



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

NYS DEPARTMENT OF ENVIRONMENTAL CONSERVATION
in cooperation with

New York Cooperative Fish & Wildlife Research Unit
Cornell University Department of Natural Resources
Cornell Laboratory of Ornithology
National Audubon Society of New York

NEW YORK STATE BREEDING BIRD ATLAS 2000 NEWSLETTER

NUMBER FOUR

OCTOBER 2001

Documenting Louisiana Waterthrush

Louisiana Waterthrush is a species that may be overlooked by Atlas workers because it arrives early, nests early, and leaves early. In the Oneida Lake Basin, individuals arrive in early April. The Louisiana Waterthrush is one of the first warblers to appear in the spring. I have seen ice and snow in the creek, but still their beautiful song cascades down the steep hillside above the creek. As the season progresses, songs are not as frequent, but the loud chipping is a dead giveaway to a waterthrush being present.

Nest building has been observed this year as early as April 24th. On May 16th I observed adults entering an opening under some roots, possibly to feed young. At other locations adults were feeding young on May 18th, June 8th, June 17th, and June 19th. Agitated behavior of another pair on June 25th undoubtedly indicated young out of the nest. The latest date that I heard of this year for fledged young being fed was July 13th. In the past, it has been my experience that the birds leave the nest area as soon as the young are able to fly well.

The best place to look for this species is a fast-flowing, wooded stream. Most of the preferred areas have a steep bank at least along one side, often with smaller creeks coming down into the main stream. Sometimes Louisiana Waterthrush nest along these smaller creeks, but still feed in the larger stream below.

Pay particular attention to your Louisiana Waterthrush locations from mid-May to the middle of June, or you may miss confirming this species. Sometimes it takes considerable patience (and insect bites) as you sit or stand quietly by waiting for the birds to disclose their nests or young.

- Dorothy W. Crumb and Natalia Garcia

Dorothy is the Regional Coordinator for Atlas Region 5 and Natalia is her indefatigable field companion.

Hints for the Less Experienced Birder

Participating in the Breeding Bird Atlas will be a true learning experience and your contribution to this project can be significant. In order to make the most of it, here is what you can do when you see an unfamiliar species.

First, look at the Field Card to make sure the bird is expected to breed in the state. Review the field marks you observed using your field guide as a reference. Make a note of the habitat in which you observed the bird and any noticeable behavioral characteristics. When you have access to other reference materials, do research on the bird to see if all of the information that you gathered in the field makes sense for the bird you have identified. If the bird is an asterisked species on the Field Card or indicated as rare or uncommon in your field guide, call your Regional Coordinator or another experienced birder to discuss your sighting. The next time that you see the bird, the identification will be that much easier.

Finally, be conservative in recording species on the Field Card and do not become discouraged if your identification turns out to be questionable. It happens to all of us.

This article was modified from the September 1980 Atlas newsletter.

POSTED
NO TRESPASSING
Trespassers Will Be Prosecuted



You have thoroughly scouted your Atlas block. You have marked on your map the locations of good spots that represent a diversity of habitats. You now make a plan for visiting these sites. But, you have noticed that many of the sites you want to visit are posted against entry. What do you do? First, do not ever trespass. Though prosecution in New York is rare, trespassing is unlawful, unethical, and inconsiderate as well as unnecessary.

Many birders assume that the posted sign means “No Hunting,” and that birders and other non-consumptive users are exempt. Not so. Posted signs mean that all entry without permission is denied. Private landowners go to a great deal of trouble to post their land, so we know that they are serious. Signs must be of a specified size, must bear the name and address of the owner or lessee, and must be placed at designated intervals.

There are very good reasons for posting land against trespassers. Privacy is perhaps at the top of the list, particularly if there is a home on the property. Our litigious society has certainly contributed to the growing frequency of landowners posting their lands to avoid liability. Another reason cited by landowners is bad behavior, including littering, noise, ATVs, and leaving gates open. There are also land uses that simply do not allow access such as agriculture and forestry.

Public lands are often closed to entry, or entry is restricted to prescribed times. Many areas in waterfowl refuges, for example, have “No Entry Beyond This Point” signs during breeding season. Many parks try to contain people to established trails for their own safety. Some public lands are simply not open at all; these include reservoirs and military reservations. One trend that is troubling is the narrowing of hours that many public parks are open, mainly for the convenience of the park staff. Many parklands are justifiably closed to access at night, but are not opened before 8 or 9 in the morning, well after the most productive time for atlas-ing.

