



A Project of the
FEDERATION OF NEW YORK STATE BIRD CLUBS
and

NYS DEPARTMENT OF ENVIRONMENTAL CONSERVATION
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Cornell University Department of Natural Resources
Cornell University Laboratory of Ornithology
National Audubon Society of New York

NEW YORK STATE BREEDING BIRD ATLAS 2000 NEWSLETTER

NUMBER TWO

OCTOBER 2000

Region 1 - The Niagara Frontier by Richard C. Rosche

The Niagara Frontier Region encompasses the western part of New York State and includes all of Niagara, Erie, Chautauqua, Cattaraugus, and Allegany counties, as well as the western halves of Orleans, Genesee, and Wyoming counties. The Great Lakes of Erie and Ontario border the north and west, while the Pennsylvania border forms the southernmost boundary. Major river valleys include those of the Niagara, Allegheny, and Genesee rivers. Major inland water bodies include Chautauqua Lake in the southwest. Much of the area away from the Lake Plains is upland and comprises the northern reaches of the Allegheny Plateau.

Region 1 nesting bird habitats include the extensive freshwater wetlands of the Iroquois National Wildlife Refuge-Oak Orchard-Tonawanda Wildlife Management Areas in Genesee and Orleans counties and additional Carolinian-type habitats scattered on the Lake Plains. The Niagara River corridor contains some important colonial nesting bird sites. Farther south, the region becomes heavily forested, with Allegany State Park being the most “pristine” forested jewel of the Region. The heavily forested southern areas tend to be northern in character with a variety of bogs and small wetlands found throughout; many of the plants are more representative of cooler, northern Canadian zone habitats.

There have been a number of obvious nesting bird habitat changes in the Region since the work was done for the first Atlas in the early 1980’s. First of all, the major cities of the Region have continued to expand outward and greatly change the character of what was formerly countryside. While the total acreage of active farmland has decreased, agricultural practices have changed in ways that have greatly altered grassland and meadow habitats. Many former meadows and hay fields continue to be abandoned and soon grow up into heavy brush. The mowing of existing meadowlands, sometimes as early in the nesting cycle as late May, not only destroys early nests but, in many cases, makes the habitat unsuitable for re-nesting attempts. The current Atlas work will show a definite decrease in the distribution of the grassland species like Upland Sandpipers, meadowlarks, and most of the grassland sparrows compared with the results of the first Atlas. In the dairy farm areas, the widespread practice of putting fertilizer slurry on open fields is causing surrounding farm ponds and other small-sized water bodies to become artificially and prematurely nutrient-rich from the heavy run-off. This has caused many small wetland areas to be of little value to water birds, particularly nesting ducks and grebes, moorhens, rails, herons, and the like.

Changing forestry practices have also altered woodland habitats, the results of which are not as easy to detect at present as those above. Certainly the current practice of removing the larger trees in woodlots throughout the Region due to the economic situation in farming areas, is going to affect species like hawks, owls, and herons that require large, mature trees in which to place their high nests. Even the

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Crossbill Invasion: Here they come! Are you Ready?

by John M.C. Peterson, Region 7 Coordinator

Crossbills are cool. Beginning birders just want to see one, while experts can't seem to get enough of them. Rather than keeping to a reliable range, crossbills wander the continent in search of cones, settling in to nest when they find an abundant supply, whether it be summer or winter, before moving on. They rarely come to feeders— except after the Great Ice Storm of '98, when White-winged showed they could crack sunflower seeds with the best of the Evening Grosbeaks. There are two species of crossbill, the Red Crossbill, of which a few are found each year in New York, mostly in the Adirondacks, and the White-winged Crossbill, a much less common species that is considered a rare breeder in New York. Experts, noting slight differences in bill structure, can't quite agree on whether Red Crossbills really constitute four, six, or even eight different species. Both crossbills switch foods during a nesting cycle, as different cones ripen. Depending on which species is involved, birds might be found feeding on white and Norway spruce, tamarack, jack/red/white pine, or eastern hemlock, depending on cone availability. Because of the nomadic nature of these two species, we may have only one chance during Atlas 2000 to comprehensively document their breeding in New York. **Now is the time!!**

