



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
Audubon New York

NEW YORK STATE BREEDING BIRD ATLAS 2000 NEWSLETTER

NUMBER SIX

OCTOBER 2002

What Information is Now Available on the Atlas Website?

The Breeding Bird Atlas website now has a wide variety of information that volunteers and the general public alike will find useful. This material includes general information on the project, such as who sponsors the Atlas, what the goal of the Atlas is and how a person can participate.

Also available are materials for volunteers who are already active in the Atlas. All of our forms except for the Annual Summary Form can be printed from the website on your home printer.

And, of course, there is the Interim Results section of the website. Here, you can view the results of the first two years of fieldwork, check your own data, and see what areas of the state need more work. Interim distribution maps are posted here as well and are updated at the end of each field season. Environmental consultants also use the information available here to get the most current information on bird distribution.

To find our website, use a search engine and type in the words, New York State Breeding Bird Atlas. This is easier than typing in the actual address, which is very long (it's also on this page, for those of you who like to type!). Once you have arrived at the BBA home page, bookmark it for future use.

General Information

- + goal of Breeding Bird Atlas 2000
- + history of breeding bird atlases in New York State
- + organizations involved in Atlas 2000
- + mailbox to send email to Project Coordinator
- + calendar of events relating to Atlas 2000

Information and Materials for Volunteers

- + contact information for Regional Coordinators
- + printable forms (and instructions for using them):
 - Registration Form Notable Species Form
 - Casual Observation Form Database Correction Form
- + interactive mapping page to determine block numbers
- + printable *Handbook for Volunteers*
- + list of notable species, both statewide and by Atlas region
- + past newsletters from Atlas 2000 and from first Atlas project

Interim Results

- + species distribution maps, from 2000-2001 and from first Atlas
- + species lists for each survey block, both for 2000-2001 and from first Atlas
- + query to determine whether a survey block is assigned, unassigned, or complete
- + map of state showing which survey blocks are assigned, unassigned or complete
- + map of state showing the number of species in each survey block for 2000-01
- + number of volunteers registered and active
- + number of species in database and number of species records in database

Atlas Website Address: www.dec.state.ny.us/website/dfwmr/wildlife/bba/

Meet Our Regional Coordinators: Oneida Basin Region 5

Dorothy W. Crumb

Fast closing in on my 8th decade, I can claim seniority on the list of New York State Breeding Bird Atlas Regional Coordinators. I worked as Region 5 Coordinator on the first Atlas and as Chair of the Art Committee. I selected most of the artists to do the drawings that appear in the book and followed them to get the work done and corrections made. At one of our meetings, plans were discussed to repeat the survey in 2000. I told Bob Arbib I was all in favor because I would be too old to work on it again. But here I am. I must admit it is great to have so many younger people do so much of the work and to have a Co-coordinator like Bill Purcell to do so much of the field work.

Growing up near Utica, I remember several species of birds as a youngster, but I didn't really take much of an interest until we moved to Maryland in the 1960s. We built a rock garden with a circulating pump and shallow pond on a slope in our yard. A number of colorful birds came to the



Dorothy Crumb
Photo by David Lassman

water, including Eastern Bluebirds. Our home was near the corner of Maryland, Delaware and Pennsylvania. The University of Delaware was nearby and was offering a birdwatching course, so I signed on and found a fascinating hobby. While living on Long Island in the 1950s I took lessons in watercolor painting and continued for many years, also trying other mediums such as woodcuts, oils, and acrylics. After I was elected to the American Watercolor Society, I submitted a painting to a juried exhibition to celebrate the 200th Anniversary of the society. My painting was selected to hang in the show at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City. I felt it was a great honor. Birdwatching

cut into my painting and I have given up the art except for a rare woodcut. The one time the two hobbies overlapped was when I did a woodcut for the cover of the *Hawk Mountain Bulletin*.

See "Dorothy" on page 7.

Bill Purcell

Born in New York City in 1946, I grew up in rural/suburban northern Westchester County where I spent much time outdoors but was never exposed to birding. After attending what is now the SUNY College of Environmental Science and Forestry and spending two years in the Army, my outdoor interests were hiking and cross-country skiing through the 1970's. Some amateur photography in the early 1980s led to birds, and by 1983 I was using binoculars far more often than I used a camera. My job at the Syracuse Post Office required evening work which allowed me to bird in the mornings. I was able to take advantage of that time to learn much about song and habitat.

