

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 2**

APRIL 1981

*It's really exciting to feel one can
contribute something worthwhile
while going out snooping after the
birds."* **Lee Boyd-Region 9**

We're Out of the Nest and Flying!

Who would have ventured a guess or predicted in March 1980, when our Atlas project was in its incubation period, that a year later it would be fully fledged and out of the nest with 228 species confirmed as breeding within the state? I certainly would not have been so sanguine, at least publicly. But thanks to the enthusiastic and devoted hard work of some 700 workers, our 10 regional coordinators, and the invaluable help of our cooperating agencies, especially the DEC, we are up and flying strong into our second year.

As you will see from the progress reported in this newsletter we all have reason to be very much pleased with what has been accomplished. At the same time the preliminary distribution maps show clearly that there are vast deficiencies of coverage which must be remedied in the coming years.

The need for more workers, especially in northern regions of the state, is urgent. Word of mouth communication to your fellow birders is a potent way to enlist coworkers. Tell them of the pleasure you've had, how you have learned a new way of birding and looking at birds, the new insight you've gained into the lives of birds. "It's been great fun" is the verdict of those who've tried it—they are anxious to get started again.

An unresolved question is, "What constitutes adequate coverage of a block and a square?" When do you conclude you've done an effective job and should move along to another area? There are beginning to be glimpses of an answer. Vermont, now in its fifth and final year, considers "adequate coverage" to be "at least 75 species recorded and 37 confirmed." Gilbert Raynor, Region 10 coordinator is studying the question statistically and may suggest a different standard for "adequate coverage" for us. Perhaps before this breeding season is over we will have come to

an answer to this question. However, let me caution against automatically stopping your survey of a block when you reach 75 species; many blocks are yielding considerably more. A decision to move on probably hinges on the point at which additional hours of surveying yield few or none in the way of added species or little category upgrading. Your input into this question will be helpful and welcome.

I should report to you that we will continue to need funds over and above what has so far been available to us. The Federation was fortunate to have a small fund to get us started, and this year we received a generous donation from our fellow member and good friend, Joe Taylor, of 50 shares of Bausch & Lomb stock. These monies have kept us going for phone calls, postage, printing of stationery, handbooks, newsletters, etc. The Department of Environmental Conservation has made a major contribution of staff time and salaries, map production costs, printing, mailing, postage and use of their quarters for meetings. We are indeed indebted to the Federation member clubs and individuals who have generously contributed funds to cover expenses of regional coordinators and workers. But we should not count on this continuing indefinitely. If you can suggest individuals, foundations, corporations, etc. as funding prospects let me know and we'll follow through. If clubs have ideas for money raising events—birdathons, auctions, benefit sales, etc. they should not feel hesitant about raising money to assist with the Atlas Project.

With that I'll sign off with congratulations and thanks to everyone, and with anticipation of exciting new developments in 1981.

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

Atlas Highlights

The results of the initial year of the New York Breeding Bird Atlas Project provide the impetus to prepare for the 1981 breeding season with renewed energy and excitement. Surveys were conducted to some extent in 909 blocks and while this represents only 17% coverage, it is an excellent start. Some of these blocks had just a few species reported, but the majority had from 50 to 75 breeding records. The total number of breeding records for the state was about 38,000; of these approximately one third were in the confirmed category.

228 breeding species were recorded statewide; 203 were confirmed. No breeding evidence was obtained for the Lesser Scaup, Peregrine Falcon, Black Rail, Bewick's Wren, Western Meadowlark and Monk Parakeet. In Bull's, "Birds of New York State," only single breeding records have been reported for Lesser Scaup and Bewick's Wren. A female Lesser Scaup was seen with seven downy young at the Tiff Street Marsh in Buffalo on June 1, 1946 and a nesting pair of Bewick's Wren was observed at Mohonk Lake, New Paltz, N.Y. in 1974. Peregrine Falcons as a population last bred in the eastern U.S. in the early 1960's. Hopefully, the peregrine reintroduction project in New York State will result in breeding pairs in the near future. The Black Rail is an elusive species known to nest on Long Island. No doubt breeding records will be reported in the coming years. Western Meadowlark began an eastward range expansion into New York several years ago. Four sightings of Western Meadowlarks early in the 1980 breeding season in the Rochester area indicate that breeding records will be forthcoming. The Monk Parakeet is an exotic species; that is, it is not native to New York. Its presence in New York as a breeder would be through the "courtesy" of people who released their unwanted pets.

