

HIGHLIGHTS OF THE SUMMER SEASON

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Sometime during the 1982 summer season we passed the halfway mark for field work on the five year New York State Breeding Bird Atlas. When records began to arrive at the end of the third nesting season, state and regional coordinators could see that we were clearly involved in the most complete field survey of our breeding avifauna ever undertaken. Observers have already discovered more about the distribution of nesting species than was known in all of New York State ornithological history prior to 1980.

With observers recruiting the help of family, friends, and local residents, the number of participants engaged in the Atlas can no longer be fixed with any authority, but is certainly over a thousand people. In spite of a pressing need for more help from competent birders, this effort compares favorably with the final total of 1,500 dedicated observers whose work was the basis for *The Atlas of Breeding Birds in Britain and Ireland*, the model for all such efforts. The Atlas is an amazing consortium of professional ornithologists, expert birders, and casual bird watchers, plus many contributors who can at best name only a few dozen avian species. Thanks to all of them, we are now obtaining records from virtually every part of the state, including many areas never before birded. The realization that the Atlas is fun swept the state as more birders moved out of familiar haunts into new parts. There were boat trips to islands and backpacking expeditions into the mountains, canoe trips to wilderness areas and surveys of metropolitan neighborhoods that required no less of a sense of adventure. Coverage included large tracts of land—Indian and military reservations, lumber and paper company holdings, estates and private clubs—rarely visited by birders. By the end of the summer, well over half of the 5,345 blocks in the state had received at least some coverage, although Regions 3, 4, 6, and 8 still seemed to be below the 50% threshold.

The increase in observers combined with the geographic expansion of coverage to provide a multitude of Atlas reports. During the first two years of field work about 89,000 individual records were reported statewide. Early evidence suggests that during the '82 season that number was more than doubled. We may also have picked up a few new additions to the 237 breeding species already reported state-

wide. To place these figures in some sort of perspective, the British Atlas accumulated 285,000 records for 229 species over a five-year period.

Another highlight of the summer was the preparation of a set of computer-drawn maps showing the range of each species based upon 1980-81 records. As good as those were, the next set showing all 1980-82 data will be even better. The Information Age is upon us and, after less than a decade, the methods used by the great British Atlas (punched paper tape and an adapted electric typewriter) seem creaky by comparison. Acknowledgment should be made of the enormous contributions made by the NYS Department of Environmental Conservation, not only to data processing, but also to Atlas communications, blockbusting coverage of unassigned areas, and other essential services.

As excellent as the regional reports of the 1982 summer season are, and they all contain much detailed and interesting information carefully compiled by the editors from everything available to them, there is a noticeably uneven response to Atlas data. The Region 9 editor is clearly pleased that, "What with all the work on the N.Y.S. Breeding Bird Atlas, notes come pouring in," adding, "There was a time a few years ago when we had to scratch for records; now we have more than we can handle." Even though the Region 2 editor could only include data from the first 105 green sheets and the Region 8 editor from the first 103, the considerable impact upon the reports of these regions is apparent. Region 5 intensified work on the Atlas, "has begun to yield some surprises." Yet some accounts fail to make mention of the Atlas in the introductions, and refer to it only obliquely in the body of the reports. Region 3 had more Prairie Warblers, Grasshopper Sparrows, and Henslow's Sparrows than usual, with a parenthetical question if this might be the result of Atlas work. We can only suspect so, an uncertain state of affairs in a journal of ornithological record. The project itself may be partly responsible. The Region 6 report finds summer a difficult season because "many birders are preoccupied with the Atlas project," the editor of that region being no exception. As the Region 2 editor, also an Atlas coordinator, notes, the green data sheets are, "a mixed blessing, as they arrive late for this report and have apparently resulted in less quantitative data with fewer field trip reports being submitted."

