

Hints on Haunts

by Janet Carroll and John M.C. Peterson

For most bird species there are characteristics of habitat and behavior that are specific to that species. These characteristics provide clues as to where to find the species and what to look for in seeking breeding evidence. Such hints can be of much help in Atlas surveying.

At the 1982 annual meeting of the Federation of New York State Bird Clubs, a workshop on these “clues” or “hints” was held. Jay Lehman (then Region 4 Coordinator) and Mike Peterson (Region 7 Coordinator) presented what they have learned about these clues for a number of species. This information seemed to be something that would be useful for all Atlas workers. Jay and Mike were invited to expand upon and write up their thoughts. The results are given below with additional comments from Gil Raynor.

This compilation is by no means complete. All Atlas workers are invited to contribute observations on additional species or expand on what has been written. Send your observations to the Project Coordinator to be incorporated into the list.

Least Bittern: Probably in most large cattail marshes, but one nest location was a vest-pocket wetland on a dry, bushy upland hillside, above a large lake and marsh. Play a tape of the “coo-coo-coo” call from mid-May onward and listen for a response. Any spot where rail tapes are going to be played would probably be worth checking with a Least Bittern tape as well. On Long Island, Least Bitterns occur in marshes with taller sedges, mixed woody and herbaceous emergent vegetation, and *Phragmites*, in brackish as well as in fresh water.

Red-shouldered Hawk: Check hardwood forests or mixed woods with tendency to deciduous upslope from pond inlets or outlets. Look for large stick nests in the main crotch of mature trees. Mark nest trees with surveyors tape and return in May to see if the nest has been repaired and decorated with evergreen, often balsam, sprigs. The small Long Island population prefers the richer deciduous woods, often near water.

Broad-winged Hawk: Watch tops of power poles along roads bordered by leafy hardwood forest. When driving dirt roads through a tunnel of leafy trees, one may flush from its hunting perch and will fly ahead of a car, often several times before it disappears into the forest. Usually quiet and secretive, in deciduous or mixed woods. Sometimes soars or flies above the forest but mostly below the tree tops.

Virginia Rail: Try playing rail tapes at any wetland area, even tiny spots less than an acre in size, bordering highways. Virginia Rails may prefer cattails with

nearby shrubs such as willow, dogwood, and alder; also sedge meadows, marshes with mixed woody and herbaceous growth and brackish marshes on Long Island.

Sora: Soras may prefer cattails with tussocks of grass and patches of open water nearby. Check all wetlands, no matter how small and unpromising.

Spotted Sandpiper: Any shoreline along lakes or streams. Scan with binoculars or walk along the edge to locate birds frozen in place that may otherwise be difficult to spot.

Upland Sandpiper: While driving, watch tops of power poles, fence posts near hayfields, wide open grasslands, old and active pastures, natural short grass prairies, airports and golf courses. Often easier to spot on poles than when standing on the ground.

Common Snipe: Wet pasture areas marked by some standing water and emergent tussocks of grass are good places to stop and listen for a winnowing snipe, especially on cloudy days. Remember when you spun a rope over your head as a kid, faster and slower, to make the sound rise and fall? There was an eerie, resonant whistling. That's what a winnowing snipe sounds like as it circles far overhead, seeming to come from now here, now there.

American Woodcock: Check abandoned fields, especially those that are low or seasonally wet and bordered by aspens and early second-growth, on an evening in early spring. Just at dusk listen for the nasal "beezp" note followed by the eerie flight song from overhead.

Yellow-billed/Black-billed Cuckoo: Songs are more important than habitat, which is often a combination of second-growth hardwood forest, open areas, overgrown fields and dense brush tangles. Yellow-billeds tend to give the fading "kowlp-kowlp...kowlp...kowlp...kowlp" call just once, while Black-billeds shoot off several series of their "cu-cu-cu-cu" call with spaces or pauses in between. On Long Island, both are found in nearly all wooded habitats, including the Pitch-Pine Scrub Oak barrens where the Black-billed is more common. The Yellow-billed prefers damper habitats but wide overlap occurs.

Barred Owl: Dense forested areas, often near low, wet woods. Look for white cedars; Barred Owls frequent nearby woods.

