

A Project of the
FEDERATION OF NEW YORK STATE
BIRD CLUBS

in cooperation with
New York State Department of Environmental Conservation
Cornell University Laboratory of Ornithology
National Audubon Society
New York State Museum

BREEDING BIRD ATLAS NEWSLETTER NUMBER 10

JANUARY 1984

Where Does the Atlas Stand Now?

As the fourth Atlas year comes to a close, it is time to look at where we stand in relation to our goal-maximum coverage of the entire state-especially as we have only one more year, 1984, to reach it.

On Saturday, November 5th, all the Regional Coordinators, some of their assistants, and most of the members of the Atlas Steering Committee met for an all-day session at the Cornell Laboratory of Ornithology. The principal discussion topics were, "What have we accomplished to date, especially in 1983?" and "What's left to be done?" Each Regional Coordinator gave a report on this year's progress. Graphic charts illustrating the extent of coverage were projected for all to see.

While exact figures will not be available until all data for 1983 have been entered into and analyzed by the computer, it was visually obvious that impressive progress was made during 1983. The picture of coverage is not even, one or two regions are quite near completion, while some have considerable coverage still required. All present were encouraged and optimistic. There is no room for complacency, however, and there is no doubt that the coming final year will require the most diligent efforts of everyone.

Undoubtedly the work of the blockbusting teams, partially funded by "Return A Gift To Wildlife" income tax deduction money, made a very significant contribution to advancing the Atlas. Well over 300 blocks were surveyed by blockbusters. There is no question that in 1984 considerably greater blockbusting efforts will be required. At this early date, it is uncertain whether or not funding will be available in 1984. While we are making every effort to assure that it will be, and in considerably greater amounts, we must not assume that we will be successful. We must proceed with plans to do

our own blockbusting, as so many surveyors did this past year. If all surveyors will take it upon themselves to work in just one or two blocks outside of the area they have previously worked, completion of the Atlas can be assured. Ask your Regional Coordinator where you can be of help.

There was a consensus that enthusiasm for Atlasing was noticeably increased this past year. With only one more season to go it behooves us all to put forth the greatest effort of the entire project.

Congratulations and warm thanks to all who have worked so hard.

Gordon M. Meade, M.D.
Chairman, Atlas Project

An Atlas Glossary

A.T.E.: Ate The Evidence; a potential FY, nervous at being watched, that swallows the worm, remaining a PO-X.

Atlas map: curious cartographic distortion of reality distributed by the NYS DEC to test compasses and patience.

beat block: scrub woods and old fields near Desolate, NY, where the pitiful gravel pit with its UN kingfisher hole, twin skidmarks at the entrance, is the birding hotspot.

bird finder: cassette tape recorder.

BOBO Country|bob'-ol: hayfields and meadowlarks, lacking variety.

bog slogger [alt.-hopper]: masochistic bushwacker of fens, identified by steamed-up binoculars and waterlogged boots acquired in pursuit of boreal birds through spruce blowdowns and alder tangles and across endless sphagnum mats.

B.O.R.E.: Bloody Old Red-eye.

An Atlas . . . continued on page 6

Owling: A Special Kind of Birding

Excerpted from The Warbler
Newsletter of the Alan Devoe Bird Club

It was 1:30 a.m. April 25, 1982.

Having braved low temperatures on April 6 for several hours huddled in inky blackness playing taped owl calls in hopeful-but unrewarded-anticipation, we were understandably ambivalent about shaking off sleep in the hope it would be a good "owl night," quiet, with no wind and clear skies . . . Careful advance scouting of likely habitats had not resulted in success our first time around, but we decided to try the same places again . . .

We pulled up to a spot, parked, and before we turned on the tape, a very realistic-sounding great horned voice reached our ears. The miracle-the unbelievable-happened. The creature could not have been more than 100' away and the call was clear and loud. We listened and later played the tape to see if he (for it was a male, according to the call) would come closer-perhaps be visible in a flashlight beam. The owl seemed to ignore the tape for awhile, continuing to call without perceptible change in frequency, and came no closer. Then he began to join in during the taped call, as if to complete it . . . It must have been a convincing tape. "Owls aren't too particular about voice imitations," we'd been told. "They will answer to almost anything." As soon as I did my owl imitation, however, the woods grew silent.

Faintly then, from the opposite side of the wooded road came another call, -a female. Soon our owl left us and the pair called together, more and more distantly. Elated and exhausted from the tension of concentration, we realized that two hours had passed, but decided to try another chosen area before returning homeward.

