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NEW YORK STATE BREEDING BIRD ATLAS 2000 NEWSLETTER

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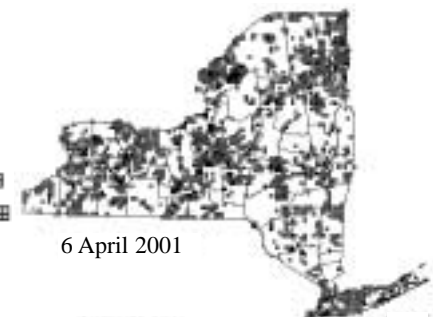
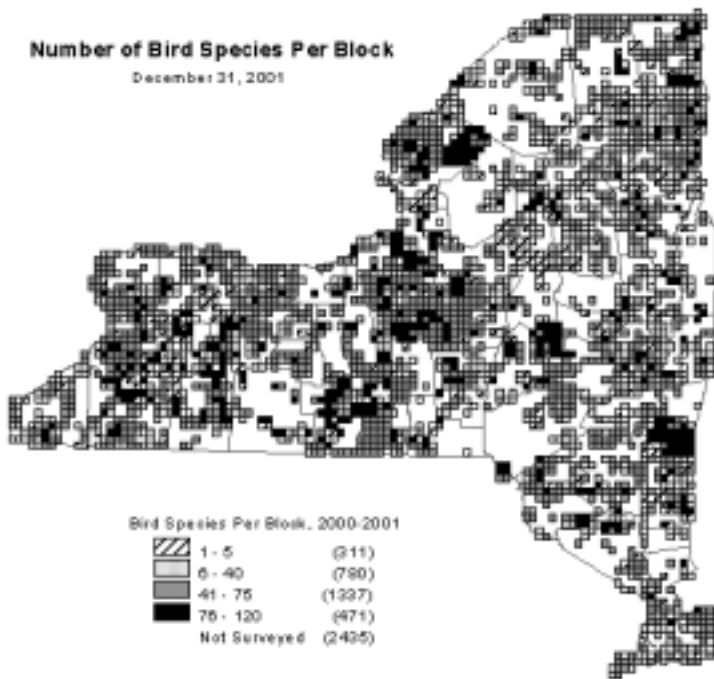
Field Season 2001

Two years out of five of the Atlas have now been completed. The amount of data that were submitted this year exceeded that of our first year by about 500 blocks. More than 600 volunteers submitted data from 2,382 blocks. We now have data from 2,918 of the 5,334 blocks. While this number suggests that we have passed the halfway point, it is important to remember that this only refers to the number of blocks that have been visited. Only a small number of these, fewer than 500, can be considered complete. Our count of individual species holds steady at 245. The number of registered participants has increased to 1,114.

The large map below shows our progress as of 31 December 2001. Each Atlas block on the map is coded to indicate the number of species that have been reported in it. Compare this current progress map to the small map that showed our progress at this time last year. The amount of white space on the new map, showing unvisited blocks, is noticeably less than on last year's map. Also becoming obvious are large areas that need better coverage. Some of these areas, like Delaware, Broome and Steuben Counties, and the northwestern edge of the Adirondacks have few people living in them. Even some areas with higher populations have poor coverage, including Putnam and Dutchess Counties. Do you have plans to visit any of these areas in the

coming years? Please consider atlasing while you are there.

As you complete your blocks, please ask your Regional Coordinator where to go next. The Regional Coordinators are keeping close tabs on the progress in their area and will be happy to send you to an unassigned block. Thanks to all of our volunteers for another great season!