Northern Saw-whet Owl: Low, wet woods with cedars. Learn the easily imitated whistled call. May be found in second-growth around abandoned fields or open areas.

Whip-poor-will: Often heard calling just after dusk from fairly open hardwood

slopes, perhaps bordered by open areas. Also from steep rooftops. When driving dirt roads after dark, watch for the gleaming ruby eye reflecting in the headlights from the dusty road surface ahead. On Long Island, most common in oak-pine woods and Pitch Pine/Scrub Oak barrens.

Ruby-throated Hummingbird: Watch for a minuscule bump on power lines along forested roads. In woods check active Yellow-bellied Sapsucker food stations - evenly stitched holes near the tops of trees such as birches, oozing sap. Through binoculars a hummingbird may be seen among the clouds of yellowjackets. In open clearings or flooded areas, always focus on the tops of dead snags; that tiny bump is probably a hummingbird. Finally, watch the tops of those bigger stands of lilacs around Memorial Day for a hummingbird going straight up and down like a yo-yo (this is a flight display: PR-D), or swinging from side to side in a wide arc.

Red-headed Woodpecker: Open hardwoods bordered by open fields. Watch fence posts, telephone poles, corn cribs, or manure piles nearby.

Yellow-bellied Sapsucker: Drums in bursts like a jackhammer, slows toward the end in a kind of hesitant stutter, with longer pauses before the final rap.

Pileated Woodpecker: Drumming sounds something like a wooden ruler being twanged on the edge of a desk, running down at the end.

Olive-sided Flycatcher: Dead snags, almost always in wet areas or around wilderness ponds.

Alder Flycatcher: Black alder thickets. Most singing comes to a halt in July.

Yellow-throated Vireo: Seems to be found not far from water in hardwoods mature enough that the trees are well-spaced and understory is vigorous. In taller woods, but usually near edges, fields, roads or water.

Philadelphia Vireo: Look in second-growth hardwoods with sugar maple-paper birch-aspen dominant as a result of forest fires or heavy logging about 75 years before with the trees forming a dense canopy. May also be found foraging on the edges of such forests. Identification by song rarely helps due to the considerable variation in other vireo songs, particularly Red-eyed. Apparently absent at lower elevations. Most of them are located by carefully sorting through all movement in the leaves and determining what bird is “kicking” around - just persistent, methodical birding.

Warbling Vireo: Loves large shade trees like elms, especially in villages. One birder dubbed the Warbling Vireo the “squeeze-me” bird, after its song: “You see me and seize me, and squeeze me til I squeak!” The very end of the song is

an upward warble and actually sounds as if someone is squeezing the notes out of the bird. This is one of the most nondescript of North American birds and is often high up in the leafy foliage. Learning the song is almost essential to finding it. Sounds much like Purple Finch, without the rising notes at the end.

White-eyed Vireo: Thick brush, bushes, tangles bordering second-growth woods, perhaps not far from water, or with nearby openings.

Gray Jay: The “gray ghost” bird. Habitat is boreal, mature, dense spruce-hemlock. When walking sandy wood roads, railroad beds, along bog edges or other avenues and openings, keep looking back. Talking while walking, or even stopping to give some whistles and claps may help, as these birds are inquisitive and like to see “what’s going on,” but keep an eye to the rear. Without warning, the bird may glide silently across the opening behind. Don’t mistake it for a small accipiter!

Horned Lark: Check all plowed fields with a scope or binoculars and keep scanning. A Horned Lark may walk up out of a furrow onto a dirt clod before dropping back into the next furrow out of sight as it feeds, looking almost like a mouse against the earth. On Long Island, also found in dunes on barrier beaches, airports and golf courses.

Northern Rough-winged Swallow: Stone bridges over small streams seem to be favored by this swallow. The present bridge may be paved and have concrete sides but you should check to see if the old foundation beneath is laid stone with some crevices. If so, a Rough-winged may be perched or flying nearby. On Long Island, may nest in any small bank, such as a road cut or sand pit, not always near water. A pair is often found at the edge of a Bank Swallow colony.

Cliff Swallow: Look among the Barn Swallows for the ochre rump and squared-off tail that marks the Cliff Swallow. Check under barn eaves, or watch for the birds disappearing under the eaves of houses or buildings.