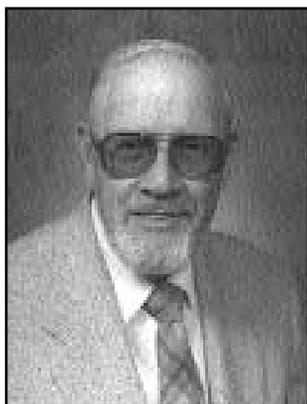
On 30 December 1979, just two days before the first Atlas began, Dan Nickerson found a pair of White-winged Crossbills at Chubb River Swamp, Essex County, the female carrying nesting material. Because it was so early in the project, however, Atlas materials were not yet available. By the time observers were recruited and were issued maps, field cards, and instructions, these invasive finches had moved on. Over the next four years, only a handful of Atlas records were submitted for both Red and White-winged crossbills in New York, confined mainly to the Adirondacks. Finally, in 1984-85, the last year of the first Atlas, a bumper cone crop brought another invasion of both crossbills, first in the Adirondacks, then from February to April in the conifer plantations on the Appalachian Plateau. Most of the crossbill records shown in *The Atlas of Breeding Birds in New York State* (1988) came from this invasion.

By the start of this summer, another bumper crop of cones was beginning to ripen. Observers reported top-heavy cedars, firs, pines, spruces, and tamaracks, not only in the Adirondacks, but also in many other parts of the state, including Atlas Regions 4, 5 and 8. Not surprisingly, crossbills began to turn up in boreal forests of the Adirondack-Champlain and Oneida Basin regions. On 29 July, principal observer David Fiske observed adult White-winged Crossbills feeding young (CO-FY) in Atlas square 5886 near Blue Ridge in Essex County. John & Pat Thaxton found recently fledged young (CO-FL) in the same county near Keene in Atlas square 5989 on 12 August. By then, a flood of crossbill reports had arrived. Most were reports of singing male White-winged Crossbills competing from the tops of Adirondack spruces, with only a few Red Crossbills found. During this first nesting, observer Larry Master found the White-winged feeding on tamarack or eastern larch (*Larix laricina*) and white spruce (*Picea glauca*) in Franklin County. Some Reds fed on jack pine (*Pinus banksiana*). Although Atlas observer Hugh Kingery also found White-winged on the Appalachian Plateau in Susquehanna Region 4, most early reports came from the Adirondacks. By summer's end, there were reports of both species of crossbill from Bog River, Bloomingdale Bog, the Boreas and Chubb rivers, Newcomb, North Hudson, Osgood Pond, and many other North Country locales.

You don't have to be a dendrologist, a tree expert, to find crossbills (although it helps to know what cones they currently prefer). Just visit any area with conifer stands. Fiske found them in many Essex County blocks by stopping with a tape of calling crossbills every half-mile along roads that run through boreal habitats; he often didn't even have to play the tape. During this current invasion, observers are asked to cover as much conifer habitat as possible **right now**, marking locations outside their assigned blocks on a DeLorme Atlas or other map with the date and breeding code. Send these records to the appropriate Regional Coordinator. This may be our *only* chance to record these intriguing birds between now and 2004 when the Atlas ends!

Richard C. Rosche

Niagara Frontier Region 1 Coordinator



Dick Rosche has been interested in birds and birding since 1944, a total of 56 years, about half of which has been spent in Western New York State. He received a B.S. degree from Cornell University and an M.S. degree from Marshall University, Huntington, West Virginia. He has worked as a Sanctuary Director for the New Jersey Audubon Society and retired in early 1998 from a 20-year career with the USDA Forest Service. He was *The Kingbird* Regional Editor for Region 1 for ten years and wrote the Ontario-Western New York report for *American Birds* for ten years. Dick's book on the *Birds of Wyoming County, New York* was published in 1967 by the Buffalo Museum of Science. He acted as Editor and Statistician for the Buffalo Ornithological Society for several years. He has written books on South Dakota and Nebraska birds and has authored several articles that have appeared in the American Birding Association's *Birding* and *Winging It*. In addition to being Region 1 Coordinator in his retirement, Dick is currently the President of the Niagara Frontier Botanical Society and a member of the Buffalo Audubon Society's Board of Directors.