Again the unbelievable happened. From our location beside a swampy wood, we thought we heard the same pair of owls hooting from across a field. Playing the tape to try to call them closer, we pretended to be territorial intruders; we used the recording sparingly to avoid being located as the unfeathered source of the calls.

At 4 a.m., Tom lifted his binoculars and quietly scanned a faintly lit, dead tree about 50 yards away. "There it is!" he whispered. "I see it!" We had heard nothing from the tree. I searched-and there were not one, but two dark shapes at its top. A second pair!

The distant voices continued from far away. Then, as if hearing them, one of the shapes turned on the tree branch to face the calls, leaned forward, fluffed up, extended its body and hooted the female's reply, later joined by her mate. A regular vocal exchange between the pairs was then established, and continued without more taped intrusions. As the light grew, we could make out pale, biblike patches at the owls' throats, the heads turning 180 degrees, feather "horns" which moved independently toward the source of interest like a cat's ears. How like eerie cats they looked: wideeyed, painfully deliberate and silent for long periods. We dared not move, not wanting to be detected by the sensitive ears. Ancient legends of the supernatural, of enchanted beings, Indian beliefs of souls inhabiting owls and thoughts of the possible origin of Carroll's mysterious Cheshire cat came to mind.

The brightening early morning light combined with first crows of distant rooster, pheasant, and calls of song sparrows and meadowlark. Still the owls hooted at each other across the meadow.

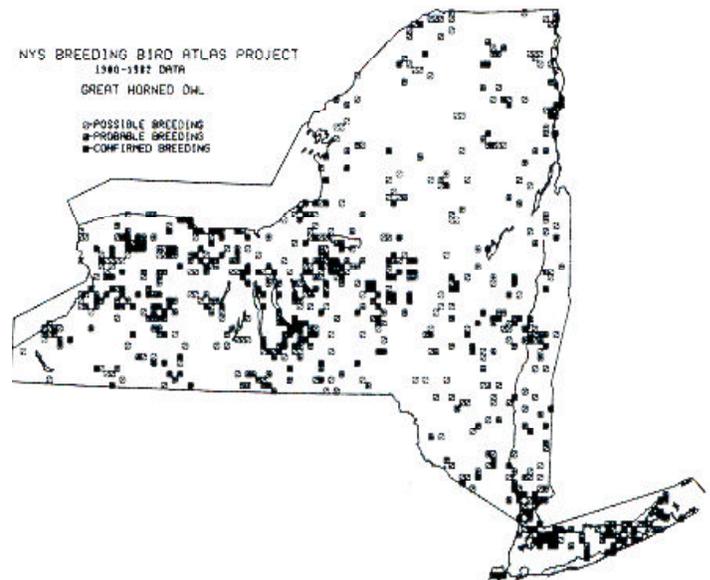
At about 4:45 a.m., one owl flew silently across the road into the woods. Then the other. A crow awoke. Quickly rallying, it roused and summoned others of its kind to join the eternal corvine conspiracy to make day uncomfortable for the owls. The group moved slowly through the trees, each movement of the owls noted with an outburst of increasing volume, sounding like an unruly crowd at a football game-until the enemy and noisy pursuers were far in the distance.

The morning brightened into familiarity, dispelling most-but not all-of the totally unfamiliar world we had been living beside. Only the crows served as a talisman to the dreamers, to prove that the dream was real.

Emmy Thomee,
Region 8

Owls-Owls-Owls Your Last Chance

This is the last opportunity to locate the owls in your block. Unless your block is located at a high elevation or you have absolutely no open land, there IS a Great Horned Owl in your block. If your block is in the foothills, has mountainous terrain or a swampy wooded area, there IS a Barred Owl in yourblock. Eastern Screech-Owls ARE in your block if you live at lower elevations. A concerted effort to find the Great Horned, Barred and Eastern Screech-Owls should turn up any Northern Saw-whets or Long-eareds that are there. NO MORE EXCUSES . . . TIME HAS RUN OUT.



Looking for the Long-eared Owl

"Owls are among the least known and understood birds in our State." David C. Gordon, *The Kingbird*, 1959. This is certainly true of one of our strictly nocturnal owls, the Long-eared Owl. The distribution map for the period 1980-1982 shows only 33 records widespread across the state. Those field workers who have found this owl tell us they believe the bird is much more common than our records indicate. It is, however, one of the most difficult to find in a group which requires special effort. Have all of you seen a Long-eared Owl? Wouldn't you like to see this extremely interesting raptor?

