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 Cornell University Department of Natural Resources
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 National Audubon Society of New York

NEW YORK STATE BREEDING BIRD ATLAS 2000 NEWSLETTER

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A Message from the Project Coordinator on the Eve of Year Five

I suspect there are precious few of us who have never sat back and wondered where the time has gone. I try my best to practice something called Mindfulness, the notion that we must not allow the past or future to supercede the importance of the present, lest the time disappear without our notice. Still, I find myself wondering how we could have only one season left to this second Breeding Bird Atlas of New York State. It truly feels as though it was just a short time ago that we were designing the field cards and data sheets!

The reality is that the final year of the Atlas will begin very soon: *January!* There has never been a

more crucial time to rally the troops for completion of this project. It is time for a little competitive nudge.

Below is a table that shows the progress of fieldwork in each of the ten regions. This table includes data that arrived at my desk by 30 November 2003 (did you wonder why the Newsletter was late this fall?). There are plenty of interesting points to make about this table and I hope you will spend some time studying it. Of particular interest is the number of unvisited blocks in each region. These are blocks for which we currently have no records. In the first Atlas, there were only 12 blocks that went unsurveyed. Across the state there are now fewer than

800 (14%). The big push in 2004 will be to get into those empty blocks. I implore you to make an effort to take on one of these blocks.

“The big push in 2004 will be to get into those empty blocks”

As we begin the 2004 season, let's step back and see how we have done after four years of field work. At press time, with late forms still being scanned, some 2,713 blocks had been visited during 2003. Since we began in 2000, data have now been collected from a grand total of 4,583 blocks (or 86% of the 5,334 statewide blocks). Obviously, not all of these have adequate coverage of 76+ species, with half confirmed, but some do have 100+ species. During the first Atlas, the average number of species per block was 68, and only 337 blocks had fewer than 50 species. Clearly, the birds are there; some observers just have to work harder at finding them.

On the next page you will see the updated map that shows how many species have been reported in each block. Over 3,400 (64%) of

(continued on page 3)

Region	# blocks in Region	# Volunteers	# Blocks Visited	Avg # Species per block	# Unvisited Blocks
1	635	151	583	66	52
2	338	123	338	72	0
3	448	95	353	67	95
4	539	135	466	66	73
5	552	137	508	69	44
6	587	89	422	61	165
7	690	146	610	54	80
8	755	159	634	56	121
9	527	141	421	60	106
10	264	97	248	50	16
TOTAL	5,334	1,273	4,583	62	751

Sandhill Crane Breeding CONFIRMED!!

by John Van Niel, Region 2

Thursday June 5th, 2003 was meant to be a day of fishing for John Foust and me, but it turned out to be a day of birding that neither of us will ever forget. While canoeing around the Northern Montezuma Wildlife Management Area (also known as Howland's Island) in Savannah, we heard the unmistakable call of a Sandhill Crane.

Numerous observers had posted sightings of not just one, but two birds in the area for two consecutive spring seasons. Speculation ran high that the birds were or soon would be nesting. After hearing their calls nearby, John and I scrambled up the bank in search of the cranes. Foust immediately spotted the pair in an agricultural field. I remarked that finding the adults had been relatively easy, but finding a nest or a chick would be a REAL find indeed. And just that quickly, John excitedly pointed and shouted, "There's a chick right there!" Sure enough, a small reddish fuzzy colt was trailing about ten yards behind the adults. The family was about 150 yards out from us in a row crop field that had just begun to sprout. The thrill of the discovery was suppressed almost immediately when a red fox appeared along a hedgerow. Perhaps the adults were a bit too menacing for this mid-sized predator, though, as we never once saw the fox go near the cranes.