So, what do you do? It is simple: ASK. Few birders are denied permission to bird private property if they take the time and effort to find out who owns the land and ask permission. Take names and addresses from posted signs, and contact the owners by mail. If you cannot find the name of the owner and the land is just too good to pass up, visit the town tax assessor. They know who the owner is!

An important part of scouting out places to atlas is to talk to landowners. They are often very interested in what you are doing, and many helpfully point out where the hawk’s nest is, show you the birdbox with the bluebirds, and give you access to the barn where the swallows nest. When landowners are not present on the land, neighbors usually can give good guidance.

Public lands are managed by some agency, and they invariably are well signed with the appropriate names. (No, don’t call the Governor!) While most state land managed by DEC has few restrictions, that is not the case for state park, county and municipal lands. Learn what the access rules are, explain your needs in some detail, and ask permission. Be specific. You need access on certain dates, certain times, and within a prescribed time frame. Many managers of public lands will be happy to give you access, especially if you offer to give them the information you gather during your visits.

There is still land that is not posted, or identified as private or public. It is technically legal to enter these lands, but you must use good judgment. Park well off roadways. Do not block drives or gates. Do not cross fences. If you are challenged by anyone, take this as an opportunity to explain the Atlas and ask permission to continue. If you are asked to leave, do so.

continued: see *Trespass* on page 8...

My First Day as an Atlas Volunteer

This is an account of my first real day as a Breeding Bird Atlas volunteer and I thought it might be useful to many of you who have not yet volunteered for this excellent activity to hear about it firsthand from a non expert birder. Let me say this to start: I have been birding for almost ten years, but only in spurts. I still consider myself an advanced beginner at best. I have missed entire seasons because of work commitments or other endeavors, so I have to work at renewing my skills every time I pick up my binoculars and head out into the field again.

When I was asked to participate in the Breeding Bird Atlas, I hesitated. But I was assured, “Most of the species you are looking for are common. You’ll learn a lot about behavior and most of the activity is in June and July, so you’ll only need to go out a few times.” I agreed to give atlasing a try, and received my first block assignment: block 2777C, a patch of farmland and public areas in Chile, off Jefferson and Scottsville Roads in Monroe County.

My long-suffering husband, Nic, and I set out to scout the area for the first time in the spring. We realized that most of it is privately owned and posted, so we quickly narrowed our concentration to a few target areas: the Reed Road Swamp, soon to be a Genesee Land Trust protected area, a stretch of the Genesee Greenway that transects the block, and some choice woods and fields that flank the road. It was a productive first pass; we spotted a pair of Red-tailed Hawks and knew to return to that wooded patch in a few weeks to see if they had nested.

June came and I set aside a few hours to truly begin Atlas work. Nic and I loaded up our pack with the Peterson’s bird nest guide, several bird field guides, pencils, the 1980-85 species list for our block, a notepad, Atlas Field Card, and the usual extras and set off down the Greenway Trail.



I was dizzy with the responsibility of it. What the heck did I know about breeding behavior? How could I tell if a bird bore an intent to breed here? Robins darted across the path, starlings flocked in neighboring pastures, a pair of crows circled continuously. I realized I had begun to ignore these birds years ago. I knew nothing of these common birds’ behavior. Every few steps we stopped to consult the Peterson’s guide. I learned that a crow nest could be as low as 10 feet or as high as 70 feet, that Turkey Vultures essentially build no nests at all, that starlings might nest singly or in groups, and that an Eastern Phoebe nest will most likely be found on shelves inside barns and other structures. Already I knew volumes more than I had known an hour before! I made copious notes about where I saw the birds and what they were doing, assigning a breeding code to each behavior and recording it on the Field Card.

Barely 100 yards down the trail, we hit pay dirt. A Black-capped Chickadee caught our eyes. Usually this bird would be worth little more than a glance, but today I stopped and really looked at it. In seconds, another joined it... no surprise there. But then they both began pecking away at a hole they had already started in a dead stump. The hole was plenty big enough for at least one bird. A few seconds later, they flew to a fence post and began pecking away at a hole they had started in that as well. Nest-building! I filled in Probable-B on my Field Card, real information on my first day out!

Unfortunately, it was too windy for many useful sightings, so we walked the length of the Greenway within our block and left to return on a more conducive day. But we left triumphant, because we had learned things we did not know before. We had charted habitat for future review, and we had actually seen probable nesting behavior. We were off to a great start. So I say this to those of you who fear that you are not a good enough birder to participate in the Atlas: If you are doubtful about your skills today, you will improve them tenfold by the end of the summer. Take a block and challenge yourself. It will open your eyes! **-Randi Minetor**

Region 3 - Finger Lakes

Region 3 contains 448 atlas blocks. It includes the bulk of eight counties and all of the Finger Lakes. Its boundary on the west follows the western edge of Steuben and Yates counties and then continues directly north to the NYS Thruway, including the eastern two thirds of Ontario County. The northern boundary approximately follows the NYS Thruway. The eastern boundary is the eastern edge of Cayuga County, the eastern and southern borders of Tompkins County, and the eastern border of Chemung County. In the south Region 3 meets the Pennsylvania border.