The Long-eared Owl nests in the spring, starting egg laying as early as mid-March. Don't start looking for its nest then. Long-eared Owls use old nests of crows, hawks and squirrels, and to repeat what we have told you before, go out and look for nests now when the leaves are off the trees. Record their locations and check them later for occupants. Don't expect to find whitewash and pellets under a nest early in the breeding season. Only when the eggs hatch do accumulations of debris become obvious. As with all owls territorial behavior begins prior to nesting and using recorded calls to elicit responses is best done when territories are being established.

Typically, Long-eared Owls nest in dense coniferous woods, but also in mixed or deciduous woods along streams and ponds or in swampy woods. Farm lands or short grass prairies must be adjacent to the nesting areas for hunting their favorite prey, mice (*Microtus* or *Peromyscus*). Long wings make this owl especially adapted to hunting on the wing in open areas.

Although very few have observed the courtship of the Long-eared Owl, the following information came from a paper entitled "Nesting and Food Habits of the Long-eared Owl in Michigan" by William H. Armstrong. He describes four phases: competitive calling, aerial performance, noncompetitive calling and copulation. Competitive calling is continuous calling of a "who-who-who" type back and forth by the owls. Aerial performance consists of turning, twisting, and diving flights accompanied by the cracking noise of the wings being slapped together. These flights are similar to that of its congeneric, the Short-eared Owl. A single "who" followed by a swoop in the area of the nest apparently excites the female and copulation then resu lts.

Long-eared Owls may have several reactions to an intruder at the nest. The female may sit tight without letting you know she's there, while the male roosting close to the trunk of a nearby tree straightens and tightens its feathers, raises its ear tufts and becomes indistinguishable from a broken tree branch. Or you may be confronted by an irate parent which fluffs out its feathers and tail becoming a formidable looking challenge to a would be predator. Among its behavioral variations is a broken-wing act. The bird drops to

the ground, piteously flutters around making a mewling noise, while attempting to lead the intruder away from the nest.

Long-eareds usually lay four to five eggs, an egg being laid every other day. Incubation begins with the laying of the first egg and lasts for 25 to 30 days. Nestling dates in New York are May 5 to June 24. The young owls leave the nest when they are 23 to 24 days old initially getting only as far as the branches of the nest tree. From early June to mid-August, they are fed and carefully guarded by their parents until they are eight to nine weeks old. Fledglings move away from the nest area when they begin feeding on their own. Longeared Owls are migratory and gregarious at their winter roosts. It is speculated that family groups may stay together.



Owls communicate mainly by vocalization and the Long-eared Owl has perhaps the most varied repertoire of all the owls. These are some of the descriptions reported in the literature: Courtship Calls - "whoowhoo-who" resembling the call of the Mourning Dove; single "who" higher pitched in the female; "wuh-wuh-wuh". (Variations of these calls appear to be part of the pair behavior during incubation and calling continues well into the fledgling stage.) Defense Calls - "quorrel-quorrel-quowk" a rasping like sound; "oo-ack" or "whack"; slurred whistle; "quick" repeated until it sounds like a scream; barking of a dog; shrieking. Calls of Young- hissing; "crick-a-crick" - like chirping of a field cricket; snapping of bill; shrill squeaks.

Mike Peterson describes three distinct vocalizations he and his blockbusters have heard in the Adirondacks: "1) Monotone hoot: just a "hoo...hoo...hoo...hoo", given perhaps four or five times on a single pitch. This call has

Atlasing in Region 7-Adirondack-Champlain

Region 7 includes the four northeastern counties of Clinton, Essex, Franklin, and Hamilton. Distance from the Canadian border in the north to the Fulton-Hamilton line in the south is 120 miles, while the greatest width from Lake Champlain in the east to the Herkimer-Hamilton line in the west is 75 miles. Second-largest region of the state (after Hudson-Mohawk Region 8), it covers 689 Atlas blocks, or 13% of the statewide total. With 6,650 square miles, the Adirondack-Champlain Region is more than two-thirds the size of neighboring Vermont, or somewhere between Connecticut and Massachusetts in total area. The arrangement of the avifauna takes some getting used to, since many southern birds are found in the north and east, while more northern species are concentrated in the south and west. Geographically, six districts are recognized.