Canada Geese and Wild Turkeys an Update

by Mike Peterson

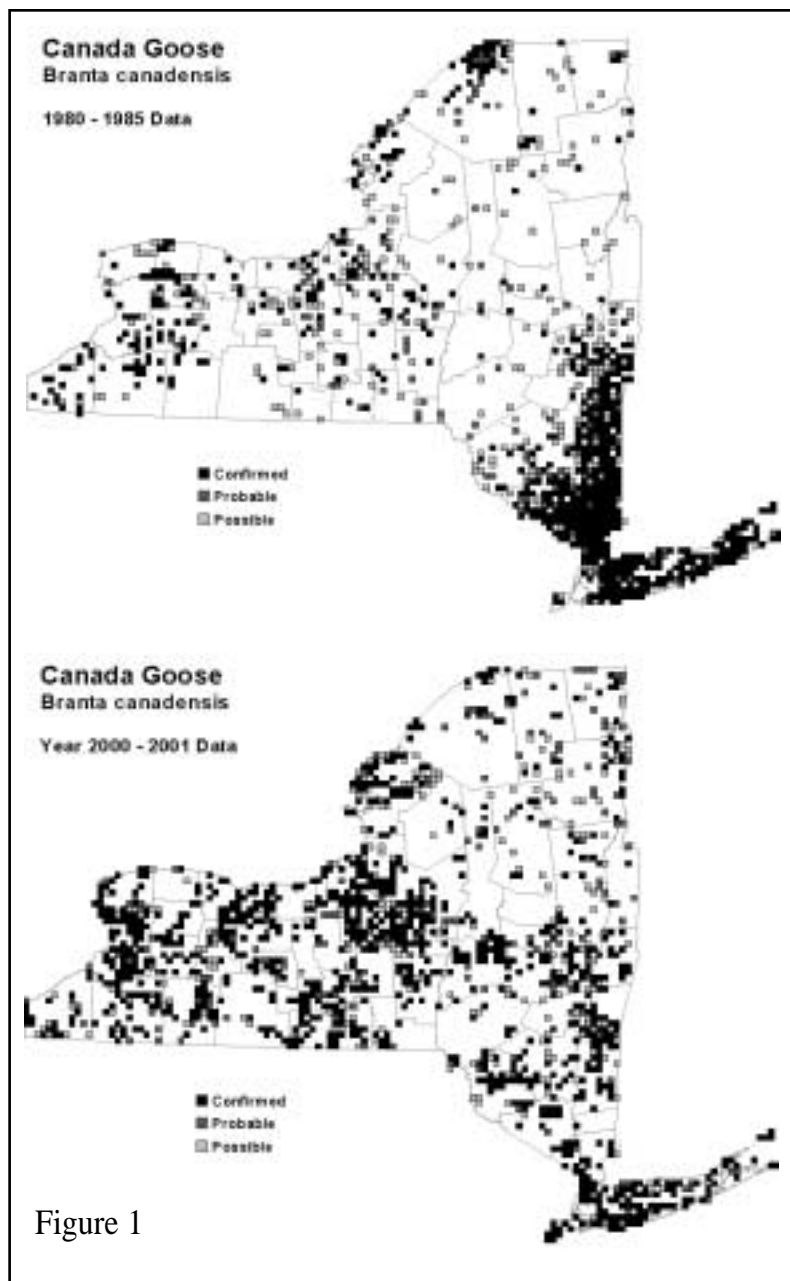


Figure 1

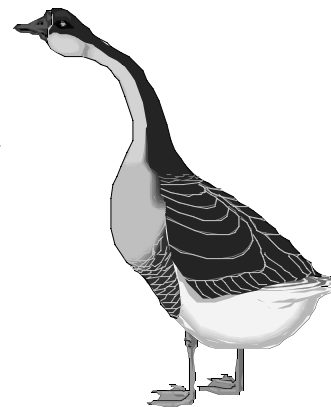
of geese on Long Island, but the apparent absence in the lower Hudson Valley seems due to a lack of coverage to date (most notably in Columbia, Orange, and Putnam Counties), rather than an actual decline. But look at the increases elsewhere, to the north and west. Canada Geese were recorded in 1,058 blocks (and confirmed in 682) on the first Atlas. In just two seasons of Atlas 2000, we have recorded them in 1,491 blocks (with 1,057 now confirmed)! The previously tenuous link between Albany and Lake Ontario now appears to be unbroken, and increases in the Southern Tier, Lake Plain, Champlain Valley, and even the Adirondacks are noteworthy.