Excited, we quickly returned to the canoe and paddled for the road. No sooner had the bow touched ground than Foust bounded off to his truck for a cell phone. I raced to an embankment to relocate the cranes. Our two calls were to Montezuma National Wildlife Refuge and the Morgan Road office for the NYS DEC. Bonnie Parton, a Fish & Wildlife Technician who had been monitoring the cranes, answered the phone. Through the frantic babbling I was offering she was able to actually decipher my meaning and look out the office window to locate Foust and me. With binoculars in tow, Bonnie headed out on foot and became the third person to see the colt. We watched the cranes for about 45 minutes before personal commitments forced us to leave. Within an hour, we reported the sighting to the Cayugabirds listserv and fired off emails to the BBA Region 2 coordinators.

By 8AM the next morning, several other birders were on site. Foust and I were able to take a few poor-quality digital pictures through a spotting scope. We watched as one adult first looked into the sky, then

lowered itself into the grass with the colt. It took us a moment to find the adult Bald Eagle circling overhead. It had only been 18 hours since our initial sighting and we had witnessed two predators near the colt. It was a quick lesson in the hardships this little guy was going to have to face.

Over the next several weeks, scores of birders made the trek to the Montezuma Wetlands Complex to observe New York's newest resident breeder. The local newspaper ran a story about the find. And although I must admit to enjoying the mini-celebrity status (the bank teller recognized me from my photo in the paper), John and I both agreed that it was pure luck that we stumbled on the colt first. The diligent postings by BBA volunteers to listserves such as Cayugabirds were what made me even think of looking for a chick.

Just how significant is this event? One hundred years ago Sandhill Crane numbers were so low that this would have been an inconceivable event. Sandhills have suffered from unregulated hunting, habitat loss, and egg collecting. Egg collecting and overhunting were addressed in the Migratory Bird Treaty Act of 1916, but



Photo by Yvonne Merriam

loss of wetlands and grasslands continued at breakneck speed. By the 1930s, Sandhill Crane numbers were so low that they were extirpated from many states in the midwest. As wetlands were restored, Sandhills responded with vigor.

Over 650,000 Sandhill Cranes now ply the North American skies. Enough so that many states have enjoyed a return of cranes while others have actually become part of a first wave of range expansion. Ohio (1988), Iowa (1992) and Pennsylvania (1994) have all

(continued on page 3)

Sandhill Crane (Continued from page 2)

had recent nesting records of Cranes after decades of absence. In New York, Sandhill Crane sightings have become so frequent that NYSARC removed them from the reportable bird list in 2001.

It is truly fitting that the Montezuma Wetlands Complex received the honor of New York's first resident Sandhill Cranes. The large-scale wetland and grassland restoration projects, made possible with cooperative efforts among the DEC, USFWS, The Nature Conservancy, New York Audubon, and local farmers makes this area extremely attractive to a wide variety of wetland and upland birds.

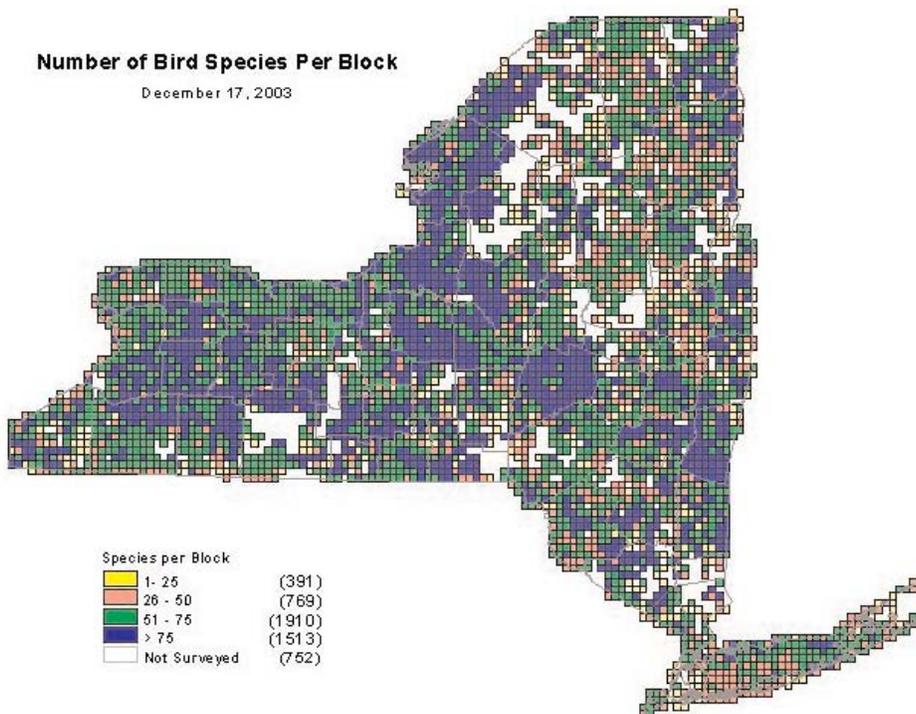
Writing this article has taken me back to the excitement of that day when John and I jumped out of our canoe and witnessed avian history. The thrill of finding something so unexpected, and the feeling that I helped to contribute to the collective knowledge of the natural history of a species has left me elated. Reveling in the experience one day, I remarked out loud, "That was GREAT finding that Crane chick!" Without even looking up from her toys, my seven-year-old daughter said plainly, "John Foust found the chick. You won second place." My fifteen minutes of fame must be up.