I became a regular field trip leader for Onondaga Audubon in 1988, ran up to four Breeding Bird Survey routes a year from 1989-2000, and have served as a relief hawk counter at Derby Hill. In 1994 I took over the Syracuse Rare Bird Hotline and became the Region 5 Kingbird Editor in 1996. I wrote several chapters for the first edition of Onondaga Audubon's *City Cemeteries to Boreal Bogs, Where to go Birding in Central New York*, helped to update the recent second edition, and compiled the seasonal summary for Audubon for the 2001-2002 CBC season.



Bill Purcell

Oneida Basin Region 5 by Bill Purcell

Region 5 consists of 552 blocks in Herkimer, Madison, Oneida, Onondaga, and Oswego Counties plus Cayuga County north of NY Route 31. The area includes some of the Central Adirondacks and the Western Adirondack Foothills, much of the lower Tug Hill, parts of the Drumlins, the Lake Ontario Plain and the Mohawk Valley, the northern edge of the Appalachian Plateau, and the Oswego Lowlands. Elevation ranges from about 245 feet along Lake Ontario to over 2,400 feet in central Herkimer County.

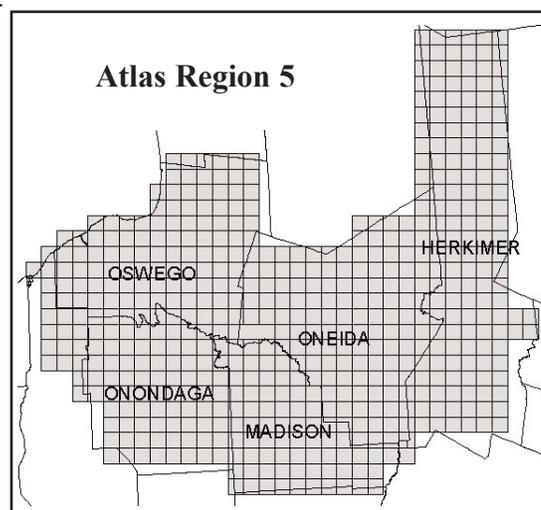
Grassland has diminished greatly over the years as suburbs have expanded and marginal farms have been abandoned and allowed to succeed to shrub land and second growth forest. The pace of suburban development has slowed since the 1980s but much of the rural road frontage is now being occupied by non-tract housing, leaving woodlands well away from the road.

On the positive side, maturing conifer plantations provide habitat for warblers, Golden-crowned Kinglet, and Red-breasted Nuthatch. There has also been an increase in beaver activity, creating wetlands for Pied-billed Grebe, bitterns, rails, and waterfowl. The majority of the region is forested and includes the wet woodlands of the Oswego Lowlands, northern hardwoods across much of the area and mixed spruce-fir at higher elevations. There are some boreal bogs in northern Herkimer County and a few large marshes, mostly along Lake Ontario. A large area of abandoned farmland in Madison County is being redeveloped as marshland with encouraging results.

Dorothy and I were initially able to find over 200 people who were interested in the Atlas through bird clubs, nature organizations, and local newspapers. Through the first two years there were about 90 volunteers in the field and, as is true across the state, the blocks that were done first were the blocks closest to where birders lived. In our Region, that's the Syracuse metropolitan area including much of Onondaga and Oswego Counties, as well as the western parts of Madison and Oneida Counties. For the final two years we will need to concentrate on Herkimer and eastern Oneida Counties, where we have had only a few volunteers in the field and, thus far, little luck in recruiting local volunteers.

As with the last Atlas, we have found that with few volunteers to cover many blocks there is little time to find birds that require extra effort, such as accipiters, rails, and owls. Observers are often limited to reporting the singing birds and those that can be found from the roadside. So far, it would appear that species in decline as breeders are Black Tern, Whip-poor-will, Common Nighthawk, Red-headed Woodpecker, and several grassland species, notably Upland Sandpiper and Henslow's Sparrow, and Golden-winged Warbler.

