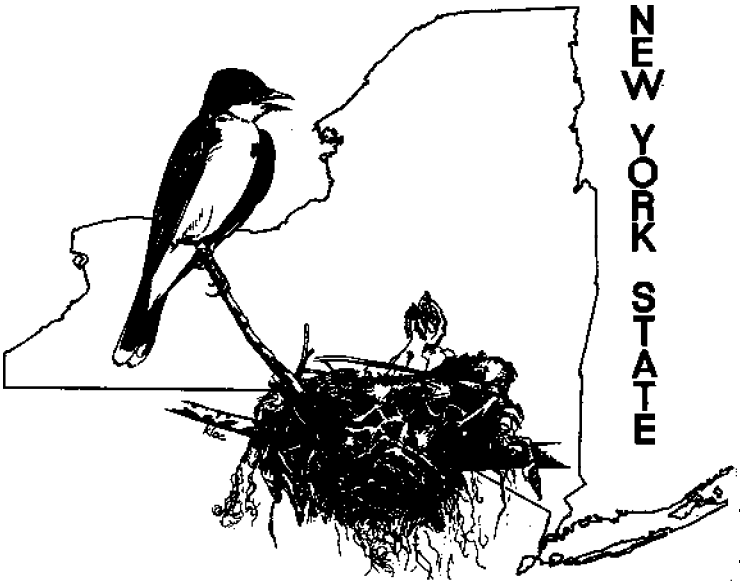


A Project o/ the
FEDERATION OF NEW YORK STATE
BIRD CLUBS
in cooperation with
New York State Department of Environmental Conservation
Cornell University Laboratory of Ornithology
National Audubon Society
New York State Museum

BREEDING BIRD ATLAS
NEWSLETTER

NUMBER 8 **MAY 1983**

The Push to the Finish

Three years down, two to go. With the arrival of the 1983 breeding season, we're now entering the next to last, or penultimate, year of Atlas field work. This is our final push toward completion of coverage for each of the more than 5,000 blocks in New York State. Thus far, we've obtained at least some coverage of 2,901 blocks, or 54% of the s,, Vie. Churchill is reputed to have exclaimed, "How mud(we have done; how much we have yet to do!" That was in a different context, but the sentiment is apt. Coverage within the ten regions varies from 35% to 92%. The challenge now is to fill in the remaining holes before time runs out in 1984. We tend to speak of the last "two" years, but in fact it's all going to come to an end sometime next summer, and only about 100 days of prime breeding season are left at this point. Time to get going.

In some regions of the state, several observers have been working on a single 5-km block. Meanwhile, in many regions where experienced observers are in short supply, a single person may be responsible for at least one, and perhaps several, of the larger 10-km squares, each composed of four blocks. Whether an observer is covering a single block or a 4-block square, the task this year remains the same: adequate coverage of all blocks. Remember "adequate coverage"? Generally, that's 76 or more species in a block, AND at least 38 of those birds Confirmed. Some blocks just don't have that many species and the task of confirming half of those found is an elusive one.

Given these limitations, observers should still plan to go back into blocks previously covered to add and upgrade wherever possible. Most observers have been doing a good job in this direction, and our repeated efforts are really showing up on the developing range maps. Birders should also cover all assigned blocks that still haven't been touched. This year we'll all turn in green sheets for every assigned block in the state where adequate coverage is now lacking. Principal observers will receive a computer printout showing what birds have already been recorded during 1980-82 in each assigned block, so they'll know what still needs to be found or upgraded to a higher code.

Here's a suggestion. When the printout arrives, transfer the breeding codes for each block onto a separate field card, using a colored pencil. Now look over the cards for each block and put a little check beside the missing species that should be easiest to find. Think of where you might be able to locate them in that particular block. These are your working field cards for the '83 season. Keep them with you whenever you go into those blocks, and you'll have a ready reminder of what still needs to be added or moved up to a higher breeding code. Observers will know what to look for, rather than wasting time on what's already been recorded. Make additions and upgrades on the cards with a regular lead pencil, as usual. Then at the end of the summer the new records to be reported on green data sheets will stand out from those previously reported.

Many observers still have blocks in which nothing has been recorded. Start a blank field card now, writing in the block number at the top. Get going on these blank cards as soon as possible to pick up the early species. If, for any reason, it seems unlikely that you'll be able to get into an assigned block this year, try to recruit someone else to supply coverage and pass the card along to them, asking that they return it completed to you. There's space on the back for their initials and hours.