Project Coordinator Message (Continued from page 1)

these blocks have more than 50 species in them - that's great! Those empty blocks stick out like a sore thumb, though. You can see this map in full color on the Atlas website. Also on the website are versions of this map for the first three years of the current Atlas and all six years of the first Atlas.

During the first four years at least 1,062 birders submitted data, but the numbers were much lower for each individual season: 638 in 2000, 725 in '01, and 662 in '02. So far, with not all of the reports from last summer submitted, we have received data from 448 active '03 observers. By way of comparison, over 4,300 volunteers took part in the first Atlas between 1980-85.

Many people have asked me if and how we will be able to complete the Atlas in the planned five field seasons. The answer is simple: if YOU make a commitment to get into one (or more) empty blocks this year and finish up any blocks you have been working on, we will be done. Be sure to contact your Regional Coordinator soon to sign up for a new, yet unvisited block and to let him or her know that you



are committed to seeing this important project through.

Among the sponsors of Atlas 2000 are the NYS Ornithological Society (until recently, the Federation of NYS Bird Clubs) and National Audubon Society of NY. We urge member bird clubs and Audubon chapters to publicize the need for more observers. Articles in local club/chapter newsletters, as well as personal recruitment, would

be greatly appreciated.

If you still have records, please send your completed forms to your Regional Coordinator now, so that '04 coverage of your region can be planned accurately. And many thanks to the 448 birders who have submitted their 2003 results.

By Kim Corwin with thanks to Mike Peterson for his contributions to this article.

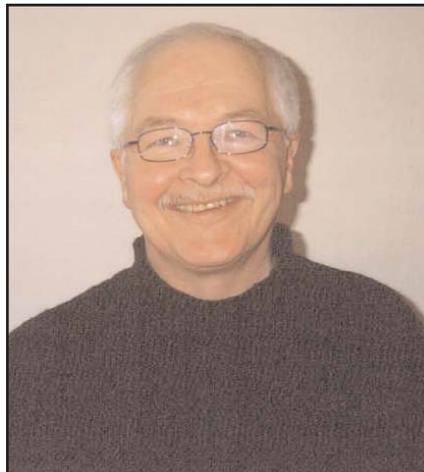
Meet Our Regional Coordinators: Adirondack-Champlain Region 7

Mike Peterson

Like Bob Spahn, Dorothy Crumb, and Bob Long, Mike Peterson is doing his second tour of duty, having also served as Region 7 Atlas Coordinator during 1980-85. In 1985 he also surveyed two 100 x 100 km blocks in the Hudson Bay Lowlands for the first Ontario Atlas with Region 7 observers Ted Mack, Dan Nickerson, and Tim Stiles, canoeing over 80 km in each. Mike notes, "Our two blocks were larger than the entire Adirondack-Champlain Region." His article, "Birds of Little Sachigo Lake and Thorne-Sachigo Rivers, Ontario," appeared in *Ontario Birds* (under his formal "John M.C. Peterson") and described 105 species, including Boreal Owl, Gray-cheeked Thrush, Bohemian Waxwing, Orange-crowned and Connecticut warblers, and White-crowned Sparrow. This past summer experienced Region 7 observer Gary Worthington returned by float plane to the Sachigo on the second Ontario Atlas to help resurvey this vast wilderness region.