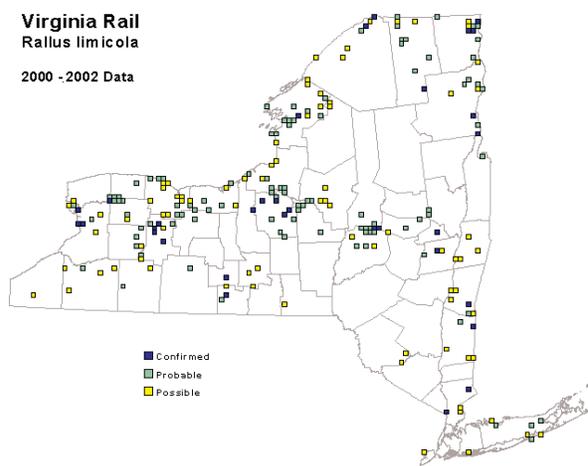
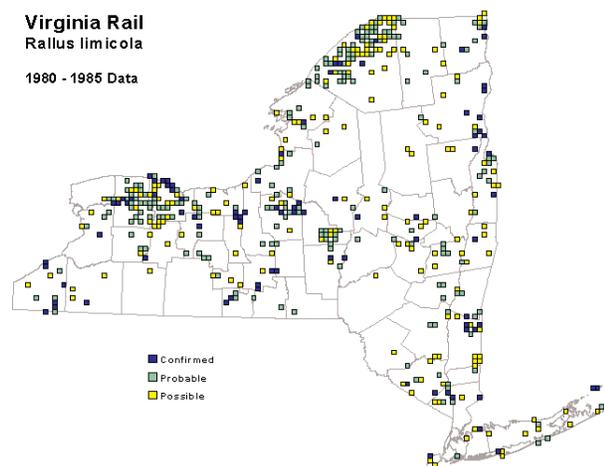
Region 5 shares range expanders such as Wild Turkey, Common Raven, and Red-bellied Woodpecker with most other regions in the state. Tufted Titmouse seems to be moving out of its lowland strongholds and into the lower Tug Hill but it is still unclear as to whether or not two other species, Carolina Wren and Northern Mockingbird, have made much of an advance over the last 20 years. New breeders since the last Atlas include Merlin, Fish Crow, and Prairie Warbler and our first documented Short-eared Owl. Another species, Palm Warbler, is breeding in bogs in St. Lawrence and Hamilton Counties and is strongly suspected to be breeding north of Stillwater Reservoir in Herkimer County as well.



The Mystery Birds Revisited: Sora and Virginia Rail by Mike Peterson, Region 7 Coordinator

Back in '83, I observed, "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." That's still true today, although the current technology of choice may be a CD, IC, or MP3 player. (The full text of "Rails: The Mystery Birds" can be found in *NYS Breeding Bird Atlas Newsletter*, No. 8, May 1983, pp. 7-8, which is now available on the Atlas website.) The two common, small rails in New York are Virginia Rail and Sora, with the larger Common Moorhen slightly more abundant than Sora on the 1980-85 Atlas.

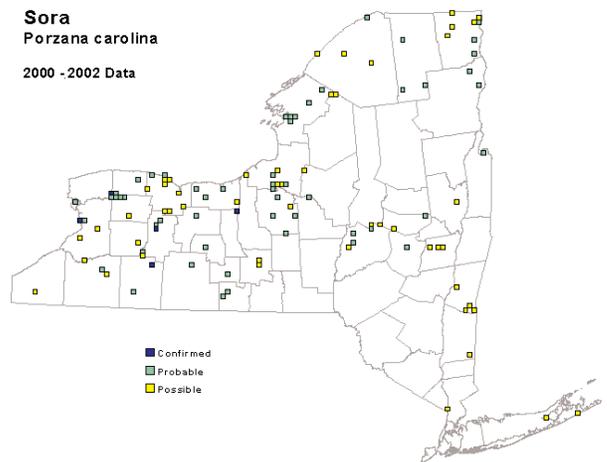
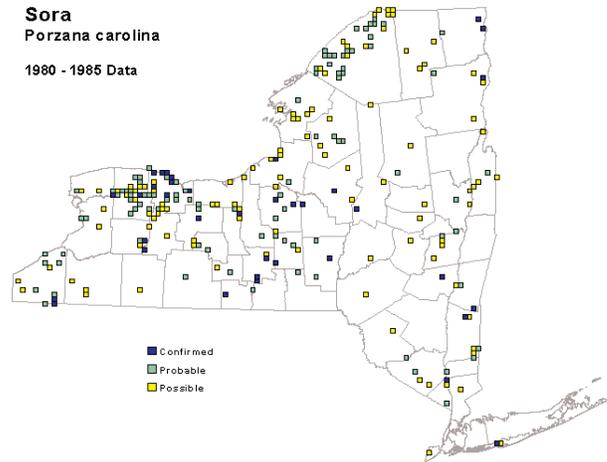
During the first Atlas, we found Virginia Rail in 458 blocks (Confirmed in 87). As Stephen W. Eaton observed in *The Atlas of Breeding Birds in New York State*, this rail was concentrated in two areas: marshes along the Great Lake Plain and along the St. Lawrence Plain and Transition, but scattered elsewhere in both large and small marshes. On 7 July of this year, Dan Nickerson and I returned at dawn to a large Franklin County wetland in Brandon where we had previously played the Virginia Rail tape in the mid-afternoon of 4 July without success. Finally, a distant Virginia answered. However, as noted in the original Mystery Birds article, "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." Later in the morning we passed just such a small stand of cattails in a neighboring block outside Skerry. We nearly passed it by, but by pulling off into the Brandon Cemetery were able to approach from the rear and pull up right next to the clump. No sooner had we turned on the recording than the loudest Wokka, wokka, wok, wok, wok, wok! we've ever experienced answered. With the recorder placed on the ground, the belligerent rail might have attacked it, if not for an intervening fence. Even blocks without large, obvious marshes host Virginia Rails.