The Push, continued on page 2

New York State Atlas Coverage?
(see page 2)

The Push, continued from page 1

To repeat, start a field card now for every assigned block, whether A, B, C,. or D. This. is our fourth year and all blocks are fair game. Regional coordinators assume that observers are making every effort to get each assigned block up to the level of adequate coverage this year. For those who have responsibility for a whole square, it's a challenge to see how many species can be Confirmed in all four blocks. Remember that such a feat will show up as a solid "black square" on the final species map, and have a considerable impact for each species in the completed Atlas. So if American Robin is already Confirmed in three blocks, keep looking for one carrying a worm in the fourth.

Observers are clearly getting better at Atlas coverage, and those growing skills are in our favor as we strive toward completion. Operating against us is the fact that many of the remaining blocks are among the toughest to reach. The accompanying table shows what we've accomplished in three years and provides an idea of what remains to be done.

Notice the close relationship between hours recorded by observers and the percentage of blocks surveyed in each region. We won't dwell on the low figures, trusting that they'll provide their own incentive. Marine Region 10, with the greatest number of observer hours recorded , has also obtained coverage of 92% of all blocks: a superb effort. Adirondack Champlain Region 7 has obtained some coverage of 479 blocks, or enough to complete any of the three smallest regions, but still has 30% left to cover. They also have the greatest number of species reported (193) with the Oneida Basin Region 5 close behind with 192.

Right now ,we face a simple choice. We can go from our present statewide coverage of 54% to maybe 72% this year, with some regions below that, and face an insurmountable task next summer. Or, we can push hard this year to over 80% statewide-and in each region-and then have some real fun in the last year, polishing off those last hard-to-reach unassigned blocks and upgrading the weaker ones. Panic or pleasure, the choice is ours now. This Atlas is a legacy to future
generations; let's leave a complete one.-

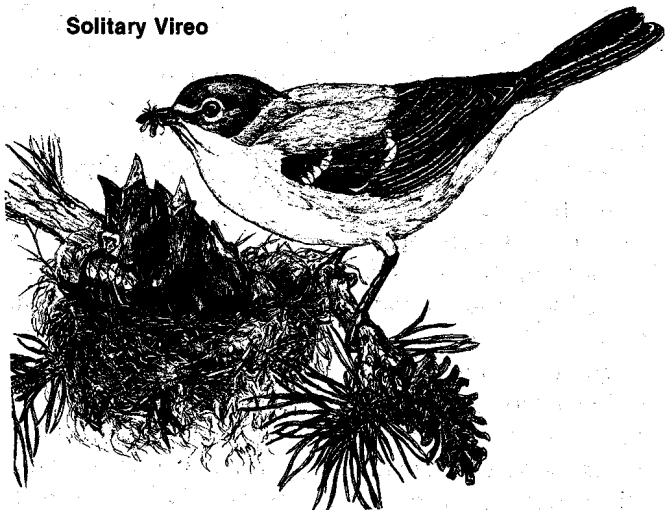
NYS Atlas Coverage 1980-82

Hours Region	Recorded	# Blocks Surveyed	% Blocks Surveyed	# Blocks to be Surveyed	# Species Recorded	# Species Confirmed
1	9,443	416	66%	215	176	151
2	4,356	163	50%	160	169	146
3	7,454	213	48%	235	174	157
4	9,459	186	35%	353	167	134
5	6,766	327	57°/a	248	192	164
6	4,440	232	40%	353	182	155
7	12,683	479	70%	210	193	171
8	5,974	280	37%	471	185	141
9	11,343	345	68%	164	166	149
10	13,726	260	92%	23	188	164

HELP 11-Solitary Vireo

This species has an odd assortment of vocal sounds which are amusing to hear when close to the singing bird. Its more familiar, typical vireo song is higher pitched and delivered slower than the Red-eyed Vireo's similar songs. The Solitary breeds in mixed forests. Though mine share habitat with their Red-eyed cousins, they prefer the more middle-leaf areas. Mine also share their part of the forest with Black-capped Chickadees, Red-breasted and White-breasted Nut hatches, Brown Creepers, Swainson's, Hermit, and Wood Thrushes, Black-throated Green and Blackbur nian Warblers, Ovenbirds, and Scarlet Tanagers, not to mention Rose-breasted Grosbeaks, Purple Finches, etc. I've always observed them at mid-level of the canopy.