The majority of the Region is within the confines of the Allegheny Plateau, a land of flat-topped hills 1,200 to 1,800 feet in elevation and grooved by countless 200 to 800 feet deep north to south and east to west ravines and stream valleys. This rugged topography is so prevalent that in much of the region it is difficult to find a block that fails to include several hundred feet of variation in elevation, contributing greatly to the diversity of habitat found here. North of Cayuga Lake the habitat changes dramatically. The land levels off at the outflow of the lake and becomes a huge marsh. The Montezuma National Wildlife Refuge and the Northern Montezuma Wetlands marsh complex includes cattail-smartweed marsh, rich muck land, swampy hardwoods, shallow rivers, and streams. It provides a habitat that is unique to this region of the state.

Although the topography has not changed noticeably, the type and character of breeding bird habitat in the region has experienced major changes, even in the 20 years since the last NYS Breeding Bird Atlas. In the first part of the nineteenth century the vast majority of the land was cleared for agriculture. Although the area retains a largely agricultural economy, land use has changed greatly in the last half century. The many family farms that dotted the landscape with their small fields, hedgerows, and steep hillside pasturelands have largely been abandoned. The once open farmland has been replaced by residential development and mature second growth hardwood forests. Only the largest parcels of the richest and most accessible lands are farmed and then in a manner that essentially precludes inhabitation by breeding avian species.

Although this progression started with the depression of the 1930s, it took many years for its impact to become obvious. In the early 1980s, the first atlas period, much of the land in Region 3 was still in transition. Old fields, hillside pastures, brush lots, and abandoned orchards, although disappearing, were still common. Clean farming practices were only beginning to eliminate the hedgerows, which, for many generations, had provided valuable edge habitat. These changes have most significantly impacted grassland birds. The Henslow's and Grasshopper Sparrow, the Upland Sandpiper and the Sedge Wren have all but disappeared from the area and the Northern Harrier is becoming increasingly scarce. Less obvious are apparent declines in Ruffed Grouse and Woodcock populations, perhaps caused by declines in transitional habitat so common a few decades ago. Logging practices and the demise of old orchards have caused problems for cavity nesters. The Eastern Bluebird and the Tree Swallow are notable exceptions, due to artificial housing provided by concerned humans. In some cases succession has enhanced species diversity. For example, the growth of mature forests has provided more habitat for Wild Turkey, Common Raven, and woodland hawks.

Currently Region 3 boasts 93 volunteers who have agreed to survey 275 (62%) of the blocks in the region. With only three years and 38%+ to go, there is much left to do. The unassigned blocks are mostly located in sparsely populated areas where birders are difficult to find. Anyone wishing to help should contact me. Before doing so you may wish to print the list of open and assigned blocks from the Chemung Valley Audubon web site: www.ffn.org/cvas/Atlasvols.htm. You can then look at the blocks on the DEC web site map page: www3.dec.state.ny.us/website/dfwmr/wildlife/bba/map/index.html to find the exact location of the open block(s) that you desire. The block list is available thanks to the generous efforts of Dave Russell at Chenango Valley Audubon.

- **Bard Prentiss**

Meet our Regional Coordinators

Bard Prentiss - Finger Lakes Region 3 Coordinator

I was born in Elmira on Christmas day 1938, and, except for about 17 years, I have spent my life in Atlas Region 3. Since 1966, I have lived in the village of Dryden with my wife and family.

I received my undergraduate training in Art at Pratt Institute in Brooklyn and an MS in Education from Cornell University. After six years as a junior high art teacher in Ithaca, I joined the Art and Art History Department at SUNY Cortland. While there I taught design, drawing, and art education and served as department chair for eleven years. I retired from SUNY in the spring of 1994.



Bard Prentiss

In the late 1980s I represented Dryden Village as a member of the Tompkins County Environmental Management Council. In that capacity I worked on the Unique Natural Areas inventory. This study extensively documents the natural treasures of the county. It has been distributed to all municipalities in the county as an advisory, planning tool.