Dick has lived in East Aurora with his wife Dorothy since January 1998, when they moved back "home" after spending 25 years in Western Nebraska. The couple has one son who is married and lives in Nurnberg, Germany. What does Dick do when he's not birding? "I've always said that I love birds, butterflies, and books, in that order!" he says. "I'm much interested and involved in various conservation and preservation endeavors, both ecologically and architecturally. I like to read. I save postcards and stamps (as well as books!). I like to travel and have birded in 47 of the lower 48 states."

Frequently Asked Questions

And Answers!!

"On the lists of species from the first Atlas, what are the numbers that follow some of the breeding codes?"

The length of the breeding code field in the database is two digits to allow for the two digits of Confirmed codes (DD, FY, NE, etc.). Since the Possible and Probable codes are only one digit, a space was created. To fill that space, a '1' was added to the X in the Possible category and a '2' was added to each code in the Probable category.

"I feel uncomfortable using the last four digits of my social security number in my volunteer ID number. Is there an option?"

Yes, you can use the last four digits of your phone number, if you prefer, or any four digits you like. We suggested this format so that we could easily remind volunteers of their number should they forget.

"Why do we need a volunteer ID, anyway?"

The use of a volunteer ID number will eliminate the possibility of different versions of your name and address being put in the database multiple times (for example, once as Kimberley, another time as Kim). It will also save room on the scannable forms; remember all the space it took to write your name and address on the Registration Form?

"How can I estimate time surveying in my home block when many of the birds I see are while I'm gardening or doing something else in my yard?"

Just estimate to the best of your ability. Here's one rule of thumb; if you stop your other activity and spend more than ten minutes birding, keep track of it. You will be surprised how quickly it adds up.

"Can I receive the newsletter by email?"

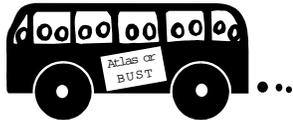
Yes. We send newsletters in PDF format, so you just need the free version of Adobe Acrobat to read them. Send your request and email address to fwbba@gw.dec.state.ny.us.

Breeding Bird Atlas Blockbusting Field Trips

Is your bird club looking for ideas on where to take field trips? How about visiting a Breeding Bird Atlas block and doing some blockbusting? Blockbusting is when birders do intensive surveying in a particular Atlas block with the goal of completing that block (76 species, half confirmed breeders) during one or two visits.

There are areas all over the state that we might have some difficulty getting volunteers to cover. Some of these areas have low human population or few roads. Some are in the Adirondacks or the Catskills and have difficult terrain.

If you would like to plan a blockbusting field trip for next summer, contact the Regional Coordinator responsible for the area in which you are interested. Your efforts will be much appreciated!



Breeding Code Clarifications

With one complete field season behind us, many volunteers have had the opportunity to become quite familiar with the codes that are used to describe breeding behavior in the field. These breeding codes are identical to those used in the first Atlas. They were carefully designed to describe, as clearly as possible, the spectrum of bird behaviors that are associated with breeding.

Unfortunately, fitting bird behaviors into these codes is not always as easy as we'd like it to be. But correct use of the breeding codes is an important feature of the Atlas Project. In the spring newsletter there will be an article discussing correct uses of the breeding codes. There will be clarifications of the breeding codes and examples of behaviors that don't seem to fit quite as tidily as we'd like them to.

If you have any suggestions on which breeding codes you'd like to see clarified, or if you have specific questions related to the codes, please send a note to the newsletter editor at the address listed on the back of this issue.

