

BIRDS OF ALLEGANY COUNTY, NEW YORK

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Allegheny County is one of seven counties which make up the southern tier of New York. Cattaraugus County lies to the west, Livingston and Wyoming to the north and Steuben to the east. The entire county is on the northern edge of the Allegheny Plateau and was covered by ice during the Pleistocene Epoch except for a small portion in the southwestern corner. (McClintock and Apfel 1944). Alma Hill, (2548 ft.) southwest of Wellsville, is the highest point in New York west of the Catskill and Adirondack Mountains. White Hill is to the west at 2500 ft. and another hill near Whitesville is 2400 ft. The Genesee River, which flows north through the area, drains three-quarters of the land. The lowest point in the county is near Rossburg where the Genesee leaves the county to form the boundary between Wyoming and Livingston Counties. The elevation here is 1134 feet above sea level. The Southwestern portion is drained by tributaries of the Allegheny River; a few square miles in the northwest corner drain into Cattaraugus Creek and into Lake Erie; the east-central portion is drained by tributaries of the Susquehanna River. The area of the county is about 670,720 acres of which 442,088 are listed as farm land in the 1950 census. (Reed 1952.)

One hundred and sixty years ago the land was an unexplored wilderness covered by virgin forests. Nathaniel Dyke cleared the first bit of land in 1795. He later erected a cabin, saw and grist mill, and a tannery at Wellsville. French's Gazetteer (1860) states the mills which were erected in 1802 were the first in the county.

In 1840 the building of the Erie Railroad was assured and following its completion through the area lumbering of the white pine and later the hemlocks began in earnest. In 1854 Carlton Farnum of Wellsville, one of several lumbermen, shipped 50 million feet of white pine. (Minard 1896).

With the removal of the forest, particularly in the southern half of the county, changes were noted in the bird life. Professor F. S. Place (1896) about forty years after the major part of the lumber was cut, wrote that the ravens, once common, were rarely seen in Elm Valley. The Pileated Woodpecker, familiar to the early settlers, was rarely seen then even in the more heavily timbered areas. The Passenger Pigeons, shot and netted by the score as late as the early seventies, were only occasionally seen. The Crows were increasing, and the English Sparrow appeared in the county in 1874. Quail, he noted, had almost disappeared.

Professor F. S. Place (Alfred) in 1896 contributed a list of birds (Minard's Allegheny County History) and a few years later along with Mr. E. S. Gilbert (Canaseraga) and Mr. A. C. Whitford (Alfred) assembled the first annotated list of birds for the county which was published by Eaton (1910). This list gives the status, frequency, and dates of arrival in the spring for one hundred and forty species. According to Eaton (ibid) this list was drawn up about 1900. At this period the Bobwhite was considered rare, Red-headed Woodpecker fairly common, Blue Jay uncommon, Vesper Sparrow abundant, Brown Thrasher uncommon. The status of these birds appears to have changed since then. Some species such as the Cardinal and Olive-backed Thrush were not given on the 1900 list.

Since 1900 lumbering and farming have decreased considerably and much land, originally cleared, has now gone back into second growth. Reed (1952) states that there are 43,955 acres in Public Lands, and 59,864 acres of land that is idle. There are few natural lakes or ponds in the county. Cuba and Rushford are the largest lakes, both man made. Cuba lake was constructed in 1858 as a feeder for the Rochester-Olean Canal and has a surface area of about 1600 acres. Since 1940 (Reed op. cit.) the Soil Conservation Service has helped many farmers and other land owners put soil saving practices into operation. The New York Conservation Department has developed game management areas on many parcels of State-owned land and encouraged better land use. During the summer of 1954 the five-hundredth farm pond was completed in Allegany County since the beginning of the Soil Conservation District. These ponds vary in size from the smallest of one-half acre to the largest, Andover Pond, which is about 60 acres in surface area. At 2260 ft. elevation near Alfred, N. Y., Mr. Foster Eddy owns a twenty-five acre pond where ducks and sandpipers are observed on migration. Other productive areas for water birds have been developed by the construction of Alma Pond (approx. 35 acres) and an adjacent area owned by Mr. Olin Brown of Wellsville. The Boandga Club pond, built in 1938 near Scio by the Empire Gas and Fuel Co. Ltd., is especially good for spring water fowl records.

Short cool summers and rather severe winters are characteristic of the climate in the county. The average annual precipitation at Angelica is 38.80 inches and at Alfred 37.22 inches, about one half coming from heavy showers. The average frostless period at Angelica is 125 days, Alfred 135 days, Andover 129 days and Bolivar 109 days. (Reed op. cit.).

