

SUMMARY OF THE 1996 NORTH AMERICAN MIGRATION COUNT
IN NEW ENGLAND:
PORTRAIT OF A FALLOUT

by Michael Resch

"The numbers of wood warblers observed during the morning hours at the Glades in North Scituate matched anything I've seen at one spot in spring in Massachusetts in a lifetime of birding!"

— Wayne Petersen, Plymouth County, MA

"This day was one of a major "fallout" of migrant birds . . ."

— Frank Mantlik, Fairfield County, CT

"This year's NAMC day was extraordinary, in terms of weather and birds."

— Sue Carr, Washington County, RI

"The weather was the worst! Heavy, even torrential at times, rain made it difficult to bird. We did well in spite of conditions."

— Bonnie Dundas, Bennington County, VT

"Serious rain . . . When I was, occasionally, able to get away from roaring water, the rain drummed on my car roof. Couldn't see, couldn't hear. And the road I use is not even opened yet [due to snow cover]."

— Jean Arrowsmith, Addison County, VT

Could all of these quotes have come from birders out on the same day in one small region of the country? If you are familiar with birding and meteorology in New England, then you may not be surprised to find that these quotes came from our fellow birders recording their results during a single event, the 1996 North American Migration Count (NAMC) on May 11. In fact, the inclement weather conditions were closely tied to the locally spectacular birding that occurred across the region.

The early days of spring 1996 were very cool, with very few southerly winds to give migrants a boost. The days immediately before the NAMC featured southerly breezes, providing several weeks' worth of migrants the tailwind they had waited for in their northward migration. But just when this movement was finally underway, a weather front stalled over New England the day of the Count, causing a coastal fallout of epic proportions on the morning of the Count. These migrants made their way inland as the day progressed, resulting in numerous small bands of migrants wandering through the valleys of New England in their search for food. A breakdown by state of key New England statistics is presented in Table 1.

Unfortunately, this front also resulted in less than ideal birding weather. The best conditions were in Connecticut, where it was just partly cloudy during

Table 1. Key Statistics of the 1996 NAMC in New England

	CT	RI	MA	VT	NH	ME	Total
Parties	21	12	86	19	36	38	212
Observers	54	19	239	38	82	84	516
Counties Reporting	4	3	12	6	7	11	43
Number of Species	180	163	221	152	174	184	251
Number of Individuals	12,333	8,487	72,541	11,218	17,198	17,533	139,311

most of the day, with temperatures up to 80 degrees; heavy rain held off till sunset. Rhode Island participants encountered fog and drizzle under mostly cloudy conditions, with temperatures peaking at 70 degrees. For the rest of New England, skies were overcast, featuring intermittent to constant precipitation (including evening snow in Maine), with temperatures that struggled to reach the 50's.

A Statistician's Dream

NAMC data, when normalized on a party-hour basis, show how far spring migrants have progressed from their wintering grounds at the time of the count, and to what extent wintering species have exited the area. The major fallout that coincided with the 1996 count also presents an opportunity to construct a statistical portrait of what most observers agreed was an exceptional bird event. It is interesting to compare the number of migrants observed per party-hour in 1996 with numbers from 1995, a "typical" nonfallout year. The relative degree of arrival and departure of several key groups of species is presented in Table 2 on a state-by-state basis.

The values in Table 2 were calculated by dividing the NAMC totals for each state by the total number of party-hours on foot reported for that state. Foot hours were used rather than total party-hours in normalizing the totals because few of the small passerines analyzed in Table 2 are observed while driving. This is a fairly standard method of normalizing count data. But in looking at Table 2, it is important to bear in mind that parts of the region—mainly Vermont—sustained drenching rain. Soaked data collectors sticking close to their cars may well have inflated the state's birds per foot party-hour ratio. If we compare 1995 and 1996 in terms of passerines per total party-hour, 1995 actually yields slightly higher numbers for Vermont.