Admittedly, the Atlas does not lend itself easily to regional reports, and even material available prior to the deadline is not always

in a form useful to the editors. Where, an editor may ask the coordinator, is Block 5497A that had the "PO-X" Clay-colored Sparrow? Who were the observers? What was the date? Are there any verification details, and was the location revisited, or did the bird disappear before it could be upgraded? In many cases, the equally mystified coordinator is still trying to obtain those very details. Editors can no longer depend directly upon seasonal reports from active observers, many of whom have never read, or even heard of, *The Kingbird*. Even field workers who do contribute regularly find it difficult to summarize their findings, and in any case their list of common species recorded is only significant in association with all of the multitude of other similar reports.

If we have entered the Information Age, we also seem to be subject to the expected human difficulties in adjusting. The day is here when observers can store field records in data banks, allowing editors to review computer lists and maps for each species while preparing the seasonal report on a word processor. Lest this seem completely out of touch with reality, it should be noted that not only Atlas information, but also U.S. Fish and Wildlife Breeding Bird Surveys, Manomet shorebird surveys, nest record cards, colonial bird register data, and banding records are all computerized. Atlas information is available on print-out in a variety of formats by region, as well as by species and breeding code for each block, while the computer maps provide a visual record of the range of each species, accurate within five kilometers. As a final note, one editor prepared the summer season report on a word processor.

The summer of 1982 marked the start of major blockbusting efforts to obtain coverage of areas of the state still unassigned. Two DEC-sponsored observers obtained coverage of 36 blocks in Regions 5, 6, 7, and 8, with over 2,400 records of 143 species obtained, including Long-eared Owl, Gray Jay, Philadelphia Vireo, and Grasshopper Sparrow. Ten Region 7 blockbusters working in Regions 6, 7, and 8 turned up about 3,000 records in roughly 100 blocks, including Spruce Grouse, White-eyed and Philadelphia Vireos, and Clay-colored Sparrows. Yet these two notable efforts comprise only about 5% of the expected total of 1982 records, and from a relatively insignificant number of blocks. The most important contributions to the developing range maps continue to come from the growing number of observers, many unaffiliated with the Federation or any bird club, who are reporting 76+ species per block. It is unfortunate that

most of the blockbusting results, as well as records from many individuals, didn't make their way into the seasonal reports.

The regional reports include positive notes for a number of species that may be a result of better coverage of the state by more observers, rather than indications of genuine increases. Note the comments from around the state regarding Red-headed Woodpecker (Regions 1, 4, 6, 7, 8, and 10), Acadian Flycatcher (1, 9, 10), Short-billed Marsh Wren (4, 5, 6, 8, 9), Prairie Warbler (1, 2, 4, 5, 8), Orchard Oriole (1, 2, 4, 5, 8, 9, 10), Grasshopper Sparrow (1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 8, 9), and Henslow's Sparrow (1, 2, 3, 4, 8, 9), as examples. As coverage continues to improve, the cumulative evidence will allow us to trace the ranges and determine with greater authority the status of a number of birds formerly considered rare or uncommon. The evidence of a single region or a single season can only tantalize.

Consider, for example, the Philadelphia Vireo, a bird of fairly undistinguished plumage and oft-confusing song usually found in leafy second-growth. In more than a half-century preceding the Atlas, between 1926-78, the literature documents only 11 summer records, confined to Region 7. If Atlas criteria are applied, seven were "Possible" and four "Probable." However, because five of these occurrences would have to be assigned to the same Atlas block, this historical record actually stood at just four "PO" and three "PR." After only three seasons of Atlas field work, observers have reported five "Possible," five "Probable," and three "Confirmed" Philadelphia Vireos in Regions 5, 6, 7, and 8. The three "CO" records all came this past summer, in Essex, Hamilton, and Warren Counties. These have turned up in the course of what, in most cases, amounts to a spot-check of all habitats for the entire check-list of species present. Given the vast amount of available habitat in northern New York, much of it the result of forest fires and heavy logging early in the century, even greater success might be expected of a specific search of second-growth hardwoods for Philadelphia Vireos, made by observers familiar with the species.

