

changing seasons

The Nesting Season, June 1–July 31, 1998

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Of all the reasons why the planetary birdlife is important, none, to my mind, is as succinct and accurate as that provided by E. O. Wilson in *Biophilia* (1984): "It is a general rule that, when the bird fauna stays intact, so does the rest of the fauna and flora." If bird communities are rough indicators of the health of the larger biotic community, then it follows that monitoring bird populations serendipitously becomes a way of indirectly monitoring the larger community of living organisms. Perhaps it also follows that how we perceive the status of birds as a result of our monitoring is generally how we should perceive the status of the biota at large.

Nowhere are the results of avian monitoring efforts in North America more clearly set forth than in each seasonal issue of *Field Notes*. In these pages the results of our bird "detectin," to quote a Jimmy Stewart character, can be presented for all to see, and here, too, the looming gaps in our knowledge can be ascertained and, we hope, filled in during future seasons.

Detection of changes in bird populations occurs in two ways with regard to their timing: (1) detection that takes place concurrently with the actual change in a bird population, and (2) detection that follows the change by some unknown period of time. Such a distinction is important to make in order to prevent a false sense of accuracy about many so-called "first" records; many of them represent merely the first time humans have recorded the event, which may or may not have been an actual first occurrence. Given the uneven distribution of field observers across the continent and the vagaries of bird population dynamics, this temporal bifurcation in detection is entirely expected, indeed inevitable. Though we would prefer to know every change in avian status as soon as it occurs, such isomorphism cannot prevail all the time, so we learn to accept the fact that we will never know exactly when a large number of avian population changes actually took place. But knowing that such changes occurred at "some" time in the past is better

than not knowing these matters at all, so it is vital to continue monitoring.

Monitoring efforts that detect a change in birdlife concurrently with the actual change are usually the result of some kind of advance warning. For instance, when Eurasian Collared-Doves invaded Florida from the Caribbean, they brought with them a well-documented history of expansion across Eurasia. Once North American observers became aware of this history, it was almost guaranteed that the collared-doves' advance northwestward would be closely documented almost every wingbeat of the way. Indeed, a reading of the reports that follow discloses this rapidly expanding species' presence in several new regions across the continent. In many cases documentation of collared-dove advances undoubtedly took place literally at the same time, and certainly during the same season, that the birds first appeared at new sites.

Without benefit of warning, most changes in bird populations are probably not noted when they actually first occur, and a few may take decades or longer to be noticed if they are ever noticed at all. For example, recently detected breeding populations of Virginia's Warbler in Oregon (see Oregon-Washington Region) and South Dakota (see Northern Great Plains Region) may well represent population changes noticed long after they actually occurred—although it is extremely gratifying and important simply to know that these "new" breeding populations exist.

NOTABLE MONITORING EFFORTS

Seven male Barrow's Goldeneyes implanted with satellite transmitters while wintering in the St. Lawrence estuary were tracked inland to sites where additional Barrow's were present; ultimately, survey efforts at these Québec sites produced the first documented breeding evidence in eastern North America of this handsome duck. A web site where one may "watch" the journey of the seven males is provided by the editors of the Québec Region.

Bird habitat is at a premium in New York City, so it is good to know that all 834 acres of Central Park were studied jointly

by New York City Audubon and the Linnaean Society of New York using Cornell Laboratory of Ornithology Breeding Bird Census procedures. For a rundown on the remarkable results of this monitoring effort, see the Hudson-Delaware report

The long-term census of Kirtland's Warblers in Michigan and surrounding areas produced another record count of singing males; check out the Western Great Lakes report for the specifics. Good news about Black-capped Vireos came from Oklahoma (see Southern Great Plains) where a territory-mapping census revealed a large increase in the number of territories mapped from the number mapped in 1997

In Hawaii, the annual survey of Guam Swiftlets in upper North Halawa Valley revealed far more occupied nests than have been counted there in previous years. Also in Hawaii, a nest-tracking study of the endangered Hawaiian Hawk was undertaken, with results showing that the species is doing "quite well"; however, in order to do well, it preys on recently released, and critically endangered, Hawaiian Crows, so the news here is not entirely rosy, except from the hawk's point of view.