Taken generally, 1996 data do suggest northern New England experienced a burst of migrants. Increased 1996 warbler/vireo results for the northern three states included all subgroups of the warblers and vireos, and numbers of some migrants, notably Yellow-rumped Warbler, were good across most of the North. But although statewide statistics would suggest that the fallout affected mainly Vermont, New Hampshire, and Maine, it may be that birders in certain counties in the southern states experienced the best the fallout had to offer.

Figure 1 provides a pictorial view of which counties experienced the greatest percentage increase (and decrease) in total passerines reported from 1995 to 1996. Counties with limited or no coverage in either year are not included in this analysis. Due to limited coverage in most of Vermont, results from the entire state are treated as a whole. We hope that increased participation in future counts will eliminate such blind spots in the future, as well as supporting more definitive and detailed analysis.

The greatest increase relative to 1995 was observed in Litchfield and

Table 2. Comparison of Migrants Observed, 1996 and 1995 NAMCs in New England

	Birds Per Foot Party-Hour, 1996/1995						
	CT	RI	MA	VT	NH	ME	
Passerines - 1996	121	73	96	370	112	114	
1995	100	123	110	179	69	105	
Warblers & Vireos - 1996	26	15	23	39	26	24	
1995	19	18	20	23	13	11	
Early Arrivers ¹ - 1996	5.0	3.9	6.7	17.2	12.7	13.7	
1995	4.7	3.7	5.2	4.7	5.5	4.6	
Late Arrivers ² - 1996	1.1	0.87	0.98	1.32	0.81	0.35	
1995	0.75	0.48	0.58	0.09	0.15	0.11	
Thrushes ³ - 1996	3.6	1.2	1.7	4.1	1.4	1.6	
1995	3.5	2.2	2.2	2.2	0.78	0.40	
Winterers ⁴ - 1996	0.39	0.65	0.82	5.67	2.21	6.28	
1995	0.04	0.57	0.33	5.68	3.55	2.82	

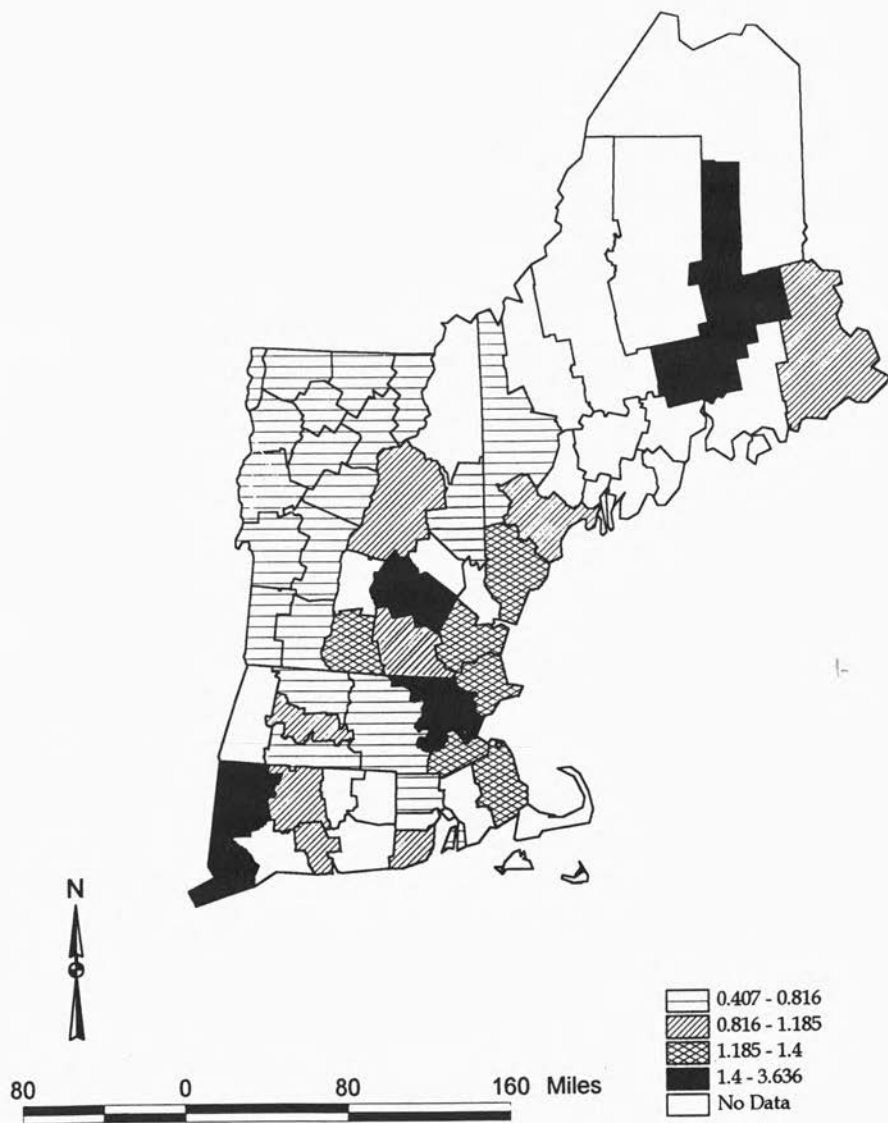
¹Early Arrivers" are Solitary Vireo, and Yellow-rumped, Pine, Palm, and Black-and-White warblers

