PATCH BIRDING
WHAT IS DIFFERENT ABOUT PATCH BIRDING?

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I had never taken up patch birding until I started work on the New York Breeding Bird Atlas 2000. In that year, I asked Waste Management for access to property they owned in Perinton, NY for atlas work. This property had never been opened for public access. It was a former gravel quarry and before that farmland since the early twentieth century. Over the years this property had been significantly altered. It consisted of an unnamed creek, several large ponds, and a large deep quarry that filled in with water, apparently from underground springs. Several years after I did atlas surveys there, it was opened to the public in 2003. Waste Management contracted to have five miles of trails with necessary bridges installed in an area of about 300 acres. It has a variety of habitats including the deep gravel quarry pond, a series of shallower ponds, several marshes, scrub areas, a small area of open grass, a lowland forest, and an upland forest.

The site was named High Acres Nature Area (HANA). Visitors enjoy dog walking, fishing, geocaching, nature photography, butterflies, cross-country skiing, hiking, and, of course, birding. It has also served students from Rochester Institute of Technology Environmental Sciences Department who work on their master's theses or teams of seniors who work on their capstone projects.

After the atlas was completed, I began to visit throughout the year; it became my go-to place when I wanted to bird for just an hour or two since it was close to my home. My interests have been to see how many different species occur annually and gain some understanding of how they use the different habitats.

Lake Ontario provides a barrier to migration in spring. As a result, local birders visit lakeshore migrant traps. HANA, on the other hand, is located about 15 miles south of Lake Ontario and further from the best know migrant traps. Because of that spatial separation, the site provides some understanding of how the migration is different inland as compared to the lakeshore. From several years of data, we can see trends in the differences of these locations.

When there are high counts of passerine migrants on the lakeshore hotspots, there are extremely few migrants at HANA. But on certain days following severe weather such as north winds, stationary cold fronts, rain, or mist, many of these migrants could appear at this inland location. In years when the water level at HANA is low, there are shorebirds and we average about nine shorebird species per year. Ducks are common migrants in spring and fall but diving ducks, except Ring-necked Duck, are rare. Ring-necked Duck is an annual spring migrant. Blackbirds and sparrows are also common migrants but thrushes, hawks, and the less common gulls are rare.

A patch location provides an opportunity to look further into migrant species. Over the years, I have come to the conclusion that there are two kinds of migrants.

The transient migrants are those that are stopping to feed but are on their way to breeding territories further north. Annually, we see many of these migrants, such as Rusty Blackbird, Cape May Warbler, and Ruby-crowned Kinglet just to name a few. Over the years, a total of 35 migrant species are annual and another 49 species are uncommon but nearly annual. These species are considered migrants based on their known geographical range.

The second type of migrants are the resident migrants. These are species that could breed at HANA based on range, or might have bred there, but the interesting facet about them is that they show up in spring, spend a few days, possibly up to a week, and then depart. They might be seeking a better breeding site, or leave because they fail to find a mate. I am surprised how often this happens. These species are non-breeders at HANA in a specific year but cannot be dismissed on the basis of range, date, or habitat. I have seen many examples of this involving species like Cerulean Warbler, Brown Thrasher, Wilson's Snipe, and Yellow-billed Cuckoo. Yellow-billed Cuckoo has done this in two different years but Black-billed Cuckoo has remained all summer, indicating breeding. This year a pair of Blue-gray Gnatcatchers was found singing and interacting on 21 May, but subsequent extensive effort to re-find them failed. Blue-gray Gnatcatcher has been a very rare breeding species at HANA. It is only through repeated visits that you can be reasonably certain that a species is breeding.

Perhaps one of the greatest joys of patch birding is to find unusual species. Rare species can show up any time of the year. Some of the most noteworthy records are Black Tern, Wilson's and Red-necked Phalarope, Common Redpoll, Northern Shrike, Yellow-breasted Chat, Prothonotary and Golden-winged Warblers. A White-faced Ibis was found and remained for some time to the delight of local listers. Snowy Egret has occurred once and Fish Crow several times. Common Loons and Horned Grebes are occasionally found in spring on the quarry pond, but Red-breasted and Common Mergansers are very unusual.

About 215 species have been recorded at HANA and 59 of these are found annually as breeding birds. There are an additional 15 species that have bred sporadically or rarely. Because of the diversity of species found at HANA and the easy access, it has become a popular birding site, and for me, an enjoyable and informative "patch".