Born at Fort Benning, GA, in 1942, Mike Peterson spent much of his boyhood in Hudson Falls and later received his B.A. in English from Hobart College, where he not only began an early career as a Chaucerian scholar, but also began banding birds above the shores of Seneca Lake in Geneva. While attached to the Air Training Command at Craig AFB from 1964-65 as a Stan-Eval officer, Mike was having his MGB serviced

at the foot of the Pettus Bridge when he watched Dr. Martin Luther King lead the marchers out of Selma to Montgomery. In addition to Alabama, he has also resided in Indiana, Michigan, Pennsylvania, and Vermont, and since 1995 has been a Permanent Resident of Canada (although still a U.S. citizen), sharing an apartment in downtown Montréal with his wife Susan. "My library and



Mike Peterson

computer are still in our Elizabethtown house," he notes, "and Discovery Farm is still where Atlas records and queries arrive, so I commute regularly on Amtrak's 'Adirondack' between Gare Central and Westport station."

Mike was an assistant professor of English at the Rochester Institute of Technology, while pursuing a doctorate at the University of Rochester, when he discovered a major caesura in the literature of Adirondack birds: "Nothing much of importance had been published since Eaton at the

turn of the century and Saunders in the '20s, and I figured that would be a better way to spend my life, rather than burden the planet with yet another medievalist."

Returning to the Adirondacks, Mike began a 30-year writing career, supplemented at times by substitute teaching and work as a licensed Adirondack Guide. He served as editor of *High Peaks Audubon Newsletter* for 25 years, saw three editions of *Birds of Essex County, New York*, by his late mentor Geoffrey Carleton through the press, and authored 32 species accounts in *The Atlas of Breeding Birds in New York State*. He has served as Region 7 editor of *The Kingbird* for 20 years, and his numerous articles in the same journal have twice been recognized with the Federation's John J. Elliott Award, in 1984 and 1999.

An active bird-bander since 1975, Mike has banded over 50,000 birds of some 163 species, subspecies, and hybrids. These include 25,188 waterbirds of 11 species banded on the Four Brothers during his 20 years of service as wildlife manager for High Peaks Audubon, which sadly ended last year. Mike has also helped Janet Carroll and Kim Corwin co-edit both volumes of our Atlas Newsletter. When asked if we can do as well in the current Atlas as the 1980-85 team of observers he replies, "Sure," and then adds with a grin, "But we set the bar pretty high last time."