Boreal Chickadee: Dense spruce-balsam stands. Listen for the nasal “zick-zee-day-day” or “feed the baby” call and then use spishing in a chickadee-like pattern to help locate the bird. A whistled Eastern Screech-Owl imitation also works to bring them in, especially if alternated with a rapid spishing pattern. Watch for food carrying.

Red-breasted Nuthatch: Conifer forest, stands of large spruces, Red Pine, and Hemlock. Originally more common at higher elevations (3,000 feet and above), but now extending to lower elevations (1,000-1,200 feet) in conifer plantations. Same habitat as Golden-crowned Kinglet. On Long Island, in stands of planted conifers and in Pitch Pines.

Winter Wren: Montane, evergreen forests with spruce and balsam, but also lower elevation bogs and swamps. Deciduous mountainsides with heavy undergrowth. Often found around logged-over areas and slashings. Nests in upturned roots.

Carolina Wren: Brushy woods, thickets, undergrowth and dense tangles near water or ravines, old dumps or refuse areas around villages. Listen for its loud “tea-kettle...tea-kettle...tea-kettle” song. Originally more common on Long Island and lower Hudson Valley, expanding range north.

Marsh Wren: Cattail marshes, inland and upstate. Coastal brackish salt hay marshes. Less numerous northward and at higher elevations. Also in *Phragmites* and taller sedges.

Sedge Wren: Avoids cattail marshes. Moist meadows (without standing water) with scattered low bushes, grass and sedge bogs. Coastal brackish salt marshes. Frequently found in same habitat as Henslow’s Sparrow but in the moist portions.

Golden-crowned Kinglet: Any conifers, but especially likes hemlock or dense spruce stands, 40-50 feet tall. More common at higher elevations but also found at 1,000 feet. Calls and song can be confused with Brown Creeper; it’s best to locate the bird.

Ruby-crowned Kinglet: Mature spruce, sometimes where spaced. Learn the energetic, loud song which ends in rapid, rising triplets - “ti-daleet, ti-daleet, ti-daleet.”

Blue-gray Gnatcatcher: Frequents dense, brushy areas near water. Complaining nasal calls often give them away. Tiny but active and relatively approachable. On Long Island in oak-pine woods, deciduous woods and swampy woods but often near water, prefers fairly tall trees.

Thrushes - Elevational Stratification: There is much overlap in these zones and habitat plays a part. In late June, there are often two or three thrush species within earshot. The first three, Wood, Veery and Hermit, can often be found in the same hardwoods. In conifers one may find Hermit, Swainson’s and Grey-cheeked. Thus Hermit may be hardwoods, conifers or where the two meet. Thrush songs are easier to learn than warbler songs; field marks are simple compared to gulls and shorebirds.

Veery: These are uphill from the Wood Thrush, in moist damp woodlands with lush understory of ferns and other low plants.

Bicknell's Thrush: Near the summits of highest peaks, 3,000 feet to the tree-line (5000 feet).

Swainson's Thrush: Generally at higher elevation than Hermit - at 1,800 to 2,000 feet, or above in spruce, hemlock, or beech-maple-hemlock on lower slopes.

Hermit Thrush: Higher than the Veery and Wood Thrush in upstate where it lives on cool, moist woodland slopes, and cooler deciduous woods. On Long Island it is found in pine barrens.

Wood Thrush: Lowest in elevation, in lowland and deciduous woodlands, open but with plenty of undergrowth.

Blue-winged Warbler: Neglected pasture, woodland borders, or openings with low bushes, briar patches, bushy thicket borders and open brushy hillsides. Formerly more southern but moving northward.

Golden-winged Warbler: Similar habitat to Blue-winged but tends to be more northern and at higher elevation. Singing stops early in season, after mid-June, when feeding young (more so than Blue-winged and other warblers).

Tennessee Warbler: Seems to favor brushy northern zone habitat (leatherleaf, sheep laurel) with scattered trees (spruce, tamarack, aspen). Secretive unless singing.

Nashville Warbler: Edges of woodland forest, or open edges of wooded bogs, young tree growth in cut-over or burned over areas, forest openings. Found mostly at 1,100 feet or above, possibly at lower elevation in northern parts of the state.