Although the Atlas 2000 database does not yet include all of the data from 2002, the above map, when compared with the map from the first Atlas, suggests that Virginia Rails might still be found in a number of counties, including Cayuga, Chautauqua, Greene, Lewis, Orange, Orleans, Putnam, Seneca, St. Lawrence, Ulster, Warren, Washington, and Yates, among others. Observers in those counties especially should plan to return to wetlands to play a recording. Even if no rail replies, we might be able to add an American or Least bittern, a Swamp Sparrow, or other marsh denizen to our records.

Sora seems less abundant, having been found in just 241 blocks (36 Confirmed) on the 1980-85 Atlas. Steve Eaton noted that records were concentrated at Iroquois NWR, Oak Orchard and Tonawanda WMAs, and on the St. Lawrence Plains, with no records from twelve counties. Sora may require a bit larger wetland than Virginia, with some grassy hummocks and sedges above the standing water. But both of these rails can be found in the same marsh at times. (While on the website, check out Bill Cook's "Sora Confirmation" in NYS Breeding Bird Atlas Newsletter No. 9, September 1983, p. 8, for tips on how to find and Confirm this elusive rail.) Serious searchers go out on moonlit nights, but rails will answer in daytime as well, and before a rail answers, you may get a response from a Pied-billed Grebe or an American or Least bittern (or even a frog)!

During the first Atlas, we found Virginia Rail in 9% of all blocks, Sora in just 5%. With the regular use of recordings to check wetlands, we can still match or exceed those previous percentages. But don't wait for serendipity to make a rail spontaneously sound off, just at the moment you've chosen to stop at a small cattail stand or large marsh. That rarely happens. Make and carry a marsh bird tape (or CD or whatever) and try it regularly. Even observers who have never previously seen or heard a rail may be pleasantly surprised.



Bicycle Atlasing by Kim Corwin Hunsinger, Region 8

For Christmas last year I asked for a bicycle rack for my car. I knew just what I had in mind for it and I couldn't wait for the weather to warm up. I am one of those atlasers who feels uncomfortable stopping my car near people's houses while atlasing. So my plan was to atlas on my bike.

Once June rolled around, I hoisted my bike up onto my car each morning and drove to the block that I planned to work in. After finding a place to leave my car, I hopped on my bike and spent the next three or four hours riding each of the roads in the block.



I have found this to be a wonderful way to Atlas! There are three great benefits. First, you can hear all of the sounds around you at any point on the road. Sometimes a bird will sing only briefly and you can miss it if you are driving. Second, you don't get any suspicious looks or questions from the locals. In fact, they usually wave to you as you pass by. And being on a bike makes it easy to just swing into their driveway and talk to them about what species are nesting on their property. I always carried Atlas brochures with me and gave out a lot. And the third benefit is, you guessed it... exercise! Good for the heart, good for the soul. And, biking all morning leaves you guilt-free for afternoon ice cream!

Tips & Tales

I discovered that the Eastern Mountain Sports store in Burlington has a National Geographic Map Machine. This machine prints an extremely sharp and enhanced full-color topographic map onto a heavy, tearproof, waterproof paper (heavier than Tyvec). You can adjust the area to suit your needs, such as your Atlas 2000 blocks. The cost is \$7.95/side. They are about the size of the old USGS maps and you can print on both sides, if desired. I bought one last year from Kittery Trading Post in Maine for my blocks and I love it. So, I was very excited to see there was one in Burlington, but I don't believe they have one in the Lake Placid store.