The following species have been reported, but not confirmed:

Possible Breeding Only

Mallard x Black Duck	Golden Eagle	Tennessee Warbler
Red-breasted Merganser	Spruce Grouse	Summer Tanager

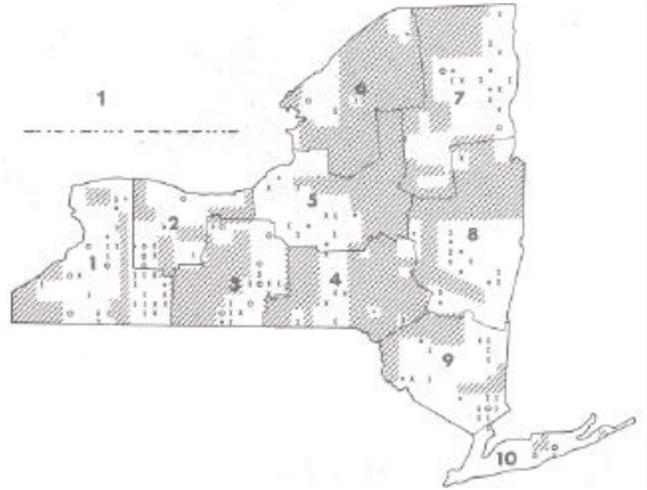
Probable Breeding Only

Gray Partridge	Philadelphia Vireo	Red Crossbill
King Rail	Lawrence's Warbler	White-winged Crossbill
Short-eared Owl	Northern Parula	Clay-colored Sparrow
Chuck-will's Widow	Cape May Warbler	
Yellow-bellied Flycatcher	Bay-breasted Warbler	
Short-billed Marsh Wren	Wilson's Warbler	
Grey-cheeked Thrush	Dickcissel	
Ruby-crowned Kinglet	Pine Siskin	

The American Robin was confirmed most often (509) with the Starling (422) and Barn Swallow (378) also heavily reported. The most reported duck was the Mallard with 161 confirmed records as compared to 48 of the less numerous, more secretive Black Duck. Over 300 confirmed breeding records were reported for the Red-winged Blackbird (319) and House Sparrow (338). Several species had more than 200 confirmed records, including Common Grackle, Northern Oriole, Blue Jay,

readily observed warbler was the Yellow Warbler, while both the Song Sparrow and Chipping Sparrow led the sparrow's with 280 and 250 confirmed records respectively. These are some of the most commonly seen and vociferous species and in most cases are backyard nesters.

Because our state bird frequently employs nest-boxes, the Eastern Bluebird is



a fairly easy species to confirm, with nesting proven in all ten regions of New York. The preliminary range map also illustrates our need for improved coverage over the next four years.

Raptors are among the group of under-represented species. Although numerous records of Turkey Vultures were reported, the difficulty in proving breeding for these scavengers is evidenced by the fact that there were only two records of confirmed breeding in the state; a nest with young in Orleans County and recently fledged young in Chautauqua County. The accipiters are equally difficult to confirm and few reports were received statewide. Sharpshinned Hawks were confirmed six times; three in Region 5, one in Region 3, and two in Region 2; six confirmed records of Cooper's Hawks were reported, two each in Regions 5, 3, and 1, and two for the Goshawk in Region 1 and one each in Regions 8, 6, 5, and 3. The highly visible American Kestrel and Redtailed Hawk had 104 and 83 confirmed breeding records respectively. Though reports were widespread, fewer reports of these two raptors came from the Adirondacks where preferred open areas and cultivated farmlands are decreasing. The Broad-winged

Hawk was confirmed in 24 blocks. This species is believed to be very abundant, but is far more secretive than its **Buteo** relatives. Most of the reports of the Broad-winged Hawk came from the Adirondacks and western New York. Because of its specialized nesting habitat requirement, the Red-shouldered Hawk may be losing ground in New York. Stream straightening and water impoundment are destroying its preferred

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Eastern Phoebe, Mourning Dove and Killdeer. The most

OWLS-How to Find Them

Just about every natural history journal this time of year has an owl story, but this one will be a little different because it's not just about owls, but is also about how to find them.