Since the publication of the county bird list mentioned above several other observers have added to our knowledge of the bird life. C. Huber Watson of Andover has photographed birds for forty years, and in recent years has banded many birds. One interesting report was of a female Red-tailed Hawk banded in the summer of 1950 which was shot December 8 of that year at Mobile, Alabama. A male was banded at the same time but there has been no report of it. Many of Mr. Watson's pictures have appeared in Audubon publications, and are in their film library. The late Dr. Raymond Douglas, while he was at Houghton College (1924-1940) prepared a booklet, *Beginning Bird Study* (1925) for his Ornithology class which includes migration dates. The Biology Department at Alfred University keeps a record of bird migrants through that area. Prof. Gordon Ogden has been in charge for the past five years, and Dr. H. O. Burdick has records for fifteen years previous to that date. Mr. Paul Davie of Wellsville, and Dr. Robert Common of Andover have been collecting colored movies of local bird life and have many fine picture records. Stephen W. Eaton (1953) published an annotated list of birds seen in the Olean and Salamanca Quadrangles between Sept. 1949 and Jan. 1953. This includes a small part of the western fringe of Allegany County. My husband, Walter McMurtry, and I have collected data on birds from 1928-1931 and 1937-1954. Many records for the county have been published by The Buffalo Ornithological Society in *The Prothonotary* and some in the *Kingbird*.

The major man wrought changes in Allegany County have been reviewed and some of the consequent changes in bird life have been briefly stated. We might summarize this in saying that four major eras exist in this his-

torical review since the first arrival of the White Man. (1) the virgin forest, (2) the clearing of this forest for farming and lumber, (3) the county under maximum land use, (4) gradual abandonment of land and recent conservation effects.

Examples of a few species which illustrate changes in the bird life of the county, correlated with the man-made changes plus other factors which seem to have effected the birds of the northeastern states in general, follow:

Crow — apparently this species was rare or absent when the county was a primeval forest. The Raven appears to have been the original corvid. (Beers 1879). After the removal of much of the timber the crow began to replace the Raven (Place op. cit.) and it was no longer an abundant summer resident. The possibility of the Raven reinhabiting the area seems reasonable as there is a small breeding population south of the County in Pennsylvania (Todd 1940).

Cardinal — this species was not known to earlier students of birds (Eaton E. H. op. cit.). The first of recent records seems to be that of Dr. Douglas. He recorded the Cardinal near Houghton, N. Y. in 1925. It seemed to prefer the river valley, becoming a resident in Wellsville in 1941. Today it is found in many areas of the county below 1900 ft. elevation. The highest altitude record I have is Alfred (1730 ft.) where the first Cardinal was recorded at Alfred Station 5 or 6 years ago. They first wintered through in Alfred in 1953-54. Several nested in the spring of 1954 (H. O. Burdick). Andover (1653 ft.) did not have Cardinals as permanent residents until 1954 (C. H. Watson).

Tufted Titmouse — this also was not listed earlier (Eaton, E. H. op. cit.). While there were some earlier records (Douglas, 1928 Houghton, McMurtry 3/8/29, Wellsville) it did not remain long in a given situation until 1945 when one remained at Paul Davie's Sanctuary for some time in February. Then there was another lapse of time until October 12, 1952, when two were recorded by Schaffner and McMurtry near Shongo, N. Y. (*The Prothonotary*, December 1952). The next year, December 1953, two returned to Davie's sanctuary for the winter months. On February 28, 1954, one appeared in our yard remaining for a half hour. While they were not there during the summer months, two returned to the Davie sanctuary October 17, 1954 and were still there in March 1955. They are tame and will come to your hand for sunflower seeds. This pattern seems to be in keeping with the species advance in other parts of the state; a single Titmouse appeared in Ithaca May 26, 1951 and was still there the last week in September (*Kingbird*, Vol. 1, No. 4). Another first record in a southern county was reported by Bemont, Rising, Layman in the Triple Cities area 4/25/53 (*Kingbird*, Vol. 3, No. 2).

Pileated Woodpecker — this species is a good example of the change in the status of birds. While it was common in the early 1800's, Place in 1896 stated it was rare at that time. This situation continued for years, until now it is again becoming fairly common. It is even adapting itself to populated areas, as two have been seen often all winter in the village of Wellsville, and one has worked on an old tree in Alfred oblivious to the college students that pass daily (1954).