Canada Goose

Commenting on actual increases in some breeding species over the past 15-20 years in the October 2001 issue of *New York Birders*, we observed, "And obviously we're finding many more Canada Geese and Wild Turkey than in the early '80s." With maps of 2000-01 coverage now available, we can test that statement against the species maps from the first Atlas.

As their name suggests, Canada Geese were natives of our neighbor to the north, only introduced into NYS as breeding birds in the 1930s. A half-century later, Stephen W. Eaton wrote in *The Atlas of Breeding Birds in New York State* (1988), "Today it is common on Long Island and in the lower Hudson Valley and is spreading from wildlife management areas into other parts of New York." Note especially on the 1980-85 map [Fig. 1] the concentrations in western New York in the vicinity of Oak Orchard Wildlife Management Area (WMA) and Montezuma, and in northern New York near Perch River and Lake Alice WMAs, plus a small concentration in the central Adirondacks near Tupper Lake.

The 2000-01 map still shows a concentration



Wild Turkey

A native New Yorker, the Wild Turkey was extirpated from New York by the early 1900s. A small remnant population in Pennsylvania moved north into New York State during the 1940s, then between 1960-86 some of these wild birds were trapped in Allegany State Park and moved to other parts of the state, as well as to neighboring Connecticut, New Jersey, Massachusetts, Vermont, and Ontario. By 1988, Steve Eaton could write, "The Wild Turkey, a distinctly American bird, is now common in most of southern New York and is managed as a game bird in the state." The 1980-85 map [Fig. 2] shows the spread of this species from Pennsylvania and other neighboring states, as