First let me remind you that as Atlas workers and conscientious birders we must not be the cause of any nest desertion. With owls in particular where it is almost mandatory that we find nests in order to confirm breeding, keep the following in mind:

1. If nesting adults are kept off the eggs, the eggs may freeze or addle.
2. Disturbance is most likely to cause nest abandonment early in the breeding season.
3. Make your observations from a distance. It is not necessary to climb to a nest. You will not only upset the birds, but you may be risking injury from an irate parent. Human scent around a nest area also attracts mammalian nest predators, like the raccoon.

Calling Owls - Recordings of owl calls played in likely habitats within your block should elicit responses from resident owls. Start by playing the tape softly. Play a cadence, then listen for a response. Increase the volume gradually. Don't call on windy, snowy, rainy or foggy nights because the owls are much less apt to respond.

Looking for Owl Signs - Once you have a response from an owl or even if you don't (owls don't always respond to taped calls) but have good habitat in your block you must make a ground search to locate a nest. Area usage by owls is evidenced by signs. Your biggest problem will be to distinguish whether the sign is that of a hawk or owl.

Both hawks and owls pass conspicuous urates, commonly called whitewash. The whitewash of hawks generally splashes into spots and streaks and is ejected out and away from the perch. The whitewash of owls is more solid and forms puddles and is ejected directly below the perch. Numerous whitewash blotches at the base of a tree means an owl has been roosting there.

Both hawks and owls regurgitate pellets. Hawk pellets usually contain only fur because their powerful digestive enzymes break down the bone into indistinguishable fragments. Owl pellets on the other hand, contain large and recognizable skull parts and bones in addition to fur. A section in "A Field Guide to Animal Tracks," one of the Peterson series, gives the size and shape of various raptor pellets.

Before hatching, the area around the nest is fairly clean, but after hatching pellets, whitewash and food remains will be much more obvious. In most species of owl, the male selects a roost tree close to the nest tree. Accumulations of fresh pellets and whitewash beneath a tree signal that a nest is nearby. (Old pellets may indicate a winter roost.)

Where to Find Nesting Owls - Don't expect owls to be waiting for you at the nest. That's too easy. Most

owls will be long gone before you arrive at the nest site.

Barn Owl: This bird nests in silos, barns, abandoned buildings or hollow trees. Look for pellets in your examination of possible nest locations and ask the farmers in your block whether they have any owls nesting in their buildings.

Egg dates: All months, usually April - June

Incubation: 32-34 days

Screech Owl: Look for the small pellets and whitewash of the Screech Owl. If you find any, inspect all likely looking tree cavities or hollows in the vicinity. Old apple orchards are especially attractive to this species.

Egg dates: Late March to early May

Incubation: 1-25 days

Great Horned Owl: Great Horned Owls most commonly use old nests of hawks, particularly the Red-tailed Hawk. Nests can be found in almost any small or large wooded area, but they prefer coniferous or mixed woods with adjacent open areas for hunting. Pellet and whitewash accumulations under the male's roost tree indicate that a nest is nearby.

Egg dates: Late January to mid April

Incubation: 30-35 days

Barred Owl: The Barred Owl nests in tree cavities or old stick nests in wet woods, river bottomland and heavily wooded swamps. These owls are very secretive, preferring to roost and nest in conifer stands, but pellets and whitewash will give away its residency.

Egg dates: Late March to early May

Incubation: 21-28 days .