Adirondack-Champlain Region 7

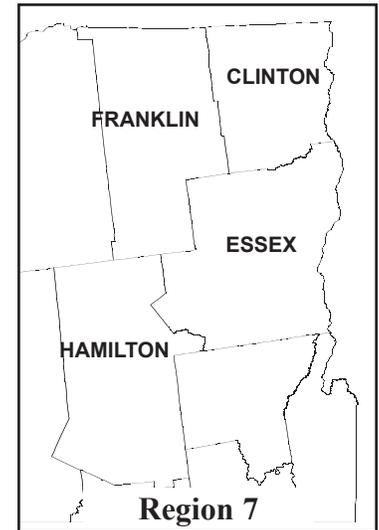
by John M.C. Peterson

Region 7 is the second largest in the state and consists of 690 Atlas blocks in Clinton, Essex, Franklin, and Hamilton Counties. Included in the region are the St. Lawrence Plains and Transition, Malone Plain, Western Adirondack and Champlain Transitions, Lake Champlain Valley, Eastern and Western Adirondack Foothills, Central Adirondacks, Sable Highlands, and Adirondack High Peaks. Elevations range from ~114 ft along Lake Champlain to 5,344 ft at the summit of Mt. Marcy. As I once noted, "The arrangement of the avifauna takes some getting used to, since many southern birds are found in the north and east, while more northern species are concentrated in the south and west." The Four Brothers islands in Lake Champlain have at least nine nesting species of colonial waterbirds, including Great Egret and the northernmost nesting Glossy Ibis in the world, plus at least five breeding waterfowl species. There were at least six sightings of up to three Caspian Terns (in both alternate and basic plumage) at nearby Noblewood Park at the mouth of the Boquet River during July-August 2003, suggesting the strong possibility of a tenth colonial waterbird now breeding on Four Brothers. Birds banded on the islands have been recovered as far away as the Azores, Ireland, and Nicaragua, following the nesting season, demonstrating the importance of "our" NYS breeding birds to the rest of the world.

Confirmed for the first time are Merlin (although a Confirmed-FL 1985 record slipped through the cracks on the first Atlas) and Wilson's Phalarope, with Caspian Tern and Nelson's Sharp-tailed Sparrow still awaiting confirmation. Merlin are now found not only throughout the region, but are becoming widespread in other parts of the state, and Wilson's Phalarope has nested at several sites in the Chazy Rivers area of Clinton County since 2000. A number of birds have increased since the last survey, including Double-crested Cormorant (although confined to just two active colonies), Canada Goose, Bald Eagle, Peregrine Falcon, Wild Turkey, Red-bellied Woodpecker, Willow Flycatcher, Tufted Titmouse, Carolina Wren, "-winged" warblers and their hybrids, and perhaps (Yellow) Palm Warbler. Except for the introductions or reintroductions, note that many of these are southern birds moving their ranges northward, much as Northern Cardinal and Northern Mockingbird did

earlier. Whether the somewhat nondescript trill of Palm Warbler was simply overlooked on Adirondack bogs until we found the first Confirmed-NE at Bay Pond Bog in 1984, or whether there has been a genuine increase since then, remains a mystery, although there are clearly many more turning up at other bogs on Atlas 2000.

Observers also seem to be doing well on several of the more elusive species like Least Bittern, Eastern Screech-Owl, Sedge Wren, Mourning Warbler, and Clay-colored Sparrows. Several Short-eared Owls are also encouraging, and a few volunteers are beginning to learn the habitat and song of the elusive (but surely more numerous) Philadelphia Vireo. Lincoln's Sparrow has been recorded in suitable habitat, but well outside the contiguous range, in northern Franklin County. Although many fresh volunteers were still inexperienced when the two crossbills exploded during the first year of Atlas 2000, everyone did a superb job of rallying to record their breeding ranges.



On the negative side, there are far fewer records of Upland Sandpiper, especially in the vast grasslands along the Québec border. There do not seem to be as many organized nocturnal owling or railing parties as there were during 1980-85, when "sheriff-baiting" was the nightly sport-of-choice, with a resultant drop in records for most species. Members of our Region 7 team working in the Central Adirondacks and High Peaks are also experiencing difficulty in locating, not to mention confirming, some boreal warblers: Tennessee, Cape May, Bay-breasted, and Wilson's. Whether this is due to lack of familiarity with the high-pitched songs, or hearing loss, or a possible crash in spruce budworm populations, is unclear.