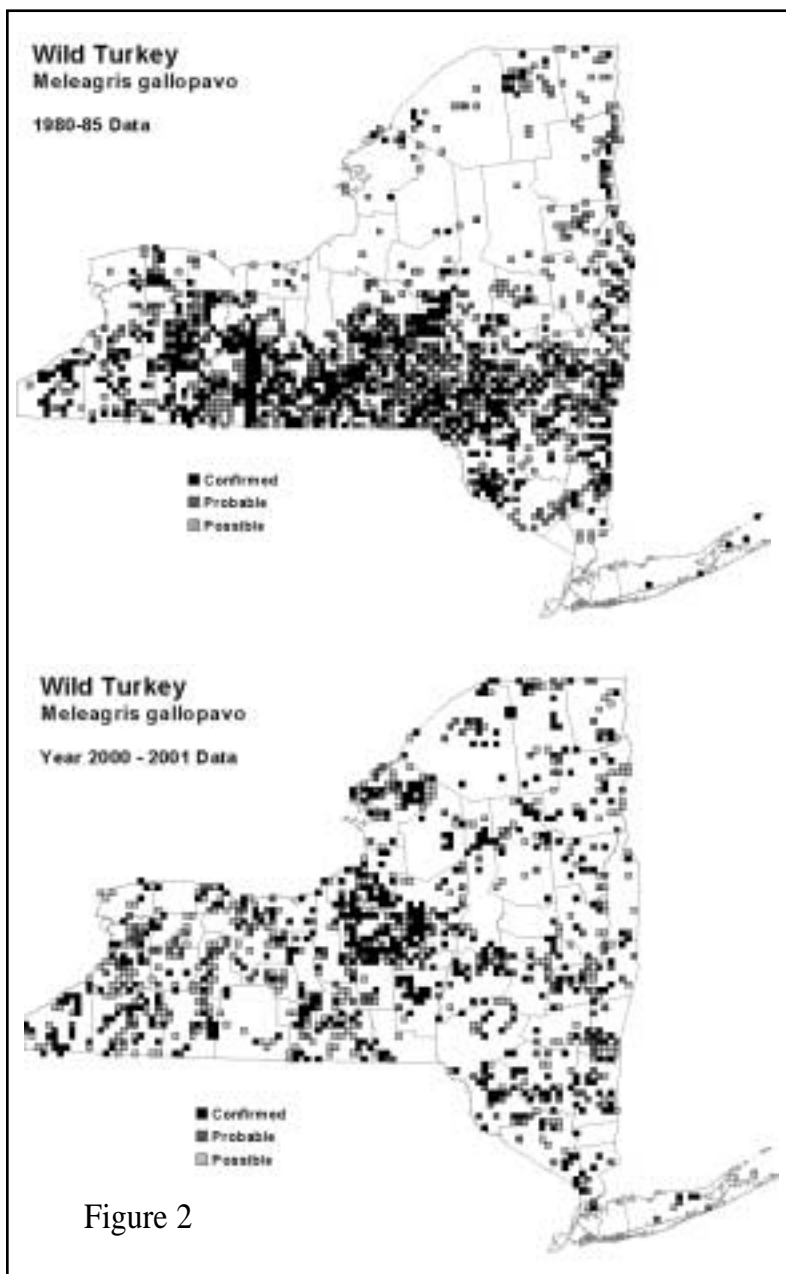


Figure 2

well as the results of early 1980s stocking efforts in places like northern Franklin County. Note, too, the general lack of birds in the Adirondacks.

The weakness north of Pennsylvania on our 2000-01 map also seems the result of a lack of coverage, especially in Broome, Delaware, and Steuben Counties. But look at the gains in the Lake Ontario Plain, north to Jefferson County, and the penetration of the Adirondacks and Tug Hill Plateau. During the first Atlas, Wild Turkeys were found in 1,567 blocks (722 confirmed), but after just two years have been found in 1,264 blocks (594 confirmed) on Atlas 2000. The rate of increase is not as great for turkeys as for geese, but is still impressive.

Your work makes these comparisons possible. The most recent maps show the importance of finding a wide variety of species in each block, then making that extra effort to confirm as many as you can. "Adequate" coverage (of 76+ species, with half confirmed) may not be possible in blocks with lack of access or habitat variety, but many should yield 100+ species (and with half, or more, confirmed). Let's fill in the gaps and upgrade in '02!

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

Helpful Hint

Experienced Atlas observers not only carry a good supply of pencils with fresh erasers, but also recycle their old Field Cards. (It is amazing how many pencils can be found under the front seat of one's car at season's end!) To reuse last year's Field Card, simply take a few minutes to go over the records from the previous season with a colored pencil, so you will know what species and codes have already been submitted. Then, while visiting the block, write in this year's new records with a lead pencil, as usual. If you need to upgrade, the colored pencil should erase easily. At season's end, just transfer the new records marked in pencil to an Annual Summary Form, and ignore those still in color.

The same easy system works even if the old Field Card has been lost, or if working in any block with previous records. Just transfer the records from the printout of the block, or the Atlas website, to the Field Card in colored pencil before setting out. After a few years, when the card is battered and dog-eared, you may have to start a fresh one, but in the meantime this trick can be extremely timesaving.

And, whatever you do, *don't* try keeping Atlas records in a field notebook. You will find it is too time consuming in the field and makes it difficult to transfer records at the end of the year. Use the Field Card!

Words from the Field

"It sure is fun to have an excuse to go sit in the woods." Mary Ashwood, Region 4

"I have found atlasing to be tremendous fun and a fabulous learning experience. Stumbling upon a redstart's nest with hatchlings, finding a Yellow Warbler carrying a fat green caterpillar, seeing a Hairy Woodpecker enter a hole and hearing those squawking nestlings inside were just a few of the exciting finds I had last season. If you have been thinking about volunteering for a block, I would highly recommend it." Cindy Marino, Region 1

"One thing I've done that I've not seen mentioned before is to print my block maps out in black-and-white, then plot the location of stick nests on them in red. During the breeding season, I mark down new Red-tailed Hawk and American Crow nests that I find, and during leafless days in winter, I look for old stick nests. This gives me an idea where Red-tails may re-use nests and where Great Horned Owls may be nesting." Brenda Best, Region 5

Migrating Bird Atlas or Breeding Bird Atlas?