Long-eared Owl: This owl prefers to use the old nests of hawks or crows in coniferous or mixed Short-eared Owl, Essex, January 9, 1981 wooded areas. A Long-eared Owl was confirmed by an Atlas worker in Region 8. He says the nest "tree was located in a wet woods of about 15 acres consisting of white pine, hemlocks, northern hardwoods . . . The wood lot is



surrounded by grazed pasture, active hay fields and small woodlots . . ." This owl is very defensive of the nest and may give away its presence.

Egg dates: Late March to late May
Incubation: 21-30 days

Short-eared Owl: A mere depression in the ground, the nest of the Short-eared Owl can be found in a marsh or meadow. This raptor depends for its livelihood on meadow mice and tends to be where there are irruptive populations of mice. This dependence on a single prey item not only makes the species vulnerable, but also keeps it on the move. Little is known of its New York nesting population.

Egg dates: Early April to mid May
Incubation: 24-28 days

Saw-whet Owl: Our smallest owl most often nests in old woodpecker holes, mainly that of the flicker. Deciduous and coniferous woods, especially wooded swamps are the preferred habitat. If tiny pellets and whitewash are near a suspected nest tree, rap on the tree and the owl may appear at the hole entrance.

Egg dates: Late March to mid June
Incubation: 26-28 days

Looking for owl signs and nests can be a real challenge. Good luck and good owling!

Funds for Nongame Wildlife

The Fish and Wildlife Conservation Act of 1980, which establishes a national nongame fish and wildlife program, was signed by the President on September 29th. By this act, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is authorized to apportion \$20 million over a four year period to state wildlife agencies for nongame purposes, beginning October 1, 1981. New York's share of the funds is expected to be approximately \$225,000 the first year.

The funds are to be used for planning and implementation of comprehensive management programs which include all wildlife species. They can also be used for strictly nongame management programs or to carry out special projects to benefit nongame wildlife. One program which the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation plans to support with the funds is the Breeding Bird Atlas Project. An Atlas Finance Committee has been set up to decide how best to utilize the anticipated funds.

Questions we hear . . .

Q. Has the goal to cover all blocks changed?

A. No. Our survey unit remains the block and we hope to have all blocks covered by the end of the study period. We do want you to work systematically, however, going from A blocks, to B blocks, etc.

Q. When should I begin in 1981? A. Some species (Great Horned Owl, White-winged Crossbill) may already be nesting. Others like woodcock and snipe may begin courtship in early

Short-eared Owl, Essex, January 9, 1981 John I.M. C. Peterson

spring, so start making note of early nesters now. Most Atlas field work, however, takes place in June and July when the spring migration is safely past.

Q. When will I get my new data sheets so I can start? A. Your Regional Coordinator will have the new sheets and field cards. Each coordinator will arrange for distribution and you should get your's soon. In the meantime keep careful notes of early breeding evidence.

Q. What block should I cover this year? A. If you have covered the "A Block" of your square, move to your "B Block," keeping in mind you should continue to upgrade the species in your "A Block." If you are willing to work in other blocks, you will be asked to take an uncovered "A Block," if possible. Of course, all data is welcome. **How do I upgrade or add to my A block records?** A. Simply fill out a new data sheet for your 1981 data. You'll get a print-out of last year's records so you'll know what's been done already.

Q. If I confirmed breeding on a species in my block in 1980, what happens if I record breeding evidence on that same species in 1981? A. All 1981 data will be stored separately, but on the computer print-outs (most of which are 1980 to date) only the highest code recorded in a block for a species will appear. Therefore, your 1981 record will be kept in the 1981 data storage file and the higher code will be sorted out for printing on the computer reports.

Q. Can I report Atlas records from outside my square? A. Yes. Hopefully, Atlas workers will keep alert for breeding species throughout the state and report their sightings.

Q. How should I report these records from other squares? A. As directly as possible. Please use data sheets or field cards. If you know the Principal Observer in charge of the square, submit to that person and give them the exact location. Otherwise, submit through the Regional Coordinator. If you're planning a trip, contact the appropriate person in advance.

Q. How can I get help in covering my square? A. Make xerox copies of the maps of blocks you'll be covering and distribute to friends, along with field cards. Plan field trips and invite fellow birders. Find out if adjacent squares have been assigned, then work with your neighbors. Offer to help others; they'll usually return the favor and be happy to try their skills in a new area.