²Late Arrivers" are Blackburnian, Prairie, Blackpoll, Mourning, Wilson's, and Canada warblers

³Thrushes" are Veery, Swainson's, Gray-cheeked, Bicknell's, and Wood thrushes

⁴Winterers" are Red-breasted Nuthatch, Golden-crowned Kinglet, Junco, Purple Finch, Crossbills, Siskin, Evening Grosbeak

**Figure 1. Passerines Per Party-Hour
Ratio of 1996 Results to 1995 Results**



Fairfield Counties, CT, perhaps due to migration along north-south trending river valleys. In Litchfield county, morning counts increased from 78 passerines per foot party-hour in 1995 to 330 in 1996. (A fourfold increase with the latter figure working out to roughly a bird every eleven seconds.) The vast majority of the other counties showing major increases were along the east-facing coastline of Massachusetts, New Hampshire, and southern Maine, validating subjective reports of a massive fallout in those counties.

It is of interest that not only did Nantucket, MA not experience a fallout, but this county experienced the greatest decrease in passerines from 1995 to 1996! It is also notable that coastal Rhode Island, where a major fallout early in the day was described, did not finish the Count with high total numbers of passerines. This could indicate that the migrants rapidly moved inland after the early morning fallout, resulting in lean afternoon birding that lowered the average for the day.