Winters are long, snowy, and cold here in the Northeast... well, they usually are, anyway! Even after a mild winter, as soon as the days lengthen and the weather begins to warm up, we all become anxious to get outdoors without our bulky coats, hats, and boots. Spring is a favorite season for most people and for birders in particular. Not only is it exciting to see the birds return after being away all winter, but we also have the opportunity to see birds that only pass through our areas during migration.

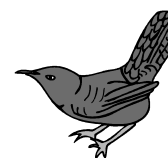
However, when it comes to the Atlas, it is important that we keep in mind the distinction between migrating birds and breeding birds. If you are uncertain about the breeding period for a particular species, you can check the table of Breeding Season Dates in the back of the Handbook for Workers. Contact your Regional Coordinator if you need a copy. It is also available on the website.

Here in New York, most of our birds breed during the months of June and July. These are therefore the most productive months for atlasing. There are exceptions to every rule, of course. Owls and other raptors breed early in the year, as do the species that remain in the north during the winter rather than migrating.

The "Atlasing Calendar" in the first issue of the newsletter also provides helpful information on early breeders. Back issues of the newsletter are also available on the website.

Sedge Wren

by Allen Benton



*Deep in the marshy grass a small red ball
Of dry brown fibers hangs above the ground.
The tiny bright-eyed wren, whose rattling call
Comes from a breast so small, the rasping sound
Seems more than such a tiny bird can make,
Clings to a stem above the nest and sings.
His mate is hidden, silent but awake,
Six brown eggs warm beneath her breast and wings.
Small secret bird! Wee sprite of grassy mead!
Your rattling sound resounds across the field
From dawn to dark. How few the things you need:
A grassy field; the insects it will yield;
A quiet time to rear your offspring there
Before the mower comes to strip it bare.*

Merlin: A New Bird on the Block

by Tom Salo

KLEE-KLEE-KLEE! It's first light on a late July morning and three young Merlins are screaming for food. With only the tent and a canopy of balsam between us and the birds, our sleep is finished. These young birds have spent their entire lives on this island in Stillwater Reservoir. Yesterday, when we dragged our canoe ashore we heard their piercing calls echoing across the water. Recently fledged, the young Merlins chase and harry their parents constantly. Only food will bring peace, and not for long. Historically, summer reports of Merlins have been rare in New York. An intriguing 1985 account of a July fledgling on Cascade Mountain in Essex County exists, though no reports were submitted for the first Atlas. The first fully documented nesting by *Falco columbarius* in New York occurred on the shore of Spitfire Lake, Franklin County in 1992. In less than ten years, breeding "bullet birds" spread to four Federation reporting regions and seven counties in the northern part of the state. The extent of this expansion is now being documented by Atlas 2000. During 2000-2001, Merlins were found in 36 blocks with nesting confirmed in 17.

Merlins are small, dark, powerful falcons. Their length approximates that of an American Kestrel, though they are considerably heavier than their better known cousins. Females and young have similar markings: a dark brown back and streaked body. Adult males are not as dark, with a lighter belly and a slate gray back. All Merlins have a checkerboard pattern under the wings and a dark tail with narrow white bands. They also lack the distinct mustache mark that is found on many falcons. In poor light, the contrasting white throat can serve as a field mark.

Early in the season, Merlins are an elusive and frustrating quarry. Small and fast, they don't give much time for study. Look for Merlins in the northern counties, around lakes and along habitat edges, where they build their nests in trees. Adults tend to fly in a straight line to and from the nest. Draw their flight paths on a map. Path intersections may help locate a nest. The birds are quite tolerant of people and will locate near houses and summer camps, typically in old nests of other birds. Golf courses, burned areas, beaver meadows, and bogs may also provide nesting locations, as do towns and cities.