Q. What if I hear or see a bird I can't identify? A. Don't record any data until you're sure it's correct. Make careful field notes at the time of observation and try to get expert verification. Your Regional Coordinator may be able to assist.

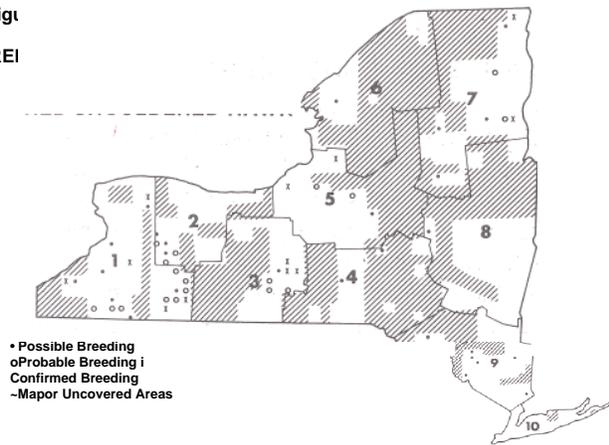
Atlas Highlights

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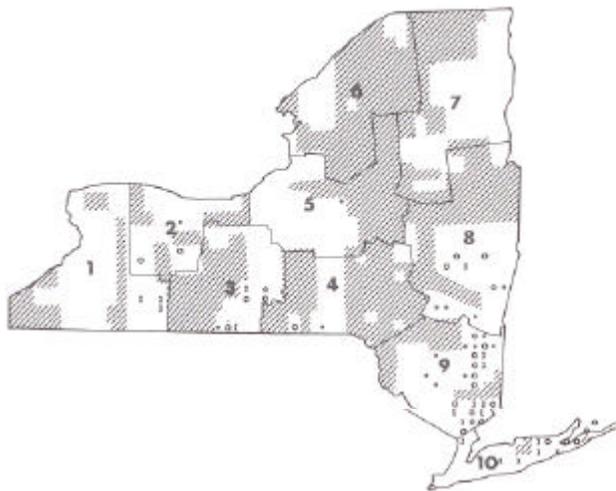
habitat, the river bottom woodlands, and pollution is contaminating its prey. Atlas observers (see Figure 2) confirmed breeding for this species in twelve blocks. Atlas data will be useful in helping to determine the status of this and other bird species. The Marsh Hawks were often seen, but confirmed records are minimal and only in Regions 1, 5, 6, and 10. Marsh Hawk reports were lacking from Region 9. The Long Island and Adirondack Osprey populations were well represented with 25 blocks in Long Island and 8 blocks in the eastern Adirondacks having confirmed records.

Of particular interest are three sparrows which are decreasing in numbers because of habitat loss - the

Fig 1
REI



Disappearance of habitat gives cause for concern for this *Buteo*. Observers are reminded to notify the NYS DEC promptly of any nesting Red-shouldered Hawks.



From which direction did the Prairie Warbler penetrate New York -the west by way of Michigan as *Bull* speculates, or the south as this distribution map suggests. Future Atlas data may provide more evidence.

Grasshopper Sparrow, Henslow's Sparrow, and Vesper Sparrow. The Grasshopper and Henslow's Sparrows were confirmed in only 11 blocks each, and the Vesper Sparrow in just ten. "Possible" and "probable" records were somewhat more numerous - all are much more easily heard than seen. The most reports on all three species came from western New York (Regions 1, 2 and 3) in the farm areas. The Grasshopper and Vesper Sparrows were recorded on Long Island but the Henslow's Sparrow was not. Reports on the Henslow's were also totally absent from Regions 4, 6, 7, and 9.

To achieve these results approximately 700 volunteers spent more than 13,800 hours surveying for breeding birds in their blocks. With greater experience and improved coverage, 1981 field work should continue to build upon this excellent start.