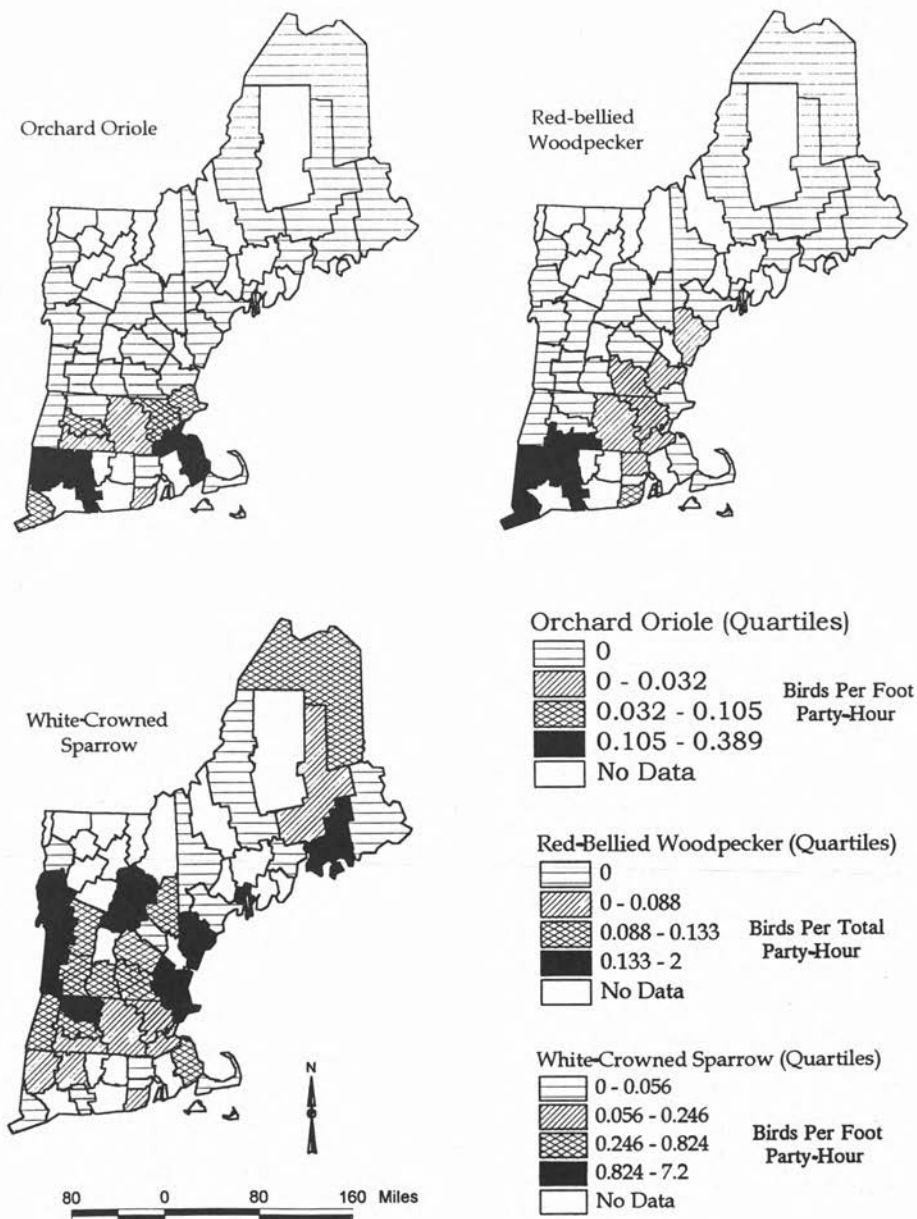
Notable Birds

The Most Valuable Player for the 1996 Count may well have been the White-crowned Sparrow, as shown in Figure 2. Some of the greatest numbers were in Vermont (up to 7.2 birds per foot party-hour, which would be a terrific number even for total party-hours). That large numbers of White-crowns were also observed in western Massachusetts suggests that a sizable inland movement of this species coincided with the Count. And White-crowns made headlines along the southern New England coast, where counts ranged from 2 to 3.2 per foot party-hour. Literally hundreds of White-crowns were encountered on Plum Island (a dozen or so would be a respectable day's count at this location). In comparison, in 1995 this species was reported at levels averaging only 1 per foot party-hour in Vermont and less than 0.3 per foot hour along the coast.

A bird that illustrates another aspect of the fallout is the Orchard Oriole. (See Figure 2). This species is typically seen in appreciable numbers only in the southern portion of the region (and not always there), with infrequent spring reports farther north. On the 1995 count, for example, the four east-facing Massachusetts coastal counties reported no Orchard Orioles at all, and in 1996 this species was not reported from New Hampshire or Maine. But also in 1996, a total of 0.062 per foot party-hour were reported from the southern three states, compared with only 0.029 in 1995. Most of the action was in those east-facing Massachusetts coastal counties, averaging 0.18 Orchard Orioles per foot party-hour. A total of fifteen individuals were found in this area (an astonishing six at a single location, Boston's Arnold Arboretum—but that observer, Bob Stymeist, had no White-crowned Sparrows at all on the count!).