In 1991 I became an active member of the Cayuga Bird Club. Since then I have been a regular leader of field trips. I have also led club projects, including the construction and installation of an Osprey nest platform at Dryden Lake. I was Club President for two terms and acted as compiler and presenter of the "Cayuga birdline" for two to three years. I also serve as coordinator of the Dryden

portion of the club-sponsored Christmas and June counts and as a member of the town Dryden Lake Park committee. In the spring of 1998 and 1999, I was a scout for the "Sapsuckers," the Cornell Lab of Ornithology's "World Series of Birding" team.

I have watched, drawn, collected, and otherwise enjoyed elements of the natural world as long as I can remember. My passion for nature study was inherited from my parents with whom I started birding at a very early age. I cannot, however, claim an uninterrupted passion for birding. When I was about six, on a bird walk in Elmira, we found several prometheia moth cocoons in a cherry tree. We took them home and put them in a screen-covered aquarium. In the spring one hatched into a female moth. After drying her wings, she flew to an open window and lit on the screen. We left her there and that evening many male promethias came. They lit on the screen door and the outside of the screen where the female rested. Someone opened the door and several of them flew in. At least one of them mated with the female. We kept her in the aquarium until she laid her eggs. When the eggs hatched I fed the tiny larvae cherry leaves. I do not recall whether the caterpillars lived to complete the cycle, but I was hooked. When I grew up I was going to be an Entomologist.

My fascination for insects soon led me to the plants and trees they ate and eventually to ecology. Birds became a now-and-then interest. That changed very suddenly, about 1990. I was alone on a winter walk when I saw a Cooper's Hawk kill a Rock Dove in mid-flight. The raw, incredible beauty of that scene, the birds, the struggle, the blood against the fresh wet snow, forever enriched my understanding and appreciation of nature and the life of birds. Once more I was inescapably hooked. When not birding my interests include archery, woodworking, canoeing, and hunting.

The Education of Atlas Observers

The longer we live in the Information Age, the more it seems a misnomer, an oxymoron, a contradiction in terms. In spite of personal computers of dizzying speed, the Internet, the Web, the listserves and chat lines, it seems we have less of a chance to learn. Admittedly, it is a joy to have the Atlas maps and 1980-85 data available on the NYS DEC website. Word of Boreal Owls nesting in the White and Green mountains can reach observers in the Adirondacks and Catskills with the speed of light. But how many New York observers would know the snipe-like whinnying call of the Boreal Owl? Or maybe even the whinny of a Common Snipe?

When the 1980-85 Atlas of Breeding Birds began, birders started poring over the 655 pages of John Bull's monumental *Birds of New York State* which had appeared just six years before (and at the then-astronomical price of \$29.95). We looked at the maps, some of them based upon more than a century of field work, wondering if we could ever do anything similar in just the few years allotted to the project. Observers read and re-read the species accounts in hopes of learning how to find yet another unfamiliar species for a block.



By the time *The Atlas of Breeding Birds in New York State* appeared in 1988, we had not only matched the efforts of our predecessors, but we had blown them out of the water. Prior to the first Atlas, bird clubs from Rochester and beyond would make field trips to Madawaska to see one particular Lincoln's Sparrow, a species known to Bull from only 20 breeding localities in the Adirondacks. Observers on the first Atlas actually found this skulker in 277 different blocks, from the Québec border to the Sacandaga Reservoir, nesting even in hamlets and along road sides.

If we are to match that first great effort, and we can, we are all going to have to continue our education. There may be no better way to start than for those with computers to shut them off and for everyone to begin reading. And there are no two books to begin with better than those mentioned above, "Bull" and "The Atlas," as they are commonly known, the former reprinted as a softbound volume by Cornell University Press. Although it does not have maps or habitat photos, there is also *Bull's Birds of New York State*, published in 1998.

Page 36 of the *Atlas 2000 Handbook for Workers* includes an application for membership in the Federation of NYS Bird Clubs, Inc., a major partner in the Atlas project. For just \$18, individual membership brings both *The Kingbird*, a quarterly journal with regional reports rich in Atlas records, as well as the newsletter *New York Birders* with regular pieces on Atlas progress. All volunteers should be members.

Finally, for something more specifically useful on how to find snipes, owls, rails, hawks, the wading birds of Long Island (and even confirm some of them), there is always the original *Breeding Bird Atlas Newsletter*, which ran for 12 numbers between September 1980 to October 1984. Need help on Mourning Warblers or Orchard Orioles? It is all there. These newsletters are available on our Atlas website.

These are only a starting point of our education. Every state and province bordering New York has also published an Atlas, and each has invaluable information. So kick back, let the e-mail (and snail mail) pile up, and resume reading. Isn't that what fall and winter are for?