House Wren

by Tom Alworth

*Wren of the house, you sordid type, with tilted tail and full of flight,
Your chattered song of brave new height, recluse, bandit, troglodyte.
My talkative friend of casual wear, how bold your daring brown eyes stare.
Inquisitive to a fault, with relentless verbal assault,
You pursue the truth from me each day, while debating all I have to say.
Hiding now in bushes thick, with a nervous twitch, you pick up a stick.
Oh puzzled soul in such a fix, to fill your nest box up with sticks.
But you can't delay your hurried pace, and so build two nests, just in case.
Inspired I follow your every feather, for days on end, in any weather.
While together we anxiously await, the arrival soon of your precious mate.
And soon your silent mate arrives, perhaps just one of several wives.
With song incessant from atop each nest, you are sure to prove your sticks are best.*

Scannable Forms

by Kim Hunsinger

You may have wondered why the Volunteer Registration Form, the Notable Species Form and the Annual Summary Form require you to write in long strings of boxes, forming your letters just so and avoiding the edges of the box. The answer is that they are machine-scannable forms. Rather than being key-punched into the computer by a person, these forms are designed to be read by a scanner.



After being checked, the data will be automatically sent to the database. The use of scannable forms is an exciting new technology that we are delving into during Breeding Bird Atlas 2000.

In New York's first Breeding Bird Atlas, all but 12 of the 5,335 atlas blocks were surveyed by at least one person during one or more of the six years of the project; most blocks were surveyed for multiple years and many had multiple observers. The result was over 500,000 species records, each of which was keypunched into a computer by a member of a keypunch crew who worked for months to get the job done.

Thanks to scannable form technology, the need for hundreds of hours of keypunching data during Atlas 2000 will be eliminated. Instead, we will run the forms through the scanner and then manually check the ones that the software cannot understand with high confidence. The scanning software that we are using, called TeleForm, has three components: the Designer, the Reader, and the Verifier.

Forms are created in the Designer. A variety of different data entry types are available, including text boxes, as in the Registration Form, and bubbles, as on the Annual Summary Form. Each field (e.g. last name, address, date, etc...) has several options that can be specifically modified to increase the accuracy of the data. For example, the date field is set to recognize numbers only and the address field recognizes both numbers and letters. In the breeding code field on the Notable Species Form, a "dictionary" was created, so only one of

the 15 breeding codes will be accepted.

The Reader is used to scan the forms. Despite the careful design of the form and its specific fields, there will inevitably be characters that are not recognized with the desired rate of accuracy. This may be because the person who completed the form has written sloppily, or because a letter or mark extends outside the box or bubble. Forms with unrecognizable characters will be checked manually in the Verifier.

All scanned forms are sent to the Verifier, where they are displayed, one after another, on the computer monitor. On one side of the screen is an image of the entire form. On the other side of the screen, you can see what data has been scanned from the form and entered into each of the fields. The software points out questionable characters and a person can easily make any corrections that are necessary.

After the corrections have been made, the scanned data from the Annual Summary Forms will be printed and sent back to the Regional Coordinators for a final round of verification. Once the reports have been verified, the data will be stored in an Oracle database. With this powerful database, we will be able to run a variety of queries on the data and produce annual interim reports.

Another feature of the scannable forms that you may notice is the series of numbers in one corner of the form. This number is unique on each page of the form and tells the software which form it is reading. Registration marks in each corner of the form allow the page, and therefore all of the fields, to be aligned correctly.

Scannable forms will make our work much easier when it comes to processing the hundreds of thousands of species records that will be produced over the five years of the Atlas. We have designed the forms to be as simple to use as possible. While they may require a little extra patience to complete, the benefits are outstanding.

Your careful completion of the scannable forms is greatly appreciated and will help to ensure the high accuracy of the Atlas data.

Tips & Tales

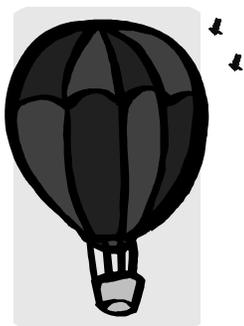
Advice and stories from Atlas participants

Region 4 volunteer Dave Messineo notes that **Pine Siskins** actually breed much earlier than is indicated in the Breeding Season Dates Table, potentially causing volunteers to miss their chance at confirming this species. In February and March of 1985 he observed hundreds of siskins in courtship flight displays and courtship feeding. A nest with eggs was found on 29 March and the young fledged on 17 April. A 14 day gestation period puts the egg-laying date at about 15 March, much earlier than the 4/25 to 5/25 egg dates in the Table. These birds, like the crossbills that they often accompany, Dave says, nest in cold, snowy weather.