Merry Baker
Region 7



Endangered and Threatened Species List

A new official list of endangered and threatened species in New York has been announced by the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation. The listing of these species in either category affords complete protection to them under Section 11-0535 of the Environmental Conservation Law. They may not be taken, harassed, or possessed in any manner.

Endangered species are any native vertebrate wildlife which are in imminent danger of being completely eliminated, or that have been extirpated from the state. Threatened species are any native species that are likely to become endangered within the foreseeable future.

A third category, "special concern," lists species not yet recognized as endangered or threatened but for which documented evidence exists to raise question for their continued welfare. While they receive no additional legal protection through this listing, public awareness of their situation should be enhanced.

While the new list contains a four-fold increase in the number of species, this does not mean that there has been an alarming increase in the number of threatened and endangered species in New York State. The first listing, published in 1971, was based on very limited information. Since 1976 DEC biologists have conducted extensive studies of uncommon species and have been able to develop the new lists based on much more accurate data.

The following are the "listed" bird species. For a complete listing write to:

Endangered Species Unit
New York State Department of Environmental Conservation
625 Broadway, 5th Floor
Albany, NY 12233-4754

Endangered	**Threatened**
Golden Eagle	Osprey
Bald Eagle	Red-shouldered Hawk
Peregrine Falcon	Northern Harrier
Eskimo Curlew	Spruce Grouse
Least Tern	Piping Plover
Roseate Tern	Common Tern
Loggerhead Shrike	

Special Concern

Common Loon	Short-eared Owl
Least Bittern	Common Nighthawk
Cooper's Hawk	Sedge Wren
Black Rail	Eastern Bluebird
Upland Sandpiper	Henslow's Sparrow
Black Tern	Grasshopper Sparrow
Common Barn-Owl	Vesper Sparrow
Common Raven	

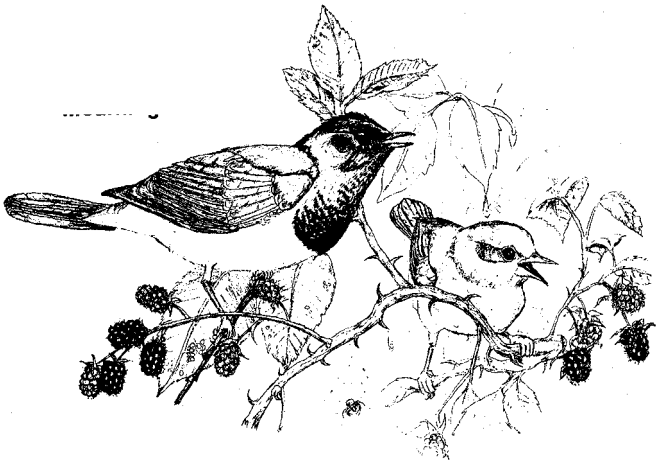
The drawings in this newsletter were done by Michael Milligan . We thank him for this contribution.

HELP 11-MOURNING WARBLER

This elusive, almost impossible to observe, species got on my Atlas records as PR-S in two blocks only through its loud vocal efforts. Had I not learned its song, a loud chirry, chirry, chirry, chorry, chorry, chor, a few years earlier, Mourning Warbler might have remained blank on the data sheets.

My birds sang from ground level inside extremely dense, brushy, tangled thickets. I think this species limits its vocalizing to early morning, and only sings a short couple of weeks early in the breeding season in the month of June. My C-block bird shared habitat with Alder Flycatchers, Gray Catbird, American Robin, an unseen bee-buzzer warbler, an American Redstart pair (a pair of Common Yellowthroats were in the same area, but a little closer to a creek), and both Song and White-throated Sparrows. The challenge of this species is, how do you Confirm something you can't see?

Merry Baker
Region 7



HELP 11-ORCHARD ORIOLE

1982 was a boom year for Rockland County for this uncommon species. I had an immature male singing in the old Haverstraw brickyards on May 13 but never again (immature males do mate and breed, we've seen in previous years). This bird was in a 15 ft. tree in the midst of a wasteland of mostly 6 ft. shrubs; rather unusual for habitat and no surprise that the bird moved on. The confirmation in 5756B, west of Stony Point, came on June 16 in a typical habitat: male singing atop a 50 ft. isolated oak tree at the roadside, female and three or four well-fledged young flying around frantically in shrubbery beneath. I would not look for this oriole in woodlands ever; more conveniently, it should declare itself in insolated roadside trees in rural or semirural countryside.