The Border district of the north extends from the St. Regis Indian Reservation below the St. Lawrence River, eastward across a plateau that rises from below 200' to above 1,000', before dropping down to Lake Champlain at Rouses Point. From vantage points along the height of this escarpment, one can look down into Quebec to the north, as if gazing off the edge of the world. The country is relatively flat and open, cut in places by rivers like the Chateaugay, Marble, and Salmon, flowing toward the St. Lawrence. This is the least-known part of the region, but we've learned that the breeding birds include a rich variety of waterfowl and wetland species in the marshes to the northeast and northwest, plus Northern Harriers, Upland Sandpipers, Black Terns, Red-headed Woodpeckers, Louisiana Waterthrushes, and both Clay-colored and Vesper Sparrows.

South of the Border district, paradoxically, is the Northern district, which takes in the northern reaches of the Adirondack Park. Elevation averages about 1,400' and, although there are farmlands on the periphery, the ranges of many boreal species extend up through the middle toward Upper Chateaugay Lake. Here, birds like Common Loon, Black-backed and Three-toed Woodpecker, Gray Jay, and Common Raven are being found at their northernmost known locations within the state.



A few of the more than 16,000 pairs of Ring-billed Gulls nesting on the Four Brothers Islands, Lake Champlain.

The Champlain district includes the eastern agricultural lowlands along the 100-mile stretch of lake from Rouses Point southward to Ticonderoga. Elevations begin at about 100' at the shoreline and sometimes rise abruptly to nearly 1,500' on the ridgeline bordering the largely agricultural valley. The lake contains several islands within NYS waters, where avian diversity is low (t 25 species), but numbers of individuals are sometimes high: Valcour island with 400+ pairs of Great Blue Herons and Four Brothers Islands with over 16,000 pairs of Ring-billed Gulls, more than 100 pairs of Herring Gulls, and 100 pairs of Black-crowned Night-Herons, plus Great Black-backed Gulls and a variety of geese, ducks, and mergansers. The lake basin appears to be a main avenue of northward invasion for birds like Tufted Titmouse, Northern Mockingbird, Blue-gray Gnatcatcher, Golden-winged Warbler, Northern Cardinal, and House Finch.

The High Peaks district includes the 43 peaks above 4,000' elevation (with Algonquin and Marcy rising above 5,000'), of which nineteen have no maintained trail to the summit. The number of species is low above four thousand feet, but this subalpine zone below the summits is the stronghold of birds like the Gray-cheeked Thrush and Blackpoll Warbler. Variety is much better at lower elevations, especially around the few large bodies of water and village namesakes such as Indian Lake and Schroon Lake. Within wilderness areas, birdlife is most abundant around the few high elevation lakes and ponds: Arnold, Avalanche, Colden, Duck Hole, Flowed Land, Scott, and Wallface, to name several of the most important.

The Lakes district is home of most boreal species. Elevations average 1900' with most of the few mountains below 3,000'. Even the village names convey a sense of water: Inlet, Long Lake, Raquette Lake, Saranac Lake, and Tupper Lake. Common Loons are aptly named here. This is also the heartland of the Spruce Grouse and Gray Jay within the state.

The Southern district includes lower portions of Hamilton County around Piseco Lake, Lake Pleasant, and the Sacandaga River. Forests are mostly hardwoods or mixed, and mountains rarely top 3,000'. Birds like American Kestrel, Mourning Dove, House Wren, Northern Oriole, and Field Sparrow are more frequently encountered here than in northern portions of Hamilton County.

Even in a region so large and with such a diversity of habitats, the number of breeding species is something of a surprise. Beehler (*Birdlife of the Adirondack Park, 1978*) claimed, "The Adirondack region boasts over 150 varieties of breeding birds." Just before Atlas field work began, Carleton (*Birds of Essex County, New York, 1980*) noted that "159 breed or have bred" in that one county. After just four years of Atlas observations, 200 species have been recorded as nesters in

Continued next page

the region, of which 178 are now Confirmed. Since the visit of DeKay and Emmons in 1840, the region has been studied and described by Roosevelt and Minot, Eaton, Saunders, Bull, and many others. Yet after just four years we know more about the ranges of breeding birds than was provided by the collective work of all ornithologists prior to 1980.