Perhaps the saddest sign of our time and of the changes in the United States since the last Atlas is
(continued on page 7)

Clay-colored Sparrow Surge by Robert Spahn, Region 2 Co-coordinator

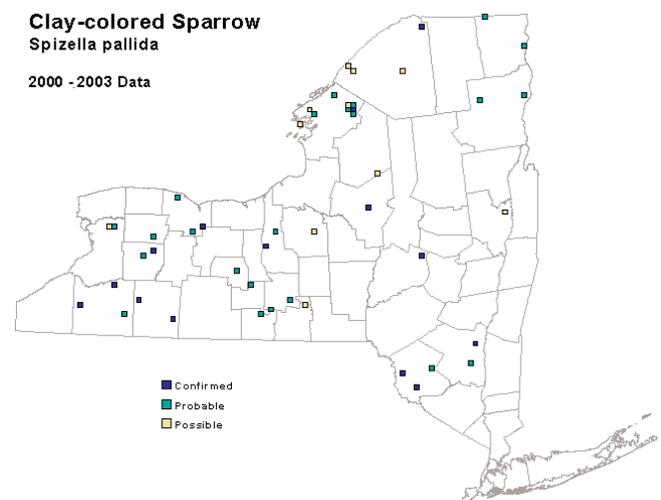
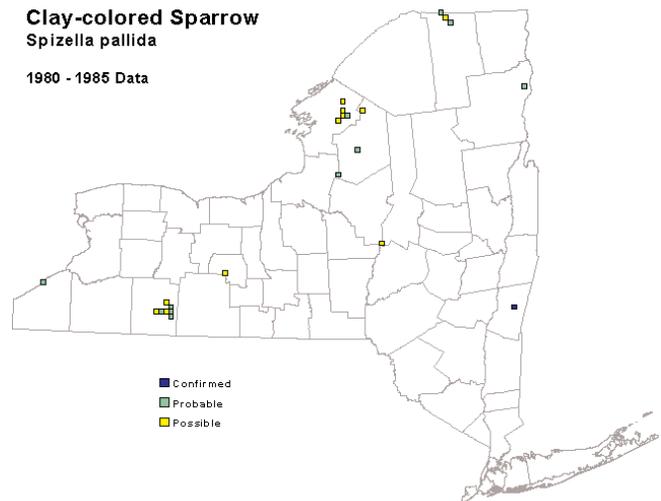
This summer brought a surge in the number of Clay-colored Sparrows found in the state by Breeding Bird Atlas workers. The birds were scattered all across the state, being recorded in seven Regions, though the highest concentrations were to the southwest in Region 1 and to the north on Fort Drum in Region 6, where they have been found in the past. Over 30 singing males were recorded from just the Fort Drum area! The species has now been found in 23 counties in Atlas 2000.

Confirmed breeding was reported this year in Regions 1, 2, 5, 6, 8, and 9, in contrast with only one confirmed breeding record in all of the first Atlas, in Columbia County. The confirmation in Region 5 was a first for that region. The total number of blocks in which the species has been reported in Atlas 2000 is now 48, with 15 additions just this year. The total was only 23 blocks in Atlas 1980. There are now confirmations in 15 blocks.

Historically, the picture is well summarized in *Bull's Birds of New York State* (1998), edited by Emanuel Levine and *The Atlas of Breeding Birds in New York State* (1988), edited by Robert F. Andrie and Janet R. Carroll. The species was first recorded in 1935 and first bred in 1960. Through the 1970s there were sporadic sightings and breeding records, with the latter often finding male Clay-colored Sparrows paired with female Chipping Sparrows. The increase continued through the 1980s, with the data noted above gathered in the Atlas period 1980-85. The rate of increase accelerated in the 1990s, especially with studies on Fort Drum. Still, most records were of May migrants in the interior of the state and coastal birds in the fall, with only scattered documented breeding records. This pace has continued since 2000, especially for summer records.

Most birds are located by their song: a low, slow buzz-buzz-buzz. The fact that they are easy to overlook probably accounts for all of the mixed pairs found (that I have noted in the literature)

being male Clay-colored (singing) and female Chipping. In the breeding season, they are often found in areas with sparse, scattered trees or clumps of shrubs in the 5-20 ft height range. Young Christmas tree plantations and overgrown pastures seem to be particularly attractive, though there are records from orchards and a vineyard. Atlas workers should continue to listen for this species in this habitat type through the remaining year of our fieldwork.



