

RECENT STATUS OF THE BLUE GROSBEAK ON STATEN ISLAND AND IN NEW YORK STATE

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The Blue Grosbeak is an enigmatic species throughout much of New York. Traditionally considered a species of the southeastern United States, its presence in New York has generally been restricted to the extreme southeast portions.

Southeastern New York lies at the boundary of the Canadian and Carolinian biotic zones, each with different average temperatures and floral-faunal associations (Ritchie and Funk 1971). Staten Island and eastern Long Island's flora and fauna have closer affinities with regions to our south, and the Blue Grosbeak can certainly be considered one such example.

The occurrence of Blue Grosbeaks in coastal New York goes back as far as the 19th Century (Cruikshank 1942). Early records from New York include a specimen collected by DeKay in Manhattan during the spring of 1838, and from Bicknell, who reported an individual on Long Island in 1878 (Braislin 1907).

Since then, the Blue Grosbeak has slowly but steadily increased its breeding range through the 20th Century, reaching northern New Jersey by the 1970s (Buckley and Davis 1973), and New York by the early 1980s (Siebenheller and Siebenheller 1982).

The presence of a pair of Blue Grosbeaks on Staten Island in June 1981 was the first indication that breeding might have occurred in the state (Carroll 1988), and nesting was confirmed on Staten Island the following year (Siebenheller and Siebenheller 1982). Since then, the bird has continued to expand its breeding range in New York, breeding as far north as Orange County (Carroll 1988), and at several sites on Long Island (McGowan 2008; S. Mitra, pers. comm.). Although Blue Grosbeaks appear to have established a regular breeding presence in central-eastern Long Island, this bird is still a good find on the outer beaches and remains very rare anywhere else in the New York City/Long Island region (Mitra and Lindsay 2005). Scattered late spring and early summer records from as far north as the Hudson-Mohawk region have occurred in recent years, but breeding has yet to be detected there (Will Raup, pers. comm.).

Blue Grosbeaks are riparian edge specialists, occurring at forest/field edges or at forest/gravel-bar interfaces. Blue Grosbeaks prefer herbaceous annuals and young, shrubby trees. Tall plants, shrubs and trees may be important in providing singing perches and shade for nest sites. Plant growth form is likely more important than plant species (White 1998). Populations may be expected to benefit from the abandonment of agricultural land where the species breeds. The Blue Grosbeak does not generally accept suburban habitats, so urban sprawl into suitable habitat may be detrimental to this species (Ingold 1993).

Regionally speaking, the two main loci for Blue Grosbeaks have historically been and continue to be concentrated in New Jersey, to the southwest of Staten

Island, and in central and eastern Long Island. On Long Island, the traditional strongholds for this species have included Eastport and Calverton. Both of these locations offer attractive breeding habitat, consisting predominately of dense low growth in semi-open country.

During the late spring and early summer of 2013, Staten Island (Richmond Co.) experienced an unprecedented influx of Blue Grosbeaks. The first reports came at the end of May (Anthony Ciancimino, pers. comm.), and subsequently multiple birds at numerous sites throughout Staten Island were reported well into the breeding season. In most instances, sightings were of singing males, but in at least once instance a pair was seen attempting to nest (Baksh 2013). Multiple individuals were noted at Mount Loretto DEC Unique Area, Cemetery of the Resurrection in Pleasant Plains and the former Fresh Kills Landfill in Travis. Some of these individuals lingered into the early fall. This was an unprecedented occurrence locally, and certainly noteworthy for New York.

A few scenarios have been considered to explain the sudden increase in abundance. The first possibility is simply that more people are actively looking for this species in the field, and reporting it to eBird (William Raup, pers. comm.). This seems to be the simplest explanation, and certainly could not be ruled out. Perhaps the increase was merely a localized anomaly due to favorable weather conditions, after a good breeding season and above-average dispersal from areas to our south. Lastly, it is also possible that the species is undergoing a range expansion similar to what was seen in New York with the Chuck-will's-widow during the late seventies. It should be noted however that the Chuck-will's-widow population expansion has seemingly stalled, with some local populations having since contracted (e.g., Long Island) and others having disappeared (e.g., Staten Island) (Mitra 2008; pers. obs).

In order to try and shed some light on the current status of the Blue Grosbeak in New York, I carried out an analysis of eBird data from the past five years. I compiled and graphed three data sets via the eBird graphing tool. I looked at the relative abundance of Blue Grosbeak sightings in New York from 2009-2013 (Figure 1), the abundance of Blue Grosbeaks in New York during the breeding season (June-July) from 2009-2013 (Figure 2), and finally the abundance of Blue Grosbeak sightings in Richmond County (Staten Island) from 2009-2013 (Figure 3). These figures are printed in color in the centerfold of the present issue.