Northern Parula: Locate by sound in dense conifers, humid woods near ponds, lakes and streams where old man's beard moss (*Usnea*) abounds.

Magnolia Warbler: Conifers, especially spruce but also hemlock and mixed deciduous-conifer. More common at higher elevations but now found as low as 1,100-1,200 feet in suitable habitat.

Chestnut-sided Warbler: Dry, brushy areas, similar to habitat of Common Yellowthroat, but sometimes drier. Both species may often be found in close proximity, sharing the same habitat.

Black-throated Blue Warbler: Shaded deciduous or mixed woodland where there is heavy growth of ferns, laurel, deciduous bushes or saplings two to three feet high. Found at 1,200-2,500 feet, less common in low-lying

agricultural regions.

Yellow-rumped Warbler: Large conifer stands, especially spruce and fir such as in state reforestation plots. Originally confined to higher mountains. Now found at 1,500-1,600 feet or above, except in the more northern regions. Also found in Long Island pine barrens.

Black-throated Green Warbler: Mainly conifers or mixed deciduous-conifer, especially spruce and hemlock. Upstate mostly at 1,500-1,600 feet or above, except in the more northern regions. Also found in Long Island pine barrens.

Blackburnian Warbler: Higher elevations (1,500-1,600 feet in southern portions). Mixed deciduous, but especially conifer (spruce, fir, hemlock and pine).

Pine Warbler: Breeds exclusively in pines, preferring tall, dense stands. Downstate in Long Island pine barrens. Upstate in large, mature White and Red Pines.

Prairie Warbler: Brushy pastures, old clearings, hillsides, especially with small (15-20 feet) White or Red Pines. Moves on when pines get too tall or dense. Formerly mostly southern but expanding northward into upstate. On Long Island, mostly in low Scrub Oak/Pitch Pine barrens, but also other brushy habitats, such as abandoned fields growing up in young pines and bushes.

Cerulean Warbler: Deciduous forest, especially lowland river bottoms with high trees. A bird of the high tree tops.

Worm-eating Warbler: Wooded hillsides, ravines with heavy undergrowth, especially south-facing (upstate) and often near rivers and streams.

Northern Waterthrush: Swampy wet woods, bogs, along shorelines of lakes or ponds with brushy edges, especially in shallow or standing pools with partly submerged logs or fallen trees, where a waterthrush may teeter along slowly feeding.

Louisiana Waterthrush: Found along small, fast flowing brooks and rivers with steep banks. In deep cuts or ravines, especially with trickles of water running down the sides to the stream. Loud, ringing song that carries well. Plumage of the two waterthrushes is similar, but Louisiana likes rushing water while the Northern prefers still ponds.

Mourning Warbler: Look in open woods with blackberry or raspberry thickets where there's been logging, thinning or slashings. Check open clearings, abandoned sugar houses, cutbanks along dirt roads, where waist-high

undergrowth and berry tangles are dense and young maples are not much thicker than a thumb. Electrical or gas rights-of-way are often good spots. Birds are skulkers, sing deep in tangles, refusing to pop up. Patience will usually bring you an FY. Listen for the “chirry, chirry, chorry, chew” song.

Wilson’s Warbler: Only one confirmed NY nesting, in North Meadow, Essex County. Ground cover was patches of meadowsweet (*Spiraea*) growing one to five feet tall in clearings between white and red spruce, tamarack and balsam (15-30 feet) in clumps or singly. Quaking aspen, fire cherry, white pine, alder and willows also occur here. Ground cover of blueberry, goldenrod, strawberry, grasses, sedges, mosses and hawkweed: an old pasture.

Canada Warbler: Very diversified habitat, forest undergrowth, conifer swamps with deciduous undergrowth, heavy brushy growth along rock ledges, ravines and steep road cuts that are wooded at the top.