Clearly, birders at some locations encountered several times the usual number of passerines, and many times the usual number of particular species.

Figure 2. Notable Birds in 1996



The mix of species and the level and persistence of activity varied on a fairly small scale. But regionwide, data from the 1996 NAMC reflect a day of widespread good birding.

Although waterfowl may be less responsive than passerines to the localized conditions that cause fallouts, the 1996 count also turned up good numbers of seabirds at inland locations. Hampden County, MA, had eleven Red-necked Grebes and three White-winged Scoters; two White-winged and a Surf scoter were found in Hampshire County. White-winged Scoters also turned up in Windham County, VT (2), and Rutland County (8); Rutland County birders also found two Brant. In New Hampshire, a Red-throated Loon was found in Merrimack County, while Grafton County yielded fourteen White-winged and three Surf scoters.

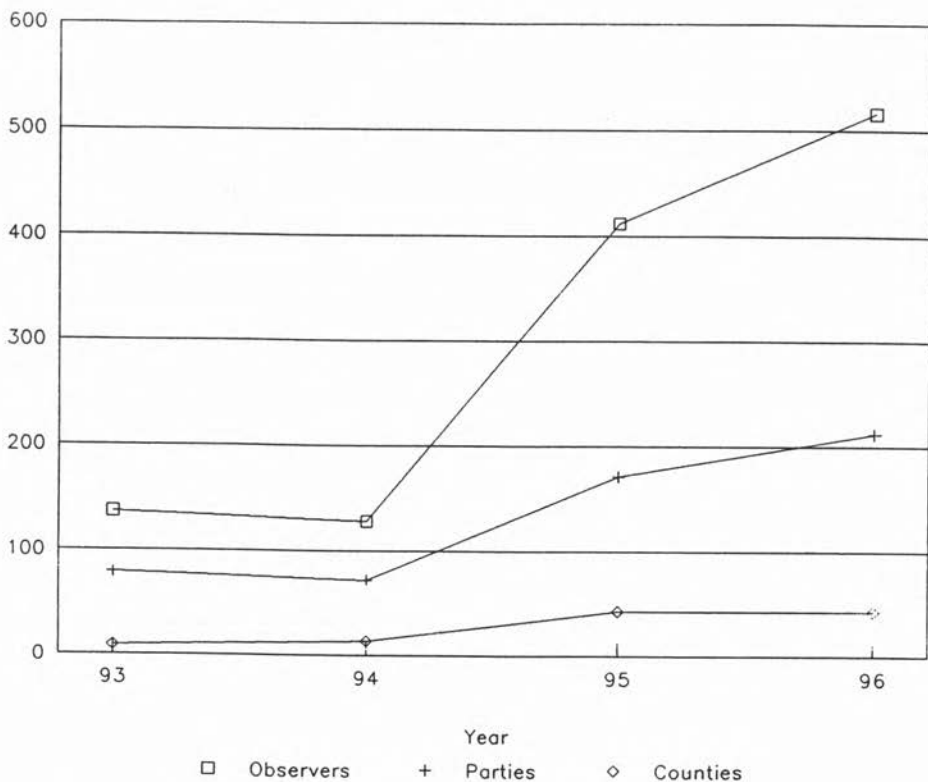
May 11, 1996, also brought some unusual species into the region. A Boat-tailed Grackle turned up in Fairfield County, CT, while an American Golden-Plover appeared in Washington County, RI. Counters in Massachusetts found a Bicknell's Thrush in Essex County and one Prothonotary and two Cerulean warblers in Middlesex County. Vermont highlights included a Lesser Black-backed Gull (Windham County) and a Greater White-fronted Goose (Windsor County). Grafton County, NH, had a Lapland Longspur, and a Harlequin Duck was reported from Rockingham County. Maine's Aroostook County featured Bohemian Waxwing, Barrow's Goldeneye, and a Dickcissel.