The data suggest that over the past five years, there has been an overall increase throughout our region during both migration and the breeding season. Total annual numbers of Blue Grosbeak sightings in New York increased from a high count of eight in 2009 to a high count of 31 in 2013. During the breeding season, this trend continued with a high count of four in 2009, and 31 in 2013. If these data are to be taken at face value, they suggest a healthy increase over the past five years, after what may have been a cyclical lull since first making headway into the state during the early eighties.

To conclude, it must be acknowledged that eBird is a fairly new technology, and the reliability of data likely deteriorates the farther back in time one goes. It will certainly be interesting to see what the data reveal over the course of the

next five years, as the use of eBird continues to proliferate in the birding community, and as more birders keep an eye out for this species in proper habitat and input their data into eBird.

eBird has given amateur citizen scientists access to valuable data, and the tools to analyze those data in order to better understand local species dynamics over periods of time. The author looks forward to seeing what the next five years bring for this fascinating species in New York!

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Figures from Shanley article, pp. 286-288.

Figure 1. Blue Grosbeak Totals New York State (2009-2013).

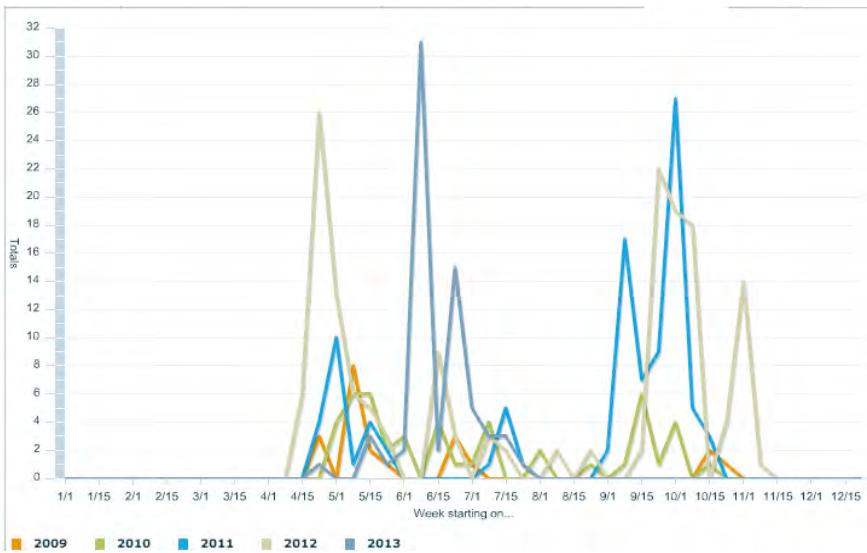


Table 2. Blue Grosbeak Totals New York State Breeding Season (June-July 2009-2013).

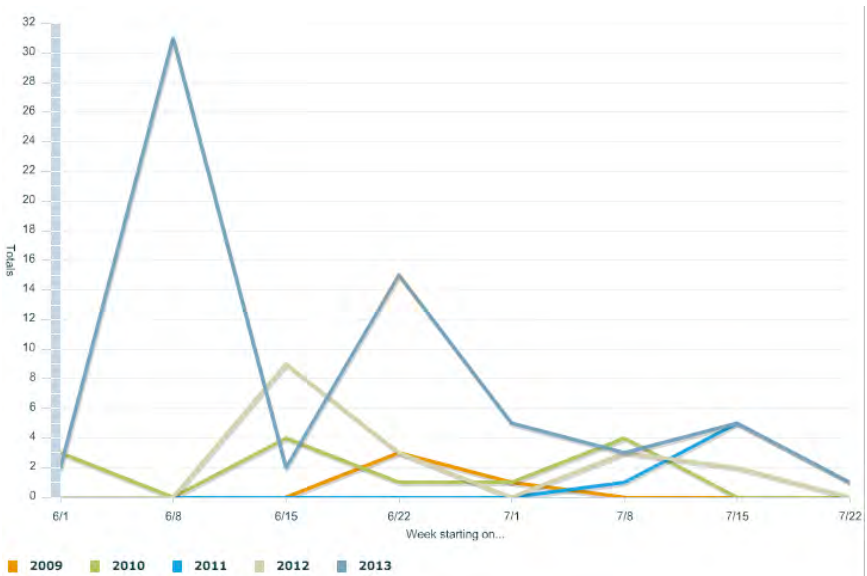


Figure 3. Blue Grosbeak Totals Richmond Co. Staten Island (2009-2013).