See the newsletter in full color: www.dec.state.ny.us/website/dfwmr/wildlife/bba/newslett.html

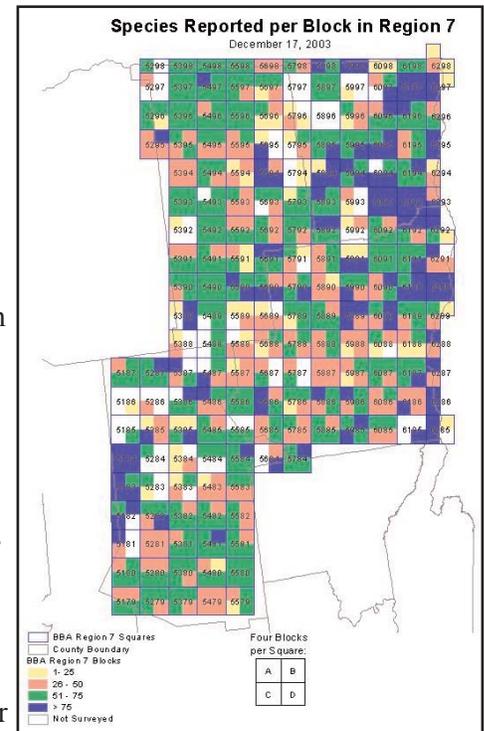
Region 7 (Continued from page 5)

suspicion. Bird a lowland block in a remote, rural area and stop to check the girders of a tiny bridge for an Eastern Phoebe nest, and a pick-up with gun rack will miraculously appear. Bird a highland block in a remote, forested area and be prepared to figure out a new route to bushwhack any State Forest Preserve land (if any) to access the block after permission to survey private land is denied. If we don't obtain records from all 690 blocks, as we did the last time, it will not be for lack of trying to do so.

In spite of difficulties, the Region 7 team seems to be doing well. There are now 146 registered volunteers, with those from other regions generously contributing their time, as well. During the '02 season we obtained records from 359 blocks (52%) and had managed to enter a total of 563 blocks (82%) since the project began, and we should have improved upon that during 2003. At the end of last year there were 321 blocks with >50 species (57%), which is not

bad, but unhappily only 90 blocks (16%) had reached "adequate" coverage of >76 species. There were eleven blocks that exceeded 100 species, showing just what is possible in some areas, both in the Champlain Valley and the High Peaks. We have now obtained records from at least one block in all but about three of our 10x10 km squares in Region 7, so the distribution on the species maps should improve and show more representative ranges by the time the revised maps appear on the Atlas website in early '04. To date, we have recorded at least 200 breeding species.

As principal observers reach a point of diminishing returns in their assigned squares, and as the number of blocks with no coverage declines, I ask that those interested in helping to complete coverage of Region 7 next season contact me now so we can arrange assignments. Some may be well away from home and access alone may provide a challenge. But participants will get to explore some new country,



see some great birds, and help us document more thoroughly the avifauna of the Adirondack-Champlain Region and the changes over the past two decades. And my fellow regional coordinators would undoubtedly welcome the same offer of help, all across New York State.

Tips & Tales

Be sure not to overlook ANY sloped, sandy location for nesting Belted Kingfishers! While atlasing about 200 feet up an abandoned ski slope this season, I was surprised to see a kingfisher land in a tree not far from me. I moved away and slipped into the cover of trees at the bottom of the hill and watched the tree in which the bird had landed. A short time later, the bird appeared again, rattled briefly, then dove into a small ditch in the middle of the slope. After it flew out, I made my way back up the hill and found an eroded, sandy gully, about four feet deep and three feet wide at the uphill end, but gradually widening and rising to ground level about 30 feet down the hill. The burrow was at the upper end of the ditch, about a foot above the bottom. Making special note of kingfishers perched and rattling while away from water has netted me three additional nests, though in more conventional sandy cliff locations.

Jean Miller, Region 6

I spent most of the 2003 season atlasing in southern Schoharie County. This area is sparsely populated, tremendously beautiful, and lucky for me, has plenty of state land. One species that I encountered in almost every block was Black-throated Blue Warbler. I had previously thought that this species was difficult to see, given that they prefer a deep forest, and I assumed that confirmation would be difficult as well. What a nice surprise I had when I briefly spished one day and had a male come running out to me with food in its bill!