Robert Deed
Region 9

Region 6 Coordinators

Bob and June Walker

Bob Walker has been actively interested in birds for about twenty years. Born, raised, and educated in Watertown, he only wishes he had been interested in birds while serving five years in the Navy during the Korean War. His first exposure to birding was a Watertown Christmas Bird Count when he accompanied a friend who was taking part. Soon after, Bob started taking his binoculars with him while trout fishing, only to find he was more interested in birds than in the fish.

June Walker grew up in Ogdensburg, where she was born, and attended the College of St. Rose in Albany. Bob showed her a Snowy Owl and she too was hooked on birds. Both feel they're fortunate to share the same interest. Together they have birded not only St. Lawrence Region 6, but also Arizona, California, Texas, Florida, Colorado, Washington, and parts of Canada.

Bob has been employed by New York Telephone for 25 years where he is presently a Toll Switching Technician. He states that his main interest is "just birding," although he also enjoys bird photography. Both of the Walkers have played an active role in the North Country Bird Club: Bob is a past Director and June is past Editor of the Upland Plover. One of their favorite projects is The Nature Conservancy's El Dorado Beach Preserve, a stop-off for migratory shorebirds and waterfowl on the eastern edge of Lake Ontario, and both were members of the original committee which helped preserve this valuable habitat in northern New York.

The Walkers are members of the American Birding Association, Onondaga Audubon Society, The Nature Conservancy, Kingston Field Naturalists (Ontario), and North Country Bird Club. Bob and June admit they are "listers," but find the Atlas project fun, as well as rewarding. Much of what we're learning about the breeding birds of northern New York is due to the efforts of this dedicated couple.

Lee Chamberlaine

Lee Chamberlaine is a Senior Wildlife Biologist in Region 6 Department of Environmental Conservation at Watertown, New York.

His responsibilities in that position involve furbearers, upland gamebirds, small game, endangered species and nongame, as well as assisting in coordination of the BBS for Kingbird Region 6 with Bob and June Walker.

A 1963 graduate of the College of Forestry (now the College of Environmental Science and Forestry) with a Bachelor of Science in Land Management, his first professional working experience was as a Park Ranger with the Department of the Interior, National Park Service at Everglades National Park, Homestead, Florida. His activities in this position involved law enforcement, visitor services, interpretive activities as a naturalist, coordinator of the control burning program and involvement in fire control.

In 1965, Mr. Chamberlaine returned to New York State and started working for the New York State Conservation Department, Region 4, Stamford, New York as a temporary labor foreman-biologist aide working on big game, forest inventory and upland game.

A permanent position for a Wildlife Biologist in Region 6, Watertown, New York became available in 1967 which involved wildlife management areas in Lewis and Oswego Counties and small and big game management activities in Oneida and Herkimer Counties.

His interest in ornithology goes back many years to when as a youngster living in Richmond, Virginia, he attempted and succeeded box trapping mockingbirds in his backyard. He has possessed a master birdbanding license since 1954 and has done considerable bird banding in New York State and while in Florida.

Organizations of which he is a member include National Audubon, the Wildlife Society, Society of American Foresters, Eastern Bird Banding Association, North Country Bird Club, Inc., Onondaga Audubon Society, Ducks Unlimited and Hawk Migration Association of North America; also past Region 6 editor of The Kingbird.

Hobbies that he enjoys include fishing, hunting and photography, as well as birding and banding activities in his spare time.

Presently, he and his wife reside in Henderson, New York near Lake Ontario, a short distance from Eldorado Shores and Derby Hill Hawk Lookout and fishing.

Atlasing in Region 6-St. Lawrence Region

The St. Lawrence Region is comprised of Jefferson, Lewis and St. Lawrence Counties which have a total land area of about *5,565* square miles. St. Lawrence County is the largest county in New York State and Watertown is the largest city in population in the northern portion of the state.

Elevations in the region range from a low of *158* feet above sea level near Massena to a maximum elevation of *2,688* feet above sea level on Mt. Matumbla in eastern St. Lawrence County near Tupper Lake.