Karl Curtis, a tractor-trailer driver and BBA volunteer in Region 5, notes that most van-type and flatbed semi-trailers have holes on the underside where the trailer attaches to the tractor. Karl reports that this a good place to look for cavity nesting birds such as **House Sparrows**, **House Finches** and **Rough-winged Swallows**.

Karl also noted that **Belted Kingfishers** and **Great-crested Flycatchers** are extremely shy about entering their nest holes when a person is standing nearby. "Stand back some distance from the suspected nest hole and conceal yourself," he says. "You might be rewarded with a CO-ON."

Region 5 Coordinator Dorothy Crumb shared with us her discovery of a good method for finding **Chimney Swifts**, which she almost never sees in the Jamesville area where she lives. A hot air balloon festival this summer sent balloons right over her house. She says, "We stood out in the road where the view was better and I had my binoculars. I lifted them to get a better look at a balloon decorated like a cat. Flying right next to it was a Chimney Swift."



Dorothy related another story to us in which she received an enthusiastic letter from a potential volunteer who lived in an area of her region that wasn't well covered. He listed his birding accomplishments and excitedly asked if he

could participate in the Atlas. Dorothy was surprised a few weeks later when Project Coordinator Kim Hunsinger e-mailed her to say that the Volunteer Registration form Kim had sent to this new volunteer had been returned unopened. Dorothy phoned the man's residence and a woman answered. When Dorothy asked to speak to the volunteer, the woman said "He doesn't live here." Dorothy apologized and said that she must have the wrong number. "Oh no," the woman said, "He *used to* live here, but I kicked him out! He would not get a job and all he ever wanted to do was go birding! He now lives out of state." Too bad! We could have hired him as a blockbuster!



Region 7 observers were tempted away from their duties by a vagrant **Fork-tailed Flycatcher** that summered just across Lake Champlain, near Ferrisville, Vermont. The rarity was first noted around 10 June by former NYS and VT Atlas worker, 91-year-old Bea Guyett and her daughter Jeanne Wisner. Bea had first seen the species about 40 years ago in the Amazon!

Region 5 volunteer Tom Salo was atlasing around Stillwater Reservoir this summer when he noted **Barn Swallows** nesting on the ferry boat that runs between Stillwater and Beaver River Station. Tom says, "...during the 14 mile round trip, the nest and young travel through three different Atlas blocks each day, with the parents flying alongside!" Since other Barn Swallows are nesting on each end of the reservoir, breeding in those blocks was Confirmed, but the middle block was not counted since the nests were most likely built while the boat was docked.

Region 1 volunteer Bob Andrie shared with us an unusual **Blue Jay** nesting in the Town of Hamburg. He writes, "A pair built a nest in an attached garage eight feet above the ground on the automatic door control box. They successfully fledged young in mid-June, the owner leaving the large door open throughout the nesting cycle."

Region 1, The Niagara Frontier

(continued from page 1)

understory of many forests is changing due to the incursion of alien shrubs like honeysuckle that tend to crowd out the native species. Several recent studies have indicated that alien shrubs are much less likely to be used as nest sites than the native shrubs. Excess populations of white-tailed deer and the consequences of over browsing over long periods of time have seriously damaged woodland understory habitats, thereby making them less suitable for bird species that use them; this also frequently contributes to unsuccessful nesting among some species of forest floor nesting birds.