Indigo Bunting: Males usually sing from exposed high, outer branches, often a dead limb. Learn the paired song to help locate them (“fire-fire, where-where, hurry-hurry, see-it see-it”). Brushy forest edges and openings are the usual locations. In largely unbroken forest look for them in clearings around hunting camps or wide loading areas for logging operations. Often found along railroad tracks or power lines. If the male is singing high overhead, the female is probably somewhere low nearby, perhaps skulking in a berry patch or dense shrubs. Spishing will often elicit a disturbed response (PR-D) or bring her into sight with a beak full of food (CO-FY). On Long Island, mostly at edges between woods and overgrown fields or brushy areas.

Purple Finch: Song has much the same quality, warbling and sweet as the Warbling Vireo but without the phrasing and the squeezed-out, uprising finale. Turns up in all kinds of woods and woodlots, often singing from an outer branch or the tip-top of a conifer. Not too easy to confirm, but a singing male can be often parlayed into a Probable Pair.

Clay-colored Sparrow: Overgrown fields with scattered red cedars, maybe a few young White Pines, barberries, and other scrubby growth. Horses or cattle may still be grazing in it but basically it was abandoned about 30 years ago. The birds sing from dawn to dusk but mornings may be best. Listen for flat, insect-like buzzes - “bzzz, bzzz, bzzz” - in a series of three, four, or even five notes, building in intensity and then maybe dropping. Most listeners would attribute it to an insect of the grasshopper and cricket tribe, not to a bird. Look at the tops of the scattered trees; the bird is probably singing about a foot from the top of the cedars and may be partly hidden, although the pipe-clay colored breast should show up. He throws his voice, so it may take some patient triangulation to locate the bird that is making this strange sound. Get your scope! This rare bird requires solid identification.

Field Sparrow: Much the same habitat as Clay-colored Sparrow. This bird likes overgrown, not open fields. Listen for the sweet opening notes, following by a descending, slowing trill. On Long Island, common in abandoned brushy fields and Scrub Oak/Pitch Pine barrens.

Vesper Sparrow: The song is strongly reminiscent of Song Sparrow, so listen for the paired opening notes. Look in short, sparse grassland of waste areas, in brushy, grassy edges near large open fields often planted to young corn, potatoes, strawberries, raspberries with grasslands or woods nearby. On Long Island in abandoned weedy fields and airports.

Savannah Sparrow: Stop at a big hayfield almost any time from dawn to dusk during summer - a lazy "tseeee- tsaay" will drift across the field. Inhale... exhale, "tseeee-tsaay." Get out into real farm country where there are big, wide-open, grassy fields. Listen for the song. If the bird is close enough, the "tsit-tsit-tsit" introductory notes may be audible but most often only the "tseeee-tsaay" is going to reach you. Once heard, the same spot can be revisited a week later for an easy PR-S. A little patience usually produces a CO-FY. If you have trouble identifying these striped field sparrows, look for a little bit of yellow behind the bill, running into the eyeline; that's the bird. Wilderness birders should look for it on the bog mats, too. On Long Island in abandoned weedy, grassy fields, airports and drier portions of salt marshes.

Grasshopper Sparrow: Sparsely grown, short, abandoned grassland or weedy fields, generally not hayed or pastured. Shorter, grassy road sides or hayfields. Usually not found in luxurious, well-tended, tall hayfields.

Henslow's Sparrow: Often sings at night, especially when the moon is full. Open, abandoned hayfields, or farmland reverted to natural grassland but remaining uncut and ungrazed, and with a clear, unobstructed view to the horizon (by trees, high hedgerows or enclosing hills). Some diversity or vegetation height preferred for singing perches but excessive invasion by woody plants (bushes, small trees) decreases habitat suitability. Sedge Wrens may use moist portions of this type of habitat.

Lincoln's Sparrow: This bird seems to prefer scattered young tamaracks. There may also be spruce scattered about, some of it more mature. In northern areas, look for open areas such as bog edges or blueberry barrens where the trees scattered a little more widely than a White-throated would like, not as wet and damp as a Swamp Sparrow would prefer, although both may be heard or seen quite nearby. Walk up to the tamaracks and spish loudly. Listen for a sharp, musical "tink" note. Keep spishing and a lovely little sparrow with a buffy breast with fine sidestreaks and grayish face markings will pop out with head top feathers crested, "tinking" vigorously, perhaps with a mate or a mouthful of bugs. In some northern counties, it's as easy to find as a Chipping Sparrow.