

BIRDS OF THE ROME SAND PLAINS

MARGARET S. RUSK

Six miles northeast of Oneida Lake recognizable traces of the shores of glacial Lake Iroquois, of which the present Lake is the remnant, form the Rome Sand Plains. Approximately twelve square miles in extent, the Sand Plains lie west of Rome in a triangle bounded by State Route 69 on the northeast and State Route 49 on the south. Fish Creek cuts along the Sand Plains' west edge, forming steep sand-mud bluffs.

In the Rome Sand Plains are small patches of "live" (shifting) sand dunes on which no vegetation at all grows yet, bordered by mossy heath where bracken is the largest plant to have gained a hold. Scratch this heath, as by quarrying for sand, and ecological succession is quickly set back again to bare sand beach.

Traveling in order of ecological succession "inland" from the shore and through the moss-bracken-huckleberry heath, the next stage encountered has birch and aspen mixed with pitch pine, the characteristic tree of the Rome Sand Plains, and oaks. If one drives past the Sand Plains on Route 49, the distinctive gnarled-branched pitch pines together with the white and other oaks, which keep their brown leaves through the winter, are the clues that here is a shore-edge woods, so strikingly different from the surrounding meadows and mixed forest. Much white pine is interspersed with the stands of pitch pine; so a typical view of the Sand Plains woods includes these two, oaks and, especially at the edges, birch and aspen. The trees, especially the larger ones, grow well spaced from each other in order to receive enough moisture from the well-drained soil, giving the area a park-like aspect.

Though the Sand Plains is generally a dry woods, remnants of Lake Iroquois waters, so to speak, are trapped in the hollows between the old vegetated dunes to form aspen-alder bordered sphagnum bogs in several stages of filling-in.

Tributaries of Fish Creek have cut steep gorges through the sand flats. These moist ravines support large hemlocks, yew, tall ferns, and a variety of deciduous trees and shrubs. In spots in the more mature pine-oak woods there is enough moisture and humus to have produced, besides hemlocks, maples and beeches and other species of a typical central New York mixed woods. Thus one can trace succession in the Rome Sand Plains from lake beach to beech forest!

This area and the Albany-Schenectady pine barrens are the most extensive pitch pine plains in upstate New York. The Albany barrens have a marked black locust-scrub oak understory which the Rome Sand Plains lack, and there are doubtless other important botanical differences. Treacy, in "Birds of the Albany County pine-oak barrens" listed the avifauna of the Karner tract. To date no Golden-winged nor Prairie Warbler nor Yellow-breasted Chat, all mentioned by Treacy, has been

found in the Rome Sand Plains. Aside from these, the Rome Sand Plains' summer birds include all species listed by Treacy, but a census comparable to his would probably show a different "top six".

No quantitative censuses have been taken in the Rome Sand Plains, though one of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife breeding bird survey routes runs through it for three miles; thus, in future, comparable data will happily be available. The following account of typical birds of the Rome Sand Plains, both uncommon species which occur there regularly and common birds which are strikingly abundant there, is thus only descriptive. The species are discussed by habitats, with some rough indications of abundance. Much of this information is from Region 5 *Kingbird* reports, especially for the summer seasons, but some is from the author's field notes.

Along the creeks Phoebes utilize the bridges for nest sites. Bank Swallow colonies in the banks of Fish Creek usually number over 500 active holes; where sand is being quarried are smaller colonies of precarious existence. Yellow Warblers are common in the creek-bordering alders, but not elsewhere in the area.

In the October 1955 *Kingbird* report, Scheider noted that Vesper Sparrows are "common . . . only where *bare* sandy areas meet grassy swales." Towhees are quite common, especially on the woods-heath edge, ten-15 being counted in a couple miles' walk.

Goldfinches frequent the roadsides (man-made edge), Purple Finches are associated with ornamental spruce plantings around Sand Plains residences, and Bluebirds use nest boxes (occasionally holes in trees) on the small lawns that create openings in the pine woods.

The October 1956 *Kingbird* report contains this observation for Field Sparrow and Indigo Bunting: "These were the two dominant finches of the Rome Sand Plains with the Field Sparrows in the oak scrub and the Indigo Buntings in the birch-blackberry thickets."

The dominant *Dendroica* is the Chestnut-sided Warbler of the birch-aspen scrub, with *sixty* counted in one and a half miles in 1956. In this habitat, near one of the bogs, in June 1956 Robert Wayland-Smith and Paul Paquette accidentally discovered the nest of a Whip-poor-will. It has been possible to hear several Whip-poor-wills calling on a summer evening in the Sand Plains, but in the past two years there has been a marked population drop in this species in central New York.