The major portions of that snowbelt enigma known as the Tug Hill Plateau area lie within the region-the majority being in Lewis County with portions also being in Jefferson County and the Oswego and Oneida Counties portions part of Region *5.*

Elevations on the Tug Hill Plateau are generally above the 1,000 foot elevation, with a maximum of *2,265* feet at Gomer Hill near Turin.

Ecologically, the Region can be divided into six major; zones. Along the St. Lawrence River in portions of Jefferson and St. Lawrence Counties we have the St. Lawrence *Lowlands. The* Western Adirondacks and *Adirondack Foothills comprise* the rest of St. Lawrence County and that part of Lewis County that lies east of the Black River Valley area which separates the Adirondacks from Tug Hill. The Black River Valley zone extends through Lewis County and into Jefferson County on both sides of the Black River. That portion of Jefferson County adjacent to Lake Ontario is the Lake Ontario Plain zone and the Tug Hill Plateau east of Lake Ontario in Jefferson and Lewis Counties completes the ecozones in the region.

Vegetatively, the region is varied and very diverse from almost pure stands of red cedar-white cedar mixture with interspersed grassland prairie types on the Lake Plain adjacent to Lake Ontario to northern hardwood type of beech, birch, maple and ash inland a few miles from Lake Ontario to spruce-fir types on Tug Hill and at higher elevations in the Adirondack sections. Much of the Adirondack section is of northern hardwood type composed of beech, birch, maple and black cherry with scattered wet areas and bogs which contain larch, black spruce and associated shrubs. True kettlehole bogs on the Tug Hill area are rare, although the area is traversed by considerable streams and rivers, while they are fairly common in the Adirondack sections. Spruce and fir types on the Tug Hill section can occur on upland sites where cattle, grazing early in this century, eliminated hardwoods that would compete for space and sunlight and occupy the site.

The region has an abundance of water with lakes, ponds, rivers, streams, wetland marshes, bogs and wet meadows being very numerous. Some of the larger water bodies are Lake Ontario, Cranberry Lake (which has the longest shoreline of any lake entirely within New York State-Oneida Lake, of course, is the largest lake entirely within the state), Black Lake, Butterfield Lake, Lake Bonaparte and Perch Lake. Larger rivers include the St. Lawrence, Black, Oswegatchie, Raquette, Grasse, Indian, Beaver and Moose to name a few. Most of the region, except for a small portion in Lewis County, drains into Lake Ontario or the St. Lawrence River.

The wetlands in the region are the largest acreage in the state of this habitat and large acreages occur inland as well as along Lake Ontario and the St. Lawrence River.

Primary land uses in the region are dairy farming and forest related industries such as lumber and paper pulp. Tourism and outdoor recreation rate very high, and there are hundreds of thousands of acres of state lands such as Adirondack Forest Preserve, state forests, wildlife management areas and numerous state parks of varying size and facilities.

The organization most actively working on the Atlas project in Region *6* is the North Country Bird Club, Inc. in Watertown, which accounts for the coverage so far in this area and some adjacent Lewis County blocks. St. Lawrence County away from the River, and Tug Hill sections, presents some real challenges since roads are very limited or non-existent, and in many areas even trails are limited but the rewards can be very satisfying.

Some of the species confirmed so far are the creme de la creme such as Common Loon, Cattle Egret, American Black Duck, Gadwall, American Wigeon, Ring-necked Duck, Hooded Merganser, Common Merganser, Sharp-shinned Hawk, Red-shouldered Hawk, Bald Eagle, Great Black-backed Gull, Common Barn-Owl, Long-eared Owl, Northern Saw-whet Owl, Black-backed Woodpecker, Willow Flycatcher, Boreal Chickadee, Sedge Wren, Loggerhead Shrike and Bluegray Gnatcatcher.

Breeding species for upgrading during the *1983* season include Northern Pintail, Northern Shoveler, Redhead, Ruddy Duck, Spruce Grouse, Common Raven, Yellow-billed Cuckoo, Olive-sided Flycatcher, Gray Jay, Yellow-throated Vireo, Cerulean Warbler, Louisiana Waterthrush, and Pine Siskin.

Although the first year got off to a slow start, things have been picking up and *1982* was the best year so far. However, some of the more common species remain unconfirmed. This group includes American Bittern, Sora, Common Snipe, Short-eared Owl, Whippoorwill and Northern Waterthrush.