There are several others whose status has changed over the past fifty

years. E. H. Eaton (op. cit.) called the Warbling Vireo common, Red-headed Woodpecker fairly common, and the Vesper Sparrow abundant. Now the Warbling Vireo and the Vesper Sparrow are both uncommon, the Red-headed Woodpecker rare. To offset this, we have some birds on the increase. Brown Thrasher listed as uncommon (Eaton op. cit.) is fairly common in thorn apple habitat, and the Blue-winged Warbler and Olive-backed Thrush were not known. The Blue-winged Warbler has been found on slopes adjacent to the Genesee River near Wellsville (Prothonotary June 1953) and the Olive-backed Thrush is found on Alma Hill at an elevation of 2548 ft. where there is an outcrop of Olean Conglomerate. The Carolina Wren is another new permanent resident in this area.

In comparison with the check list prepared by Eaton in 1910, the present day list includes all of those mentioned (with the exception of the Passenger Pigeon) plus an additional 68. This makes today's total two hundred and eight. It is interesting to note that of the sixty-eight new birds, over 50% are ducks or birds that are normally found near water. This seems to indicate that the ponds and marshes recently made, are offering much needed habitat in our county, particularly on spring migration.

Following is the list of additional birds that we have seen in Allegany county: American Egret, Least Bittern, Whistling Swan, Gadwall, Pintail, Green-winged Teal, Blue-winged Teal, American Widgeon, Redhead, Ring-necked Duck, Canvasback, Lesser Scaup, Greater Scaup, American Golden-Eye, White-winged Scoter, Ruddy Duck, Rough-legged Hawk, Osprey, Pheasant, Florida Gallinule, Coot, Hungarian Partridge, Ringed Plover, Ruddy Turnstone, Hudsonian Curlew, Upland Sandpiper, Greater Yellow-legs, Lesser Yellow-legs, Least Sandpiper, Red-backed Sandpiper, Semipalmated Sandpiper, Ring-billed Gull, Bonaparte's Gull, Black Tern, Wild Turkey, Barn Owl, Hawk Owl, Red-bellied Woodpecker, Alder Flycatcher, Tree Swallow, Purple Martin, Tufted Titmouse, Short-billed Marsh Wren, Olive-backed Thrush, Pipit, Starling, Philadelphia Vireo, Blue-winged Warbler, Tennessee Warbler, Orange-crowned Warbler, Parula Warbler, Pine Warbler, Prairie Warbler, Louisiana Waterthrush, Connecticut Warbler, Yellow-breasted Chat, Black-capped Warbler, Orchard Oriole, Yellow Palm Warbler, Cardinal, Evening Grosbeak, Pine Grosbeak, Grasshopper Sparrow, Henslow's Sparrow, Carolina Wren, Broad-winged Hawk, Rough-Winged Swallow and Red-necked (Holboell's) Grebe.

Gone forever from the Allegany County scene is the Passenger Pigeon. The last great nesting was at Bull's Run, Ceres, N. Y. (Eaton op. cit. account by Fred Eaton, Olean, N. Y.). The nesting tract was fourteen miles long, the egg laying began in April, with the height of nesting May 10, when thousands of nests could be found in hemlock, pine and hard wood trees. A large hemlock often held thirty to forty nests with eggs or young. Both parents took part in the incubating, one always remaining at the nest. The males left the nest early in the morning, the females left at eleven o'clock and at three o'clock there was another flight of red-breasted males. The rest of the story is known. Both the young birds and the adults were caught by thousands, wagon loads could be seen coming to Olean where they were shipped to New York by the carloads. A few continued to nest until 1872, but probably none after 1875. Thus ended the life cycle of a remarkable bird. While some other species may disappear due to changes

in habitat which come with increased human population, we hope that none will be lost solely through man's careless and selfish interests.

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THE TROPIC BIRD IN NEW YORK STATE

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On October 26, 1954, I found the remains of an immature Yellow-billed Tropic Bird *Phaethon lepturus*, (White-tailed Tropic Bird of the new AOU checklist) on the shore of Lake Ontario about midway between Port Ontario and Henderson Harbor. The precise location is Southwick's Beach in the town of Ellisburg, Jefferson County, N. Y. Since the bird had been dead for some time, it was possible to save only the head, tail, feet and wings, and these were presented to the State Museum in Albany. Identification was confirmed by Dr. Ralph S. Palmer, State Zoologist.

Without doubt the bird was carried north by the hurricane of October 15, which passed across the interior of the state, farther inland than is usual for storms of this type. Other records for the state, given below, can be attributed to hurricanes originating in the West Indies.