Arizona was a hotbed of monitoring effort this year. The western subspecies of Yellow-billed Cuckoo (*occidentalis*) was surveyed along the San Pedro River; perhaps 10–20% of the total population of this subspecies occurs at that site. Thirty-one Ferruginous Pygmy-Owls were located at a variety of sites in the south of the state; presumably, this number is an encouraging one, based on all the times I have tried to find this species in Arizona, I am certainly impressed by it. Elegant Trogons are annually surveyed in the Chiricahua Mountains, and this year's survey resulted in 14 nests being found in the Cave Creek Canyon drainage, how this number compares with those of previous years would be good to know

AVIAN EXPANSIONS

Tales of expanding bird populations are frequent in the reports that follow, but sometimes the expansions are not entirely welcome. It is still too early to know if the massive build-up of Eurasian Collared-Doves

in Florida and elsewhere carries with it serious negative consequences, but it is worth noting that the Mourning Dove population, as represented by Christmas Bird Count data, around Cedar Key, Florida, plummeted notably after collared-doves arrived and exploded in numbers. Is this to be the fate of other columbids in newly colonized territories of collared-doves?

White-winged Doves will probably not be too adversely affected by burgeoning populations of collared-doves. White-wings colonized south Florida at about the same time that collared-doves did so and now appear to be expanding across the continent almost as rapidly as their Eurasian cousin. Many are the regions where this native columbid is making inroads, including the West Indies; read on to find out where the other regions are.

The incredibly rapid expansion of Double-crested Cormorants throughout the continent is not being viewed as a blessing by all who notice it, including some fishermen who compete, or at least think they compete, with cormorants for fish. Wayne Petersen, writing from the New England Region, views the 43% increase in this species' nests on the Vermont side of Lake Champlain from 1997 to 1998 as "scary," a view apparently also held by some truculent persons living near Lake Ontario, where, according to the editors of the Hudson-Delaware Region, at least 850 cormorants were illegally shot during the summer despite a 23% decline in numbers of nests from 1997 levels at a major cormorant colony on the lake. Increased breeding by this species was mentioned in at least four other regional reports. Additionally, the first breeding record for the Yukon Territory (as in "way the hell north") was documented. On the other side of this coin, declines in cormorant breeding success were noted in the Oregon-Washington Region.

Mute Swans have long been known to be expanding and have long been a focus of concern as a result. This year 44 were found at two sites in the eastern Upper Peninsula of Michigan, where their presence in such numbers was described as "unnerving." The Jamaica Bay population of Mute Swans has reached 300, prompting what are described as "discreet countermeasures" there and elsewhere. If declines in marsh-breeding species like Least Bittern and Common Moorhen are attributable to changes in habitat wrought by foraging swans—and, we hear, geese—then such countermeasures seem entirely appropriate.

Another probably unwelcome avian invader is the Shiny Cowbird, which staged a mini-invasion of the South Atlantic Coast Region, being found in Georgia, South Carolina, and North Carolina. Where this tropical invader will end its foray into North America is anyone's guess, but I doubt we have seen the last of its expansion north—or west.

Unlike the Shiny Cowbird's advance northward, that of another icterid, the Tricolored Blackbird, is being watched with little or no apprehension. Washington state produced its first breeding colony this summer, and the species is now poised to make its first international incursion, as the Washington breeding site is only about 100 miles from the Canadian border (see Oregon-Washington Region).

White-winged Crossbills were mentioned in reports from many regions—Atlantic Provinces, New England, Hudson-Delaware, Western Great Lakes, Mountain West, Alaska, and Oregon-Washington—as breeding more abundantly than usual or as simply being notable for their presence. White-winged Crossbills were also singing territorially in Algonquin Provincial Park in early July when I passed through during a vacation trip though their presence and abundance there was probably typical and so not discussed in the Ontario Region report.

As always, many species extended their breeding ranges or increased their abundance at the fringes of their ranges during the season. Among these is the Western Kingbird; its fascinating conjunction with electric power substations in Missouri, as discussed in the Middle Western Prairie report, shouldn't be missed, and its increase in Missouri may help explain why the species was documented as a breeder in Tennessee for the first time (see Central Southern Region).

The Northern Shoveler bred in a number of locales where it is not usually expected though whether these breeding occurrences reflect a change in the size of the species' population as well as in its breeding distribution remains unclear. The Florida Region had its second shoveler nesting record, an unprecedented nesting occurred in Tennessee (see Central Southern Region), and a surprise nesting took place in Texas. Other, more northerly but still noteworthy nestings took place in the Atlantic Provinces, New England, and Oregon-Washington regions. Still other regions had lingering shovelers that apparently did not breed.