Narrow lakes and those with islands, bays, and peninsulas provide Merlins with excellent hunting opportunities. They often hunt from perches, sitting where passerines are tempted to fly across short stretches of open water. Pay close attention to snags. That broken branch might be a bird. You may also see well fed fledglings sitting quietly in loose groups on exposed branches. The best way to locate Merlins is by listening. Larger nestlings and fledglings can be heard begging at some distance, especially over water. It is not surprising that the fledgling code (FL) was used for more than half of confirmed blocks. When fledglings are hungry and an adult is near the nest, the air is filled with a cacophony of high pitched cries. In the Atlas, most fledglings were recorded in July. A June 19th fledgling record may have been near the early limit for fledged birds. After fledging, Merlins will wander. Atlasers should take care when reporting older fledglings, as they may have moved away from the block where they were hatched.

Two other falcon species that breed in New York, Peregrine Falcon and American Kestrel, have ranges and habitat that may overlap with the Merlin. The begging calls of all three can sound alike, but since dependent fledglings are usually cooperative subjects, identification problems are not likely. Fast flying birds are another matter. Both Peregrine Falcons and Merlins are strong fliers. Peregrines, with their black mustache, are always larger and lighter-colored than Merlins. When flying, the longer wings of Peregrines beat slower by comparison and are more flexible. Merlin wings beat quicker, snappier, and stiffer. Kestrels, our falcon featherweights, are light colored. Their bold head pattern and rufous coloring make identification relatively easy. Viewed in flight, they are slender birds. Wing beats tend to be less cadenced and not as steady or as strong as that of a Merlin. Kestrels will hover; Merlins will not. Peregrines nest on cliffs and tall structures that substitute for cliffs. Both Merlins and American Kestrels nest in trees along the edge of clearings, and some habitats, such as beaver meadows, could attract either. Kestrels are uncommon in the Central Adirondacks and along the forested shores of lakes. Typically, Merlins raise young in an open nest while Kestrels use a cavity such as a nest box or woodpecker hole.

Many areas of the Adirondacks and surrounding counties contain good Merlin habitat that has yet to be surveyed. Atlasers who take the time to search these areas may find themselves rewarded with the sight and sound of these appealing little raptors.



Meet Our Regional Coordinators: Susquehanna Region 4

Tom Salo

I spend much of the year outside working in my 25 acres of Christmas tree plantations in the Town of Burlington, Otsego County. Originally from Rockland County, I am a long time environmental activist, currently serving as the Chair of the Otsego Greens. When I'm not helping some organization, conducting field surveys, or growing things, I work part time designing printing equipment for a small company in Norwich. In 1982, I settled with my family in Burlington where we built a passive solar house. I have lived in Region 4 since 1976. My fascination with birds started young. One of my childhood memories involves a mid-September picnic in Harriman State Park. Late in the day, hundreds of Broad-winged Hawks settled in the trees around the picnic area. The puzzle of so many hawks in one place lingered and raptors became one of my primary interests.

As a hawk lover, the move to Burlington was serendipitous. The ridge I call home parallels the nearby Franklin Mountain Hawk Watch. Good numbers of raptors follow both ridges each fall. Three seasons of counting hawks from the yard proved Franklin is a better site, but I rank my property as the number two spot in Region 4 for viewing migrating raptors. While selling Christmas trees, I often keep a scope in the yard. After a cold front passes, some lucky Christmas tree customers get the added bonus of seeing Golden Eagles passing overhead. The effect of human activity on birds and habitat is a personal involvement. My bird houses are used by many species from Eastern Bluebirds to American Kestrels and Eastern Screech-Owls. Our 80 acres of old fields and mature forests have changed significantly as a result of my manipulations over the past 20 years. The habitat improvements, Christmas tree plantations, and selective timber harvests have improved the diversity of the avifauna.

In the late 1980s I joined the board of the Delaware-Otsego Audubon Society. I am a former DOAS president and currently hold the positions of Secretary, Field Trip Chair, and Co-chair of the Franklin Mountain Hawk Watch. I have been a volunteer counter at Franklin Mountain since 1989. I get help atlasng from my wife Jo Ann, a teacher in the local school district. When we are not atlasng, Jo and I grow a large garden and fruit crop. We have two grown children.