We look forward to the *'83* season and many have been planning their method of attack. Anyone planning a summer vacation into Region 6 who is looking for some challenging blocks and/or new territory is welcome. Let us know ahead of time where you want to go, and we will send you map(s), green sheets, field cards, a county map to help you navigate, camping suggestions if that's your thing, or suggest a modest motel.

Lee Chamberlaine

Atlas Survey, 1981 & 1982
Brewster's Warbler

Reprinted from Wings *Over Dutchess*
The Newsletter of the Ralph T. Waterman Bird Club

The highly variable "Brewster's" hybrid warbler has been one of the most interesting species I've observed in Pawling in connection with the Atlas survey. In 1981, the first year I participated (also my first attempt at serious birding) Barbara Butler had related to me that the Brewster's was in this area, and so I made an extra effort to check out all the Bluewinged Warblers I encountered. Not once that year did I find a Golden-winged, due no doubt, to my lack of experience. I soon realized that Blue-wingeds were the most common breeding warbler species on Quaker Hill, second only to the very Common Yellowthroat.

Early spring 1981, I observed a singing Brewster's near my home, but he didn't stay. It was early July before I confirmed my first Brewster's. An adult with two fledglings (still being fed) were at the brushy edge of a woodlot adjacent to a large shrub swamp. It was off white below, olive gray above, with dull white wing bars. The most prominent markings were a splash of gold along the sides of the breast. The black eye (loral) mark was not at all prominent. The juvenile (resembling the parent in every way) permitted closer study. It had solid white outer tail feathers like a Blue-winged. These birds bore a superficial resemblance to a male American Redstart in prenuptial plumage. In form and actions they more closely resembled Blue-wingeds, and I was not at all certain of the identification until I examined a Blue-winged specimen in the collection at the Natural History Museum on Quaker Hill. The all white (not spotted) outer tail feathers confirmed the Blue-winged genetic makeup. They had to be Brewster's hybrids.

Enriched with the previous year's experience, the 1982 Atlas season yielded more excitement. Working in the Little Whaley Lake area, I found a managed area of shrub traversed with grassy lanes-great habitat for Blue-wingeds and Golden-wingeds. I heard the typical song of the Golden-winged there at three locations, but was unable to confirm any. One Blue-winged lit atop a small tree and burst into a typical Golden-winged song. His appearance was that of a Blue-winged in every respect, but the loral stripe through the eye was extremely pronounced with an extra black short "eyebrow" extending up in front of the eye. I returned a little later to the same spot and saw him again as he drove away an intruding Blue-winged -"territorial" behavior. He did not oblige with a reappearance upon my return visit a week later, nor was I able to see if he had a mate. Despite hearing the songs of more than three Golden-wingeds, I never did see any of them. Might I conclude that they normally deliver their songs from concealment? The Blue-wingeds frequently sing from the top of a shrub or small tree. It may be that the Golden-wingeds are more common than we suppose, but are overlooked because they are more furtive.

Meanwhile, events were taking place in my own backyard! Openings in our woodlot where firewood had in previous years been selectively harvested were producing bramble thickets. They also produced some interesting birding for me! Here in the spring I found some interesting migrants and a puzzling songster. The song sounded like the written description of the Blackburnian Warbler song (in the RTP Field Guide) but I could not identify it on any bird record. Subsequently, I heard the same strange song in two other locations (with the singer always in concealment). Finally, patience rewarded me with a look at the strange visitor. Undoubtedly a Brewster's, he had a white breast, but head and throat were yellow, as though he wore a yellow hood, with a sharp line of demarcation all around. He was quite furtive, and on occasion I thought he sang the typical Blue-winged song also, but I could not be certain; I never actually saw him while he was singing.

Later, in a dense brush thicket nearby, I saw my first Golden-winged, a female, feeding two fledglings. So well concealed were the juveniles, I could only determine that they looked like hybrids. Her mate was evidently a Brewster's. He was also feeding young nearby. The male was more elusive than .the female and I was unable to identify him positively, but strongly suspect that he was the same male Brewster's I had observed on territory weeks before.

If the Golden-wingeds' furtive qualities are inherited by some of the hybrids, it explains why we so rarely see them. I have yet to see my first "Lawrence's" hybrid.