To begin the current Atlas 2000 project in Western New York, we were fortunate in being able to enlist the voluntary efforts of approximately 160 persons who began covering about half of the 635 blocks in Region 1. Many of the observers are members of numerous bird clubs and conservation organizations, as follows: Allegany County Bird Club, Buffalo Audubon Society, Buffalo Ornithological Society, Cattaraugus County Bird Club, Jamestown Audubon Society, Lake Erie Bird Club, Nature Sanctuary Society of Western New York, Niagara Frontier Botanical Society, Pfeiffer Nature Center, Roger Tory Peterson Ornithological Club, The Nature Conservancy Central/Western New York Chapter, and Tiff Nature Preserve. In addition, personnel from the local offices of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation have been active participants. Early on, we found that there were some birders who preferred not to work in specific atlas blocks, but who were willing to gather nesting records from wherever their travels took them in the Region; I call them our "at large" observers! All of these groups of people have contributed MUCH valuable information during this first year.

Most of the data for this first year of atlasing was not yet in at the time of writing this in late September; however, a brief summary of some of the more significant observations follows. Least Bittern nests were located at Iroquois Refuge and

at Buckhorn Island State Park on Grand Island in the Niagara River. U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service personnel authenticated three Redhead broods of young at the Iroquois National Wildlife Refuge, a first for the Region for this rare and local New York State nester. A pair of adult Bald Eagles spent the entire season at a Wyoming County site where they are not currently known to nest. Several Northern Goshawk nests were found. A surprising number of Red-shouldered Hawk nests were observed, many of them from forested areas of the Allegheny Plateau, and none from the Iroquois-Oak Orchard region where it formerly was a fairly common and regular nester in wet woodland habitats. American Coots nested in Buffalo Harbor. Common Raven data indicate that the species continues to move northward from the southern tier counties where it first appeared some years ago. Nesting Cliff Swallows appeared to be more widespread and abundant compared with many recent years. Surprising was a well-documented White-eyed Vireo from the Allenberg Bog area of Cattaraugus County. Many warbler species were confirmed as nesters. The Prairie Warbler continues to colonize new habitats in the Southern Tier counties. I am currently aware of only one observation of a Prothonotary Warbler at the Iroquois Refuge, the only known regular nesting location in the Region. A successful nesting by Dickcissel, a rare nester that was not recorded in the State during the first Atlas, was verified at its Chautauqua County site by several of our "at large" observers. Clay-colored Sparrows were confirmed as nesters at a previously unknown Allegany County site.

About the Newsletter

We'll be producing a newsletter in the spring and fall of each year. Each issue will contain valuable information about participating in the Atlas. You may want to keep your old issues in a 3-ring binder so you may easily refer to them in the future. Back issues will also be available on the website at www.dec.state.ny.us/website/dfwmr/wildlife/bba/index.html or from the Project Coordinator.

Where's MY Newsletter?

If you live in a household with two or more Atlas volunteers, you will probably only receive one copy of the newsletter, even though you each filled out a registration form. In many cases, volunteers with the same address checked off the "yes" box on the Registration Form when asked "Do you want to receive the newsletter?" Rather than send two copies to the same household, one of the "yes" checks was changed to a "no." This doesn't mean that you have been removed from our database, though. If you really want two copies of the newsletter mailed to your home, or if you have received two copies and only want one, please contact the Project Coordinator.

You can also have the newsletter sent to you via e-mail, if you prefer. Send your e-mail address to fwbba@gw.dec.state.ny.us.

We'd Like Your Input

We want to hear from you! If you have an atlasing story to tell or a birding tip to share, please write to us. We'll put your stories in future issues of the newsletter. Other Atlasers can share your laugh or learn a great tip to improve their own birding skills. There will also continue to be a Question and Answer section in coming issues, so feel free to send along questions as well.

You can reach the Project Coordinator, Kim Hunsinger, by phone at (518) 478-3061, by e-mail at fwbba@gw.dec.state.ny.us or by regular mail at:

***Breeding Bird Atlas 2000
Wildlife Resources Center
108 Game Farm Road
Delmar, NY 12054***



Atlas Newsletter Editor
Kimberley Corwin Hunsinger

New York State Breeding Bird Atlas Newsletter
Wildlife Resources Center
108 Game Farm Road
Delmar, NY 12054

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