-Mike Peterson

*A confirmed habitat birder, Mike Peterson of Elizabethtown and Montréal insists that the absolutely best habitat photos ever published are found within the 1,302 pages of *The Breeding Birds of Québec (Atlas of the Breeding Birds of Southern Québec)*, published in 1996.*

Atlas Volunteers Go the Extra Mile

Because the data from 2001 are just now arriving, we can at this time only report with accuracy on the success of the first year of the Atlas. We were thrilled to have over 600 dedicated volunteers submitting data from over 1,800 blocks in 2000. We owe a debt of gratitude to each of those volunteers. This project will not be completed without you!

As we announced in the previous issue of the newsletter, we would like to recognize your accomplishments as we continue through the project by presenting a token of our appreciation when volunteers complete five blocks, ten blocks, fifteen blocks, etc.... In the first year of the Atlas seven volunteers, listed below, completed five blocks and received a certificate of appreciation. Several other volunteers also showed dedication far beyond what we expected. The following people visited 15 or more blocks during 2000: Andy Mason, Jeff Bolsinger, Barbara Butler, Bill Purcell, Carole Slatkin, Charlie Smith, Dorothy Crumb, Mike Peterson, Ken Feustel, Kurt Fox, Nick Leone, Bob Long, Tim Baird, and Bill Cook. Still other volunteers provided special assistance to their Regional Coordinators, who extend their thanks. Dave Russell in Atlas Region 3 put a list of assigned blocks on the Chemung Valley Audubon website. In Region 1, Willie D'Anna assisted Dick Rosche with technical matters and various questions. In Region 10, Andy Bernick recruited volunteers to cover every block on Staten Island. Our appreciation goes out to each of our volunteers for their work in 2000.

Volunteers Who Completed Five Blocks in 2000

*John & Sue Gregoire
Elva Hawken
Jim Kimball
Michael Morgante
Bill Purcell
Dominic Sherony
Gerry Smith*

THANK YOU! THANK YOU! THANK YOU TO ALL OF OUR VOLUNTEERS!

Annual Summary Form Edits

The hundreds of Annual Summary Forms that are submitted each fall are scanned and entered into the Atlas database and then filed away for later reference. We want to be certain that what is on your Annual Summary Form is what went into the database. We check this by sending a report back to you of the Annual Summary Form that you submitted for each individual block. This report will include only the species that you recorded in your block during this year. Please check this report against your Field Card to be sure there are no errors.

Our scanning technology was impressively accurate with the first year's data. The scanning error rate was less than 1%. We made more than 500 corrections to the database, though, from the Correction Sheets that were submitted by volunteers. More than 95% of the corrections that volunteers sent in were due to human error that occurred while transcribing data from the Field Card to the Annual Summary Form. Some of these errors involved writing the information on the wrong line of the form, but most of them were outright omissions where volunteers used the Correction Sheet to submit records that were new to the block. Please be extra careful when completing your ASFs.

When you receive your 2001 report this winter, please take the time to review it and compare it to your Field Card. If you find errors, use the Correction Sheet to let us know what they are. Your report will only include the records that you submitted this year. Compiled lists for each block will be available on the Atlas website.

If you have not yet completed your Annual Summary Form and sent it to your Regional Coordinator, please do so very soon. The deadline this year was 15 September, and will be the same in each year of the Atlas.

continued from page 2, *Trespass...*

Active railroads are a special case. Many rights-of-way pass through large wetlands and forests, and the access they offer is tempting. Furthermore, few are posted. Even if you know there is one train on alternate Tuesdays, resist the temptation. Trespassing on railroads is illegal. The all too frequent tragedies involving human-train collisions have made police vigilant and unforgiving.

The American Birding Association's code of ethics tells us to respect the rights of private property owners. This includes not trespassing. An ABA survey, however, showed that over half of the birders surveyed would knowingly trespass for a life bird. The sign means you! Do not trespass! Just ASK. **- Bob Budliger**

*"Across the purple sky
all the birds are leaving.
Ah, but how can they know
it's time for them to go..."*
Sandy Denny

Species Lists

We will soon have two field seasons of data in the computer. We received over 1,900 Annual Summary Forms from the first season and expect even more this year. Everyone is anxious to see how our progress is coming along. How many blocks have been completed? How many different breeding species have been reported? How many volunteers are out there doing what I am doing?

Keep an eye on our website this winter and you will see some answers to your questions. We are working on a program that will allow volunteers to view a species list for each block, just as you can now with the 1980-85 data. We will also be creating interim species distribution maps that will be on the website. And, there will be a page of some statistics that will track our progress over the coming years.

Visit the website at <http://www.dec.state.ny.us/website/dfwmr/wildlife/bba/index.html>.

Atlas Newsletter Editor
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Note our new
mailing address!