How about 1983?

Sibyll Gilbert

A-Advance
T-The
L-Local
A-Avian
S-Science

Anagram compliments
of
Lee Chamberlaine

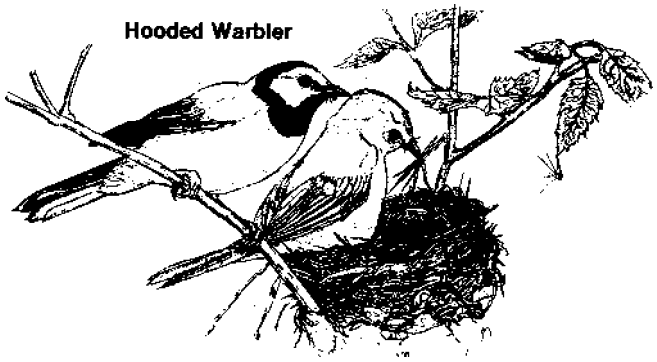
Block #3768A in Tompkins County has a record 134 species with 89 confirmed. Dan Gray is the principal observer for this block, but he had help from his ornithology class at Cornell and other Ithaca birders. Quite an achievement! Twenty-six other Atlas workers have recorded over 100 species in their blocks.

Confirming the Hooded Warbler

One never knows when going into the field just what the rewards will be, but to "go expecting" gives the joy of anticipation and rarely are we disappointed.

On July 4, 1982, I was hiking in the oak-beechmaple forest on the boggy hillside at elevation of about 1900 feet near Amity Lake, Belmont, New York (Block 2467B) where the timber was cut off about five years ago. Among the remnants of mature trees, second growth is coming in and a brushy understory carpets the floor.

Hearing a thin "chink" note in the leafy brush, I saw a small bird and left the deer trail to investigate. On a bare branch of a downed oak top less than six feet away sat the bird "chinking" desperately, trembling and twittering its wings and tail. It dropped to a bare place on the ground and crawled along, flopping this way and that for several minutes before moving out into leafy brush. It was about the size of a chickadee but slimmer. Along the top of the head, down the back of the neck and circling the neck to a large throat patch was a jet black hood. A yellow area around the eye extended over the forehead above the needle-like bill.



The breast and belly were bright yellow while the unbarred wings, back and top of the tail were olive green. Sometimes a bit of white'showed in the sides of the end of the tail as the bird flicked it.

This was not a Wilson's Warbler as it had white in the tail and a black "hood". Although uncommon here during the breeding season, I am sure this was a male Hooded Warbler, a species familiar to me for 13 years. Diligent search nearby revealed a female, also feigning injury. She was very similar to the male but had dark gray on her head and back of the neck with a dusting of gray below the striking yellow face patch around the eye. However, I found no nest and gave up *that day,* having spent two hours to gain a good strong "Probable" breeding.

Not giving up, I went back the next day to find the male in the same location, again "chinking", acting crippled and trying to lead me away. This time I searched for young among the leaves with no success. Enlarging the search area, I found the female "chinking" but very interested in one vital spot among some three-foot high leafy brush. Again, I could see no fledglings and, withdrawing, sat down to watch. First she had some preening to do. Then she foraged for herself a while. Finally with a leggy insect in her beak, she dropped to the brush where I suspected young were waiting. For about five minutes she made frequent trips to the spot, often with larvae or material I could see with 7 x 50 binoculars. During this hour's watch, the male appeared but stayed only a short time before returning to his area. It was well worth the three hours spent this day, from 7:45 to 10:45 a.m., to confirm breeding for this unusual bird.

Later, the same day, I took my husband, Raymond, to the male Hooded Warbler's territory and he was also able to enjoy seeing this beautiful bird.

Vivian Mills Pitzrick

Rails: The Mystery Birds

Finding rails is a lot like owling; the use of a tape recorder moves the exercise from hopeless dependence upon luck to a moment of existential truth, from disbelief to faith. Now, more than one Atlas worker may still be driving around at night playing owl calls at the trees and waiting for that first answering hoot or toot. Until that first owl swoops in a person can't be blamed for harboring doubts about tales of rails, those funny little birds in the field guide that nobody ever sees, rushing out of a marsh to dance on the tape recorder. Those skeptics can read this and then decide if it might not be time to trade their owl/rail cassette for Chopin or Linda Ronstadt. This is really aimed at those true believers who have had owls answer and who now spend spring nights risking arrest and flipping out farm dogs, playing and replaying Barred and Great Horned along some stony lonesome road in the back of nowhere. Owlers will love rails.