Dana C. Rohleder, O.D., Region 7

Adirondack Blockbusters Evan Obercian and Nick Laviola report that a good way to find Black-billed Cuckoos is to listen for them at night. They frequently heard their calls hours after sunset when many of us would only expect to hear owls!

The manager of a gravel pit on one of my blocks informed me that a bird had built a nest in the manifold of a huge truck that transported unprocessed gravel from one side of the road to the other. I waited there for the truck to return. Sure enough, as soon as the truck arrived to dump its load for processing, an Eastern Phoebe scooted into a hole under the hood. The noise level was unbelievable. After the truck finished unloading and started up, the bird left the truck and followed it. The men working there said that the phoebe followed the truck all day for about a dozen round trips. *Sheila Smith, Region 5*

At the same gravel pit, I noticed a Common Grackle enter the very top of a five story high conveyer belt that carried gravel and water. The bird went between the moving belt and a metal shield. I can't imagine where the nest could fit in that space but a minute later the bird emerged with a fecal sac that he/she dropped into a nearby stream. All this activity was in a very pastoral setting with the exception of the gravel pit itself.

Sheila Smith

Nelson's Sharp-tailed Sparrow

by William Krueger, Region 7

On 30 July in the town of Champlain, Clinton County, Charlie Mitchell and I saw and heard Nelson's Sharp-tailed Sparrow. It was heard again on 6 August and remained until at least 24 August. This is the first July record for New York and the first evidence of breeding (Pr-S).

Unseasonably wet weather in May and June kept water levels in Lake Champlain high and its surrounding lowlands wet and lush. July was dry and the lake began to recede steadily. Between the Great and Little Chazy Rivers the seasonally flooded fields were divided into three habitat zones: a 75yd wide strip of 6ft high hay, a 25yd wide stretch of drying mudflat, and 100 yards of rushes that gave way to cattails. On 30 July, as we emerged from the head high rye, I heard the unique song of Nelson's Sharp-tailed Sparrow in the rushes beyond the mudflats. That day we didn't see the bird well, but heard it sing again in response to a recording of its song. The next day I got an excellent look at the bird through my scope when it popped up and sang from a high perch in the grass.

It was distinguished from both Salt Marsh and LeConte's Sparrows first by voice, which we compared in the field with recordings of all three, then by its gray medial crown stripe, gray unstreaked nape, and lack of fine black streaking in the rear part of the orange eye stripe. It also had the characteristic buff orange triangle on its face surrounding a gray ear patch, an off-white throat and belly and buffy, finely streaked breast and flanks.

The behavior of this bird was characterized by its stealth and, especially after 9 August, by its silence. In a typical visit 45 minutes to an hour would pass before we would hear it calling and see it rise from cover, fly weakly a short distance to a perch high in the grass and remain there a minute or two, singing at short intervals before dropping back into its silent sanctuary. All sightings but one were between 10:00am and 1:00pm with most occurring around 11:00. After it was last heard we found it only with vigilance and luck and then on less than half our visits.

The appearance of Nelson's Sharp-tailed Sparrow was not unexpected. Because there is a breeding colony on Ile aux Fermiers in the St Lawrence River just 40 miles north, it was listed as a bird likely to be found here in *The Birds of Clinton County*.

“Dorothy” continued from page 2...

We moved to Pompey in Onondaga County in 1968 when my husband, Lloyd, came to Syracuse to supervise construction on part of Route 690. I joined the Onondaga Audubon Society and the Federation of NYS Bird Clubs and started actively birding. I traveled to many parts of New York State and took some birding trips around the United States. It was exciting to find my 600th species in 1978 at 14,000 feet on Squaw Mountain, Colorado: a Black Rosy-Finch.

I was Region Co-Editor for the Kingbird for two years with James Throckmorton, managed the Syracuse birding hotline for five years and was chairman of the committee that handled the Federation's annual meeting three times when the meeting was held in Syracuse. I wrote birding articles for the local chapter newsletter, *The Kestrel*, for a number of years. James Throckmorton and I co-authored a successful publication, entitled, *City Cemeteries to Boreal Bogs, Where to go Birding in Central New York*. I also compiled the information to print the Golden Anniversary publication for Onondaga Audubon Society.