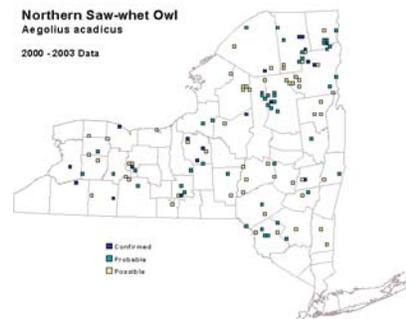
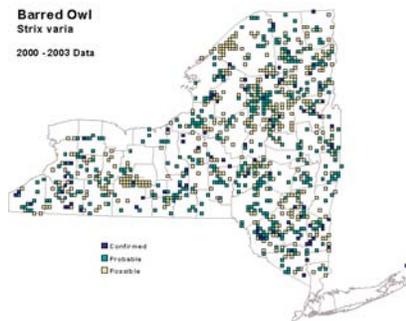
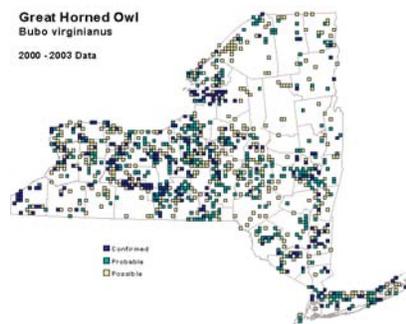
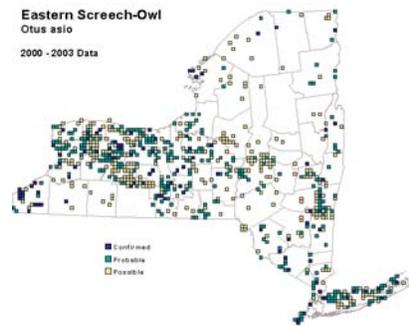
Kim Corwin, Region 8

Atlasing for Owls: a great nighttime winter activity

by Kim Corwin

As I write, a band of snow is moving into the lower Hudson Valley, the leading edge of a classic nor'easter and quite a storm for the first one of our winter season. Once the holidays are over you will surely be looking for something to do on those long, frigid nights! Owling on winter nights is a lot of fun and many of our seven species are probably more widespread than the current maps show. For atlasing purposes, a structured plan will make trekking out into the cold night that much more rewarding.

First, make sure that you have a good recording of the owl calls. A CD is the best medium, as it allows you to go directly to the beginning of each species' call. You can also have the track play continuously. Start by playing the calls of the smaller owls and progress to the larger species. Nearby individuals may call in response or swoop nearby to investigate.



Next, decide where to go. The best tool for an efficient owl atlasing escapade is a map of the blocks in your area that shows which ones are missing the local owl species. You can obtain such a map by contacting me at (518) 402-8906 or at fwbba@gw.dec.state.ny.us.

Common and widespread species to search for are Eastern Screech-Owl, Great-horned Owl, and Barred Owl; the first two of these three are somewhat less frequent in the Adirondacks.

Less common is the Northern Saw-whet Owl, whose populations historically concentrated in the Adirondacks, but spread sparsely across the rest of the state as well. More infrequent again are the Common Barn-Owl, Long-eared Owl and Short-eared Owl. To see where these species have been reported, visit the Atlas website where you will find interim distribution maps that include 2000 to 2003 data.

January through March is a great time to Atlas for owls. Check the breeding season table in the back of your Handbook or on the Atlas website for dates specific to each species.

Wait for a calm night when you don't have to contend with the noise of wind. Gather up your maps and CDs and drive to your first block. Play the calls for those owls that have not yet been recorded and then move on to the next block. By the end of a single night you should be able to fill in owl species for a half dozen blocks or more. Have fun and don't forget that hot chocolate!

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