Tom Salo and Bob Donnelly

Bob Donnelly

I am a native of the Midwest, having been born and raised in central Michigan. Sandhill Cranes were a locally common breeding bird where I lived, and watching their low-flying V formations close overhead on foggy spring mornings hooked me on birding. The first books I ever bought as a youngster were the National Geographic Society's hardcover two-volume set, North American Birds, which I still have. I also read Silent Spring and A Sand County Almanac at about the same time; together these books left me with an appreciation for nature and a sense of the importance of conservation.

I went to college at the University of Michigan, where I majored in Biology. I took ornithology and other field biology courses, and I spent one summer doing research on avian shistosomes, a parasite that causes swimmer's itch in humans. After college, I worked as a researcher in a cell biology lab before going to dental school, also at Michigan. My wife Amy, a teaching artist, and I have lived in Cooperstown for twenty years, where I have maintained a private dental practice. We enjoy gardening and have arranged our one-acre property, on the shore of Otsego Lake, to be hospitable to many species of birds. We currently have two children in college and one still in high school. My children are becoming enthusiastic birders while my wife is primarily interested in botany.

I have been able to do a large share of atlasng the last two years while bicycling to work each morning and then riding different routes home in the evening. Birding while bicycling allows me to pursue two of my main avocations at once. In order to gain a better understanding of the habitat that I occupy, I have been counting breeding birds in the fourteen blocks that comprise the watershed of Otsego Lake.

Region 4 - Susquehanna by Tom Salo and Bob Donnelly

Situated on the eastern edge of the Appalachian Plateau, Atlas Region 4 contains 539 blocks in Otsego, Delaware, Chenango, Broome, Cortland, and Tioga Counties. The last episode of glaciation carved the hills and mountains that characterize much of the region. The Susquehanna and Delaware Rivers rise in Region 4 and drain almost all of it. Few large lakes are in the area; Otsego Lake and two of New York City's reservoirs, Cannonsville and Pepacton, are the largest bodies of water.

Outside of southern Broome County, the area is relatively rural, as it was in the first Atlas. Mature forests cover much of the Catskills, while smaller woodlands exist throughout. Farming is still a major industry, although there is a continuing decrease in cultivated acreage. As elsewhere in New York, when farm land is abandoned, it is either subdivided, or reverts back to brush and eventually to trees. While many people worry about the decline in grassland birds, it is noted that their relative abundance mostly occurred only since European settlement and deforestation. One hundred years ago, at the height of agricultural land use, woodland species were much less common than today. The songs of the Black-throated Green Warbler and American Redstart have largely replaced those of the Henslow's and Grasshopper Sparrows.

Some other changes have occurred since the first Atlas. Exotic species have become more prevalent; almost all wetlands contain purple loosestrife, which is thought to have little value to birds. Norway maples have been making inroads in woodlands along many highways. Changes in agricultural practices have probably harmed many species. The worst change seems to be earlier mowing of hay fields, which has obvious dire effects on ground nesting birds. Canada Geese are now nesting across the region, as they are in much of the state. During the first Atlas their breeding was confirmed in only five blocks in the six counties. Mute Swans are also appearing in Region 4, far outside where they were found 25 years ago. These large birds are aggressive and territorial, resulting in detrimental effects on native waterfowl. Communication towers cover the crests of many hilltops now, raising increasing concerns about bird kills during migration.

Not all the news is bad. Many species have been increasing in numbers, including Northern Mockingbird, Tufted Titmouse, and Red-bellied Woodpecker. Is this due to their being aggressive species, or maybe to global warming? Osprey and Bald Eagles are no longer rare birds. Bald Eagles have been nesting in the Delaware River watershed for a number of years. On Otsego Lake, adults of both species spend the summer, although no nests

have been found there yet. Also on Otsego Lake, Northern Parulas were recorded singing on three contiguous blocks during much of last summer.

