible of the undiscovered nests whose locations have been determined approximately by plotting the songs.

A number of things have been learned from our experience so far in this our first club project census. Among these are: (1) Start early to make plans and to lay out the study area. (2) Sign up everybody possible to "walk the lines." Many things will prevent people from getting out when they hope to, such as bad weather, vacations, etc., and even if it looks as if the area might be over-censused, it will seldom work out that way. (3) It is not worth while to cover the area if it is raining or if there is a high wind. (4) People especially allergic to poison ivy should keep out of our swamp after the leaves come out. (5) Mosquito dope will soften the paint on wood pencils and make our records and fingers very messy. Use a plastic mechanical pencil of some sort. (6) The whole thing is much more fun than would seem possible until one has tried it.