If habitat and species diversity are great within the four-county region, so too are the problems of access. There are entire squares with no roads, forested blocks with not even a trail. The 4 1/2 million acres in the region are divided between private and state ownership, with many large tracts of private land (over 10,000 acres) and several larger tracts of private land (over 20,000 acres). The mix of owners could boggle the mind of a county clerk: individuals, families, timber and paper companies (and leases to hunting clubs), out-of-state and NYS scout councils, foundations, and development corporations . . . all wanting their privacy respected and a few rather suspicious of the Atlas and its possible effect upon their land use. Posted signs, steel bar gates, and alert caretakers discourage trespass. Most large tracts of state land are closed to motorized travel. Even where entry is free, or can be arranged, backpacking, bogslogging, bushwacking, or canoeing often become the order of the day. Along the Canadian border where access is simpler, distance is a factor since there are so few resident birders. Once access to a block is gained, the blackflies, biting flies, deerflies, horseflies, mosquitoes, and no-see-ums serve to remind observers how long a five-year Atlas can be.

Somehow, at least some coverage has been obtained from 87% of all blocks. Much of this is extremely good, with 119 blocks now at an adequate level of 76+ species, distributed over some seventy different squares. As we approach the final season, only 90 virgin blocks with no coverage remain, and all but five squares have been entered. The credit for all of this, as with the entire statewide Atlas, belongs to the observers. Whether year-round or seasonal residents, visitors, or invited experts, all have done well. The support of High Peaks Audubon and Northern Adirondack Audubon Societies has been important, too, as well as the backing of the Federation, the NYS DEC, and the NL Foundation. A special note of thanks goes to the railers who have already located Virginia Rail in 23 blocks and Sora in 11, and to the owlers who have recorded Great Horned in 83 blocks and Barred in 147.

The rewards have been many. Imagine a square with eight nesting species of woodpeckers (all but Three-toed in the same block). Picture a single tree with three woodpeckers lined up, showing their backs: Hairy, Black-backed, and Three-toed. All blocks are exciting, but some trees are more exciting than others. This is a region of surprises. Here, Savannah Sparrows can occur on sphagnum bogs surrounded by unbroken spruce forest, while Lincoln's Sparrows are "yard birds" in at least one hamlet and can be found elsewhere next to open fields in farm country. The variety of habitats and elevations is reflected in the 27 breeding warblers, plus a hybrid, recorded since 1980.

As much as we've accomplished, and this applies to all of the state as well as Region 7, a great deal remains to be discovered

during 1984. Given our experience, those blocks still needing coverage by midJuly could be some of the strongest. The final season promises to be a lot of fun.

John M. C. Peterson Region 7 Coordinator

Mike Peterson of Elizabethtown is a freelance writer and licensed Adirondack guide. His vocational specialties, whether at the typewriter or guiding parties in the field are the birds of the Adirondack-Champlain region. He is co-editor (with Janet Carroll) of the Atlas newsletter, Region 7 *Kingbird* editor, and has edited the



newsletter of High Peaks Audubon for over ten years. His articles on birds appear in *The Conservationist*, *Adirondack Life*, *The Kingbird*, and *New York Birders*. His Essex County life-list stands at 246 species, only seven behind that of mentor Geoffrey Carleton, also of Elizabethtown, to whom Mike credits much of his knowledge of North Country birds and most of his concern for accuracy in avian records.

Raised in Hudson Falls, Mike is a graduate of Hobart College in Geneva, where he received his B.A. in English. Following active duty as a USAF officer attached to the Air Training Command, flying jets, Mike returned to scholarship and teaching. He did his master's work with a concentration in medieval studies at the University of Vermont under the G.I. Bill before moving to Rochester, where he served as assistant professor of English at R.I.T., teaching literature and communications. At the same time, he continued doctoral

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Blockbusting Positions

We will again be looking for students and other birders to work on DEC blockbusting teams during June and July. Last year we sent notices of these positions to over 50 colleges and universities in the state and received only 20 applications. As a wildlife agency we are especially interested in giving wildlife students an opportunity to gain experience in the field. If you know any students who are good birders, experienced in camping and who like trudging around inhospitable or hospitable habitats, please have them contact me. As you can see from the photo of last year's blockbusters, who by the way did an excellent job, looks are not important. (Sorry guys!)