A long-term goal for the NAMC is to track the changing status of expanding, increasing, or declining species. 1996 provided data on the early stages of what are widely anticipated to be interesting examples of range expansion. Monk Parakeets were reported from Fairfield, CT, as this introduced bird moves out from its foothold in Rhode Island. The number of Fish Crows reported in the region increased from fourteen in 1995 to forty-four in 1996. And good numbers of Red-bellied Woodpeckers were found in southern New England, in addition to two individuals in New Hampshire and a single bird in Maine (Figure 2).

On the other hand, the expanded coverage of 1996 failed significantly to improve the low 1995 counts of some declining species. American Bitterns continue to be hard to find, with only one reported from Connecticut (up from none in 1995); this species was found in three Massachusetts counties (up from one in 1995) but showed no increase in the northern states. Only three Common Moorhens were reported (one in Hampden, MA and two in Addison, VT) for the entire region, up from one in 1995. Five Upland Sandpipers were reported (three in Hartford, CT, one in Hampden, MA, one in Washington, ME), compared with six individuals of this declining species in 1995.

Coverage in the NAMC in New England continues to improve, as shown in Figure 3. If only the weather cooperates for the 1997 NAMC on May 10, perhaps coverage will expand even further. Many thanks go to all the 1996

Figure 3. NAMC Coverage in New England



participants, and especially the county and state compilers. Coverage increased significantly in places such as Fairfield, CT (thanks to compiler Frank Mantlik), Rhode Island (thanks to compiler Dave Emerson), Aroostook County, ME (a new participating county thanks to Rita Rogers and Anne Bacon), Rockingham, NH (thanks to compiler Dick Balerviez), and Bennington, VT (thanks to compiler Bonnie Dundas). We cannot overlook the excellent efforts of long-term compilers Edith Andrews of Nantucket and Dick Hildreth in Worcester, MA, whose efforts go back to the inception of the NAMC. Dick's Worcester once again wins the award for the most participants and parties. Hampden, MA, compiled by Seth Kellogg, had the greatest number of species: 160!

Mike Resch, New England coordinator of the North American Migration Count since 1995, lives in Pepperell, MA. Mike's principal birding interest is state listing, and he has reached the ABA listing threshold in seventeen states. He can be reached at 508-433-8896 or Email MRESCH8702@AOL.COM.

About the NAMC

The North American Migration Count (NAMC) is a nationwide census held annually the second Saturday in May, with results compiled by county and state. The NAMC is the brainchild of Jim Stasz of North Beach, Maryland, who has combined facets of the Christmas Bird Count program with facets of Maryland's "May Count." The objectives of the NAMC include:

- Obtaining a "snapshot" of the progress of Spring Migration,
- Obtaining information on the abundance and distribution of each species,
- Creating challenges and goals among birders while collecting useful information,
- Having fun,
- Establishing the second Saturday in May as "National Birding Day."

To quote Jim: "The North American Migration Count is a grass-roots project instituted by independent birders to gather information about the distribution and abundance of all birds." The organization of the program, compilation of the results, and reporting of data are done without fees or donations. The count has grown since its inception in 1992 to the point that the 5th Annual NAMC on May 11, 1996, had more than 7000 participants reporting from each of the Lower 48 States, Alaska, and several Canadian provinces.

1997 New England Coordinators

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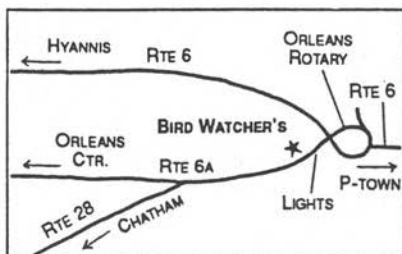
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