Before describing the rather simple methods of finding them, a word about the members of the rail family. Seven species are known to breed in NYS, including coots and moorhens for gallinules), but forget those last few. Forget Yellow and Black Rails, too. No proof of breeding exists for the former in the state, although one rail enthusiast suggests an Atlas check of grassy marshes along the Canadian border, just in case. The latter is so secretive in its limited haunts that it's probably best left as a challenge for those familiar with it.

By elimination, that leaves us with just four rails to worry about: two big ones (Clapper and King) and two little ones (Sora and Virginia). Clapper Rails are salt marsh birds apparently confined to coastal areas of Region 10, with the furthest known inland penetration along the Hudson in Rockland Co., in 1959. They're

Rails, continued on last page

Rails.f continued from page 7

replaced in interior freshwater marshes by King Rails, which in turn have both coastal and inland populations. Coastal Kings are located in Region 10, while inland birds breed in cattail marshes of upstate New York from Region 1 east at least to Region 5. Soras are restricted to freshwater marshes and are fairly widely distributed upstate, but have apparently disappeared as breeders on Long Island. The Virginia Rail is the species most likely to be encountered by railers; it's a widespread breeder throughout much of the state, both in coastal salt marshes and inland freshwater marshes.

Sometime about mid-May, when cattails are just emergent, head out with a tape of rail calls. A big marsh is an obvious place to start, but not every block has large wetlands. Most observers will be trying their luck at tiny vest-pocket habitats, those low wet spots where the road crosses a culvert and there's a close stand of cattails that could be covered by the floorplan of a normal house. This is where Virginia Rails can be found. Look for a combination of cattails, standing water, and brushy shrubs around the edge; listen for a Swamp Sparrow. If the area is a little bit larger and has some grassy hummocks poking up through the standing water, there may be Sora, too. Decide on a taped call at the marsh, play it, wait, and see what happens. Listen for a reply through the background noise of frogs and marsh birds; watch the vegetation for a trace of telltale movement. Repeat, as needed. Like owls, the species being played may not be the one that answers. In fact, a snipe or bittern, or even the frogs, may get excited first.

By the way, the "Yellow Rail" on the popular Peterson recordings is no such thing. It's something known to ornithologists as the "mystery kicker call," and sounds something like ki-ki-ki-ki-keeah! If nothing responds to other taped calls, try playing a few mystery kickers at the marsh; a berserk Virginia Rail may suddenly sound off in reply.

Rails answer at almost any time of day, which may be seen by some as an improvement over owling, but serious searchers go out on.moonlit nights. This can be a lot of fun, getting a whole marsh area all fired up and calling back and forth, and wondering where that approaching rail went, while turning the flashlight on the recorder to find the "stop" button, only to find that it is on "stop," and a real, live rail is standing on the machine, calling out the territorial intruder. That's a rare moment, but even a visit to that little culvert marsh on a warm spring evening before sunset may be rewarded by a Virginia Rail advancing out of the cattails up onto the dusty road shoulder, or perhaps the call of an answering Sora. And, unlike owling, even sunny mid-days can be productive. Like owling, however, patience and persistence are rewarded. Experienced railers agree that rails are widely distributed in New York and a combined Atlas search will be highly productive. Visit those patches of marsh and give it a try, and let us know how you do.

John M. C. Peterson

The New York Atlas At Work

Most of you have seen our Atlas displays and read about the New York Atlas here and there. New York Atlas workers are getting more recognition than you may think. Our Atlas displays have been to conferences in Vermont, Maine, Virginia and Illinois, as well as to many meetings and conferences in New York: Long Island, Rochester, Syracuse, Ithaca, Buffalo and the Catskills. Inquiries about our Atlas have come from Florida, Michigan, Ontario, Connecticut, Maryland, Pennsylvania and West Virginia. Material from our newsletter has been used by other Atlas newsletters pursuant to an agreement reached at the Northeast Breeding Bird Atlas Conference. The results of your impressive field efforts, in the form of our book of computer-produced distribution maps, accompany us everywhere. New York's Atlas workers are well known and respected in the birding community!

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