Parts of the region have been well covered by atlasers. So far 182 species have been reported, which is good when one considers the lack of large shorelines. Most of Otsego and Tioga Counties have assigned atlasers, but there are large areas in Delaware, Broome and Chenango Counties that are unassigned. Overall, fewer than half of the blocks have been visited. Many birds, such as owls, snipe, and rails are probably under-reported. We are asking atlasers to look for these birds especially. Native birds not found for the first Atlas but present now include Common Loon, Double-crested Cormorant, Great Egret, Tricolored Heron, Ring-necked Duck, Red-breasted Merganser, Black Vulture, Peregrine Falcon, Herring Gull, Ring-billed Gull, Common Raven, Blackpoll Warbler, Clay-Colored Sparrow, and Dickcissel.

We especially thank Chad Covey for his work as Regional Coordinator for the first two years. His efforts have made for a great start and made our job much easier. We wish Judy and Chad a happy retirement in North Carolina.



We will miss you, Chad!

Our original Region 4 Coordinator, Chad Covey, stepped down from his position in February 2002, leaving the region in the capable hands of the new co-coordinators Tom Salo and Bob Donnelly. Chad and his wife Judy have purchased lakefront property in North Carolina where they are planning to build a home. Both of their grown children live in North Carolina.

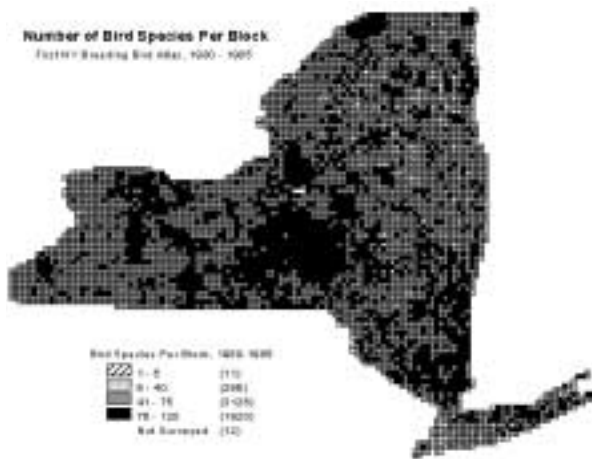


Chad Covey

Chad did a fabulous job as coordinator for Region 4 during the first two years of the Atlas. We thank him for all of his hard work, congratulate him on his recent retirement, and wish him and Judy the best of everything in their new home.

The Halfway Mark

As we near the halfway point of Atlas 2000, which we will reach sometime around the end of June, it is a good time to consider what needs to be done in the few years remaining. The accompanying map shows final coverage on the first



1980-85 Atlas project. When compared with the map of 2000-01 coverage to date on the front page, we seem well on track to do as well, or better, this time. To do so, improvements are needed on two fronts. First, the breadth of coverage needs to be expanded. Observers need to move out into “virgin blocks” still without coverage. There are undoubtedly members of bird clubs and others who still have not joined the Atlas and who might still be recruited. But with a somewhat finite number of birders available, complete coverage really depends upon you, the current and now-experienced Atlas volunteer.

Second, the depth of coverage needs improvement. Even after two seasons, many (probably most) assigned blocks are still short of “adequate coverage,” of 76+ species, with half of the birds confirmed. In forested or urban blocks with little habitat variety that goal may be unrealistic. But experience

suggests that most blocks in New York State have over a hundred species, and 76+ should be found. Starting at 4:30 a.m. and spending the whole morning in a block is far more productive than the same amount of time spread over several late mornings or afternoons in one-hour visits.

Do your best to complete your assigned blocks this summer, and contact your Regional Coordinator if you reach “adequate coverage.” Or, if you feel you are at a point of diminishing returns, ask if there is something interesting that is still unassigned. There probably is.

Atlas Results Available

Results from the first two years of the Atlas will soon be available on the website. Visit our home page and look for the link in the box on the left to “Interim Data.” You will be able to call up cumulative species lists from each block and view species distribution maps from the first Atlas as well as from 2000 to 2001.

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Kim Corwin Hunsinger & John M.C. Peterson

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