In the bogs proper are Nashville Warblers (up to 25 in a morning's walk), Yellowthroats, and White-throated Sparrows (20 or more in a day of the latter two).

Open pitch pine-aspen-white oak woods is the habitat of Red-breasted Nuthatches (an active nest in a dead aspen stub was found in 1961), Brown Creepers, Black-and-white Warblers—in low numbers—and of Hermit Thrushes and Ovenbirds. A 1955 count of "dozens" of Hermit Thrushes singing at noon would be difficult to duplicate today, but this

thrush is still more common in the Sand Plains than almost anywhere else in Region 5. The Ovenbird, of which a count of 80 along two miles of woods paths was made in 1955, is perhaps the most numerous woods nester in the Sand Plains.

The Wood Pewee, Myrtle, Black-throated Green and Blackburnian Warblers, and Scarlet Tanager are typical of the more mature oak-pitch pine-white pine sectors. Pine Warblers, associated with tall white pines but never common, have dropped in abundance during the dozen or so years of frequent birdwatching visits to the Sand Plains, to the point where they can no longer be found regularly, though in 1960 breeding was confirmed by the discovery of a pair with three young. Magnolia Warblers are found in the lower bushy second-growth conifers. Along the paths through these park-like woods a Broad-winged Hawk is often heard or glimpsed, and recently-used Broad-wing nests have been found. A Sharp-shinned Hawk raised one young as recently as 1965 in a hemlock surrounded by white pines on the edge of a gorge.

In the ravines are an occasional Winter Wren, and Black-throated Blue, Mourning, and Canada Warblers, and Northern Waterthrushes. The presence of these typical Canadian-zone birds underscores the fact that the Sand Plains are located on the southern edge of the Tug Hill Plateau which is noted for its northern affinities. Interestingly, however, Juncos have never been found in summer in the Sand Plains proper, though they are fairly common a few miles distant.

Common passerines of the mixed-deciduous areas in the Sand Plains are the Crested Flycatcher, Black-capped Chickadee, White-breasted Nuthatch, Wood Thrush, Veery, Red-eyed Vireo, Redstart (which makes 16 warbler species in the Sand Plains!), and Cowbird. In 1965 Red-shouldered Hawks raised three young in a nest in a white oak tree just west of Fish Creek on the periphery of the Sand Plains.

In winter Ruffed Grouse are frequently seen feeding in the aspen and birch. Northern finches find the Sand Plains early in winter and linger late in flight years, probably due to both the Plains' geographical location just south of the Tug Hill and Adirondacks and the abundance of pine and alder cones and birch and aspen catkins.

Summary

The geological history of the Rome Sand Plains has brought about a unique botanical association which in turn supports a varied and distinctive avifauna. It is greatly to be hoped that the area will be preserved in a natural state for future study and enjoyment.

Acknowledgements

I want to express my gratitude to Paul and Sylvia Paquette, who first showed me the Rome Sand Plains, to Dorothy Ackley and Anita Rayns-

ford, who have guided me on many field trips there and have written a short guide to the area, and to Fritz Scheider and Walter Spofford, who have shared their thoughts about its ecology.

220 Ostrom Ave., Syracuse, N.Y. 13210

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21st ANNUAL MEETING

FEDERATION OF NEW YORK STATE BIRD CLUBS, INC.

ROCHESTER, N.Y.

APRIL 26 — 28, 1968

The 21st Annual Meeting of the FNYSBC was held at the Treadway Inn, the Rochester Museum of Arts and Sciences, and the Sheraton Hotel, Rochester, N.Y., April 26-28, 1968, with the Burroughs Audubon Nature Club and the Genesee Ornithological Society acting as hosts. The Council Meeting was called to order at 9:00 AM, April 27 by Dr. David B. Peakall, acting president, and a quorum was declared with 28 clubs present.

The minutes of the 20th Annual Meeting were approved as published in the October 1967 *Kingbird*.

The treasurer, Mr. Dort Cameron, gave the following report, for 1967, which was accepted:

Cash on hand 12/31/66

Checking account	\$1,340.93	
Savings account	4,240.00	\$5,580.93

Net income, 1967*

950.70

Cash on hand, 12/31/67

Checking account	\$1,725.70	
Accrued interest, savings account	215.93	
Total Operating Funds	<u>1,941.63</u>	
Savings account	4,590.00	6,531.63

Income, 1967

Dues, Individuals & Subscriptions	2,390.25	
Dues, New Members	233.00	
Dues in arrears, collected	247.70	
Dues, member clubs	618.20	
Life membership payments	350.00	
Interest on savings account	215.93	
Misc. income	<u>234.01</u>	4,289.09