Janet Carroll NYSDEC
Wildlife Resources Center
Delmar, N.Y. 12054



DEC BLOCKBUSTERS: (Bottom Row) Paul Novak, David Medd, Doug Judall, Peter Hunt; (Top Row) Jim Clinton, Janet Carroll, Mike Milligan

Your're An Atlaser! Now Join The Federation

You're an Atlaser and you're enjoying birding in ways you never did before! But are you a member of the Federation of New York State Bird Clubs which conceived, organized and is the moving force behind the Atlas? The chances are better than 50% that you are not. Probably that's because you don't know that besides club membership for the more than forty clubs in the Federation, membership as an individual is available to you.

Why not join and enjoy the benefits that will come to you as an individual member? You'll receive the quarterly journal, *The Kingbird*, with field observation notes, reports of research on New York birds, notes on N.Y. rarities, and reports from the 10 Regions of who is seeing what, when and where. It is considered one of the finest state bird journals in the country. In addition

you'll get the quarterly newsletter, *New York Birders*, with news of what's going on among the state's birders and their clubs. You can attend the informative and pleasurable annual fall meeting with its scientific papers, workshops on birding problems, field trips, business meeting and a friendly banquet with outstanding speaker; all this while meeting friends and birders from all over the state. Join us on pelagic trips, Adirondack birding safaris, and sport a Federation arm patch and/or decal.

Federation membership will be a real plus to your birding life. To join use the membership form below or just send a letter with your check to Myrna Hemmerick, Membership Chairman, Box 203, Setauket, N.Y. 11733.

Federation of New York State Bird Clubs

MEMBERSHIP APPLICATION

To: Membership Chairman, Mrs. Myrna Hemmerick, Box 203, Setauket, NY 11733

I hereby apply for membership in the Federation of New York State Bird Clubs and enclose \$ _____ for one year's dues. (Please make check payable to Federation of New York State Bird Clubs, Inc.) I will also receive *New York Birders*. (Memberships are on a calendar year basis. Applicants for Annual or Family Membership applying in the second half of the year may reduce payment by one-half.)

My Name _____ Address _____
City, State _____ Zip _____

Classes of membership (including subscription to *Kingbird* publication at \$8.00 per year)

Individual \$12	Family \$15	Life \$200
Student \$ 5	Supporting \$20	(4 payments, no further dues)

Peterson . . . continued from page 5

studies in American literature at the University of Rochester. Meanwhile, an interest in birding dormant since his undergraduate days above the shores of Seneca Lake began to awaken, and he was soon making frequent forays to Bergen Swamp, Braddock Bay, Oak Orchard, and Montezuma, as well as the Adirondack and White Mountains. Mike went to the woods just over a decade ago in the vanguard of the exurbanite return to Thoreau's deliberate life. He has taught English, both full-time and as a substitute, in high schools at Elizabethtown, Moriah, Westport, and Willsboro.

Today, Mike Peterson is a trustee of the Adirondack Conservancy and past-president and director of High Peaks Audubon Society. He also serves as wildlife manager of the Four Brothers Islands in Lake Champlain, a vital nesting area for gulls, herons, and waterfowl, now owned by The Nature Conservancy and managed under the terms of a natural area lease by High Peaks Audubon. Following work on the NYS Atlas, Mike hopes to head for Ontario in 1985 with a crew of Adirondack bog-sloggers to help on the Atlas in that province paddling north by canoe on one of the rivers like the Albany, Attawapiskat, or Winisk, up through the tundra to Hudson or James Bay.

Backyard Boreals

For twenty-two years I had been an avid backyard birder: recorder of arrival and departure dates, contributor to *The Kingbird* regional notes, participant in Franklin County's Big Day, and purveyor of fine foods to all avian visitors.

Then Atlasing arrived, opening up the countryside beyond the backyard and introducing me to the bogs, marshes and beaver ponds of this lovely part of New York State. My enlarged "backyard" has yielded boreal species that I didn't suspect were there: several families of Gray Jays, Boreal Chickadees, Yellow-bellied Flycatchers, and (on a remote beaver pond) a female Common Goldeneye and six downy young. Once when I stood about twelve feet from two young Gray Jays, listening to the querulous "mutterings", a Blackbacked Woodpecker flew out of the dense woods and

perched between the jays!

I've heard the yipping and yapping of a coyote family; seen innumerable deer and one black bear, and can attest to the ferocity of the Adirondack blackfly and mosquito populations.

Never underestimate the power of a Regional Coordinator - Mike Peterson's encouragement and enthusiasm inspires everyone. What began as one Atlas square has increased to more than three; what began as a task has now become a joy - thanks to Atlasing, and to Mike.

Charlcie Delehanty
Region 7



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