With the increase in summer field work taking place across the state, most species continue to turn up outside their previously documented ranges, as might be expected. Caution in avian records is essential, but the editorial suggestions in the regional reports that mid-June records of Blackpoll Warblers in Essex, Hamilton, and Warren Counties are, or could be, late migrants seem overly conservative in light of the cumulative evidence of the past eight years of expanded

field work. Bull (1974, *Birds of New York State*, p. 497) stated, "Unlike many other breeding warblers of boreal or northern affinities, the Blackpoll Warbler is restricted to the *upper* slopes of the mountains, mostly above 3500 feet in the Adirondacks and usually above 3700 feet in the Catskills." That elevation was lowered by Beehler, (1978, *Birdlife of the Adirondack Park*, p. 165), who said that it was "common above 3,000 feet; elsewhere locally distributed," in the Adirondack Park. Carleton, (1976, *Birds of Essex County, New York*, p. 21) called the Blackpoll a "fairly common summer resident from 2,900' [Mt. Jo] to timberline," in Essex County, and in a subsequent supplement (1981) made note of two summer locations at 2,386' and 1,882'. Notice the sixteen hundred foot drop in elevation since 1974. Blackpoll Warblers have now been found in at least 20 Adirondack blocks at elevations well below the previously accepted altitudinal boundary, in suitable spruce-balsam association, since the Atlas began. This is not meant to serve as an illustration that all mid-June records of boreal warblers, regardless of location, represent breeding birds. What it might demonstrate is that the rejection or questioning of records requires the same care as acceptance. Perhaps the Atlas calls for a certain suspension of disbelief? The question is not whether a bird in proper nesting habitat during the breeding season is a possible migrant, but whether it satisfies the criteria to be noted as a "Possible" breeding species. Our perspective or emphasis will determine whether we learn more about actual ranges, or simply accept what fits preconceived theories.

For many species it will be difficult to determine immediately, if ever, whether the final 1980-84 range maps represent expansions or contractions of previously documented ranges. Early evidence suggests that some birds, like Short-eared Owl and Loggerhead Shrike, will indeed have disappeared from many parts of the state. Many range expansions have been documented or anticipated. Other birds—Saw-whet Owl, Louisiana Waterthrush, Northern Oriole, Clay-colored Sparrow, and Lincoln's Sparrow come to mind—already show promise of either overturning or exceeding any previously held theories regarding their distribution.

We are now entering what our British counterparts termed, "the penultimate season's work." The state Atlas will be a lasting document, and certainly everyone wants the range maps for every species to be as complete and accurate as possible. Hopefully, the Atlas will be repeated at regular intervals, perhaps every quarter-century, in

order to realize its full potential for documenting changes in the breeding birds of New York. If this is to be done, it is important that we establish as a legacy the most accurate benchmark possible in this initial effort. To accomplish this, the help of all competent observers is needed. In at least one metropolitan area of the state, boasting two active bird clubs (and some 700 members), fewer than 10% of the active birders took part in the Atlas in the first three years. This lack of participation extends to other regions as well, and places a burden of impossible coverage upon the coordinator and other observers. As one coordinator observes, "Currently, it is a dedicated few who are doing all the work from which all will later benefit."

During the '82 summer season we doubled the number of records already gathered. With the help of all Federation birders that number could be more than redoubled in 1983, and provide us with nearly a half-million records going into our final year. The Atlas is a Federation project, a project of all individual members and all member clubs. The '83 breeding season, at least for the earliest birds, is already underway. Now is the time for all good birders to contact their regional coordinators, for all clubs to support the final push to the finish.

Enough of accidentals, they only encourage wayward birders to stray from their Atlas blocks. This time the "Bird of the Season" award goes to one of New York State's own, and this season's finest: Blue Grosbeak, the award to be shared by the pair found nesting in a Staten Island park, the first "Confirmed" record for New York State.

This seasonal perspective has already failed to mention so many birds named in the regional reports that it seems consistent to close with a bird that got absolutely no mention. Both urban and rural birders will enjoy knowing that after three years and hundreds of observer days of intensive field work in Hamilton County, not a single Rock Dove has turned up.

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