Birding and learning how birds and the environment are completely entwined has changed my life. It has introduced me to many people in the birding community and enriched my life in Central New York. Working on the Atlas, with a 20 year break between projects, has shown me how habitats can change and birds along with habitats. I feel we are fortunate to live in such a beautiful part of the world.

Urban Atlasing **by Bob Marcotte, Region 2**

Standing on the Bausch Street bridge in downtown Rochester, my feet vibrated as mid-morning traffic churned over the span. I tried to block out the noise as I stared directly below into the crown of a cottonwood. Baltimore Orioles flew in and out of the tree regularly; I hoped to spot their nest. Suddenly two passers-by stopped by my side. "Do you see the peacocks?" they asked. "Peacocks?" I replied, momentarily startled. They pointed to a distant grassy area, next to buildings on the flats along the Genesee River. Two Wild Turkeys strolled across the area. I thanked my two "helpers" profusely, and entered another X on my Atlas Field Card.

I knew it would be a challenge when I volunteered to do the Atlas block in downtown Rochester this spring and summer. What I didn't know was that it would be such a rewarding challenge. Habitat is limited, but fortunately the Genesee River gorge snakes through the center of this block from top to bottom, and has provided me with a handful of decent sites.

One of my favorite spots is just south of Driving Park Bridge, where the city has turned a former factory and mill site into a scenic park next to the Lower Falls. I located a female Yellow Warbler on a nest here. On a subsequent trip, that nest was empty and Cedar Waxwings were disassembling it for nesting material. I followed one of the waxwings a few yards to the location where the nest was being built. On my third visit to this site, I saw the female Cedar Waxwing sitting on the nest. Talk about two for the price of one!



It was refreshing to see how many different species have managed to adapt to the urban environment. And I'm not just talking about Rock Doves nesting under bridges and House Sparrows and European Starlings using building vents and light fixtures. Native species have also found their niche. A pair of Red-tailed Hawks nested on the girders of the Driving Park Bridge. Northern Mockingbirds were in residence in at least three locations. Along the river downtown, Rough-winged Swallows disappeared into the crevices of a rock wall by the War Memorial and into drain pipes of an abandoned structure nearby.

My one frustration during this Atlas season was finding an Empidonax flycatcher carrying food for its young and not being able to identify the species. It never sang, never called. But I'm assuming if this species liked the spot this year, there will probably be another pair using it next year. That's the nice thing about Atlas work: next year offers a second chance.

Secret Valley Birds
by Tom Barber, Region 7

In the 1950s my uncle had three favorite places in the lower Adirondacks he called his "secret valleys." Bethune Vly, in Atlas Block 5180A, was one of these. He described it as a beaver pond/bog. He said, "You could look out over the bog with a good view of Bethune Mountain. There was a semi flat rock jutting out into the beaver pond where one could sit and watch the hunting dragonflies and an occasional beaver. There were all kinds of bog plants including Labrador Tea, Leatherleaf, Pitcher plants, Sundew, Sphagnum Moss, etc. Also, there were a number of dead trees sticking up out of the bog that provided nesting holes for the Tree Swallows, of which there were plenty. Occasionally a Common Merganser would land in the beaver pond."

This past summer Dan Crane and I, as Atlas Block-busters, returned to Bethune Vly. It looks much the same as described by my uncle; however, the passage of more than 40 years has taken its toll on the standing dead trees. They are now gone, as are the Tree Swallows that once nested in the natural cavities they provided.

New York State Breeding Bird Atlas Newsletter
NYSDEC
625 Broadway, 5th Floor
Albany, NY 12233-4754

Data Data Data

The Breeding Bird Atlas project is all about data! Have you sent yours in yet? Each breeding record that you collect is important to the Atlas effort. We spend the fall months entering the data that you worked hard all season to collect and then so carefully transcribed onto the Annual Summary Forms. After all of the forms have been scanned into the database, we will update all of the species distribution maps. We only update the maps once a year! You want your hard-earned records to be a part of these interim reports, right?

If you missed the 15 September deadline for getting your Annual Summary Forms to your Regional Coordinator, please don't think it is too late! If you send in your forms now, they can still be included in this year's reports. We will also accept data from 2000 and 2001 at any time. Stand up and be counted!

Atlas Newsletter Editors
Kim Corwin Hunsinger
John M.C. Peterson

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