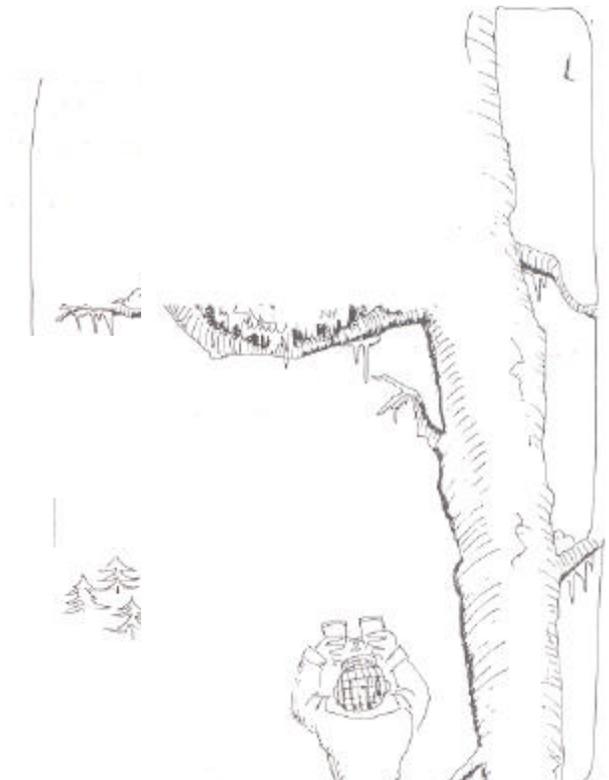
Kudos

A big **THANK YOU** to Douglas K. Bassett in Region 2 who worked in ten blocks last year. His highest species count was 111 (the 1980 record) and the lowest 66. Approximately 42% of these records were in the confirmed category.

Thanks also to Robert Schrader of Region 1 who recorded 100 species in a block in Orleans County confirming 62.

A first...

A pair of Hooded Mergansers nested in a tree cavity on the Mashomack Preserve on Shelter Island, L.I. Six eggs were found by Mike Scheibel of the D.E.C. and Mike Laspea, preserve manager. This nesting was a first for Long Island.



Looking Ahead

"Atlasing Block B this year will be an interesting experience as I've never been in that corner of our territory."

Merry E. Baker, Square 6086 (Region 7)

"I'll look forward to adding to it next year."

John Gee, (Region 9)

"The survey was fun . . . I want to work on it again."

David Pohle, (Region 9)

"I can't wait to get at it again this year."

Kaye Anderson, (Region 9)

About "Atlasing"

The March/April 1981 issue of *Bird Watcher's Digest* includes a special article on "Compiling the Breeding Bird Atlas," by Maxwell C. Wheat, Jr. Max is the editor of *New York Birders*, the newsletter of the Federation of NYS Bird Clubs, and many of the examples in his piece are drawn from our Atlas experience.

Nongame Funds Update . . . Since we wrote the item on the Fish and Wildlife Conservation Act of 1980, our hope of the legislature appropriating funds for the bill have dimmed. Letter supporting nongame funding could help and should be sent to all U.S. Senators and Congressmen from New York.

Eagles Can't Count

In the DEC's continuing effort to build up New York's bald eagle population, the Livingston County eagles have been given one foster young to raise each year for the past three years. This step has been taken because the adult had produced only one eaglet of their own in the twelve previous years. This spring after spending just fourteen days incubating one dummy egg placed in the nest by DEC biologists, the adults took only seven minutes to accept two three week old youngsters. So far, all is going well.

In case you did not hear, the original male of this pair was found dead this winter, but the female immediately paired again with a male which had been released at Montezuma National Wildlife Refuge in 1977.

Wildlife Festival on Long Island

The Long Island Audubon Council is sponsoring a "Wildlife Festival" on June 27 at the Bayard Cutting Arboretum in East Islip, New York. This conference/fair will feature talks, workshops and demonstrations on wildlife issues and programs of concern to Long Islanders. Included will be a workshop on The Breeding Bird Atlas Project. For further details contact the Great South Bay Audubon Chapter, 276 Kensington Avenue, Bayport, N.Y. 11705

**Be sure to use the new green data sheets
when submitting-your data this year to
your regional coordinator**

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