AVIAN DECLINES AND CONTRACTIONS

The gritty grandmother of grassroots environmentalism, Rosalie Edge, is credited with saying that the time to save a species is while it is still common. Her forward-looking philosophy depends for its success on a legion of dedicated field observers conducting numerous bird monitoring programs over decades of time, a condition we are now actually beginning to approach in many regions of the country. One of these is West Virginia in the Appalachian Region where the Brooks Bird Club has been conducting forays for many decades. The club's 1998 forays included a sally into wild, wonderful Pocahontas County where, sadly, numbers of Red-eyed Vireos were about 10% lower than numbers encountered there in 1993. While no one would claim that the Red-eye is a threatened bird, it is crucial to recognize now that even populations of this superabundant species are not everywhere stable. It is just as crucial to recognize that only the dedicated, long-term efforts of the members of the Brooks Bird Club provided us with the benefit of forewarning about the status of the Red-eye in that part of West Virginia.

The litany of species declining in various parts of their ranges as noted in the regional reports sometimes makes for uncomfortable reading, but an honest recognition of these species' circumstances is part of our commitment to bird conservation, indeed the very reason for it. So let me rehearse a few of the less salubrious news items found hereinafter.

In the Oregon-Washington Region, Common Murres have not had a year with very successful reproduction since 1990, and 1998 was apparently no exception to the recent string of poor breeding years if a count of 1400 that included only three chicks is any indication of the species' status. Farther south in the Middle Pacific Coast Region the news was equally dismal for murres.

Piping Plovers continue to endure poor success. This year in Colorado the culprit was high water levels in reservoirs, drastically reducing nesting habitat (see Mountain West Region). In the Middle Western Prairie Region, Iowa was described as having a "great year" for pipers with eight pairs producing 15 fledglings, but these are not overly robust numbers even if they are great. Slightly higher numbers of pairs but not fledglings were reported from the Southern Great Plains Region, but still the actual numbers of each are quite low. In the

Hudson-Delaware Region the downward spiral of this species was attributed to human beach use and predation; efforts to protect the species include ringing the nesting sites with electric fences, which are meant to keep out foxes, and not, presumably, humans.

Loggerhead Shrikes also continue a downward slide, especially in the northeast. No reports at all were submitted to the editors of the Hudson-Delaware Region, and the species was not remarked upon by editors of regions northeast thereof. In the Western Great Lakes Region the situation is better, but only 30 pairs could be located in the Ontario Region. Golden-winged Warblers went literally unreported in Massachusetts during the season. Many regional editors discussed the poor prospects for Henslow's Sparrows although conditions for the species seem better at the southern end of its range (see Southern Great Plains) than at the northern end.

THE WHITE-TAILED DEER: A THREAT TO BIRDS

Besides the obvious, immense, and direct impacts on birds caused by the expanding continental population of *Homo sapiens*, other threats to birds exist. Many animals benefit from human alteration of the planet (would this process properly be called "antiterraforming"?) but adversely affect birds. As a prime example, overgrazing by white-tailed deer, clear beneficiaries of human habitat manipulation, is pointed to by the editors of Hudson-Delaware report as negatively affecting some songbird populations. I suspect that the deer threat to bird habitat and thus to birds will continue to worsen as long as the deer population of North America continues to expand—and it currently shows no signs of stabilizing, let alone decreasing, especially in the East. During the summer, deer invaded my own suburban yard in middle Tennessee for the first time in ten years. "Browse lines" are now readily apparent in many parts of western Kentucky and probably elsewhere in the East. As a result, I've come to view deer hunting in a different light than I formerly viewed it: these days my support is entirely on the side of the hunters.

The historical record is also clear on the issue of deer and their effect on habitat. Back in the 1930s, Aldo Leopold wrote an impressive essay entitled "Thinking Like a Mountain." In this essay Leopold summarizes the effects of eliminating predators on deer herds (i.e., deer increase exponentially) and the effects on plant life caused by

increases in deer herds (i.e., plants are drastically over-browsed). We need to reread Leopold and abide by his warnings, since we may well be getting into a biological situation that parallels the one described by Leopold.

FINAL THOUGHTS

No consistent weather pattern prevailed across the continent this season, but many parts of the interior were hot and dry, with at least one Region, Ontario, experiencing the hottest conditions on record. In Texas, extreme high temperatures resulted in some nestling mortality; for instance, at some sites young Purple Martins were literally baked to death inside artificial nesting structures. Often mentioned as contributing to these meteorological events, El Niño/la Niña conditions certainly affected the West Coast and desert southwest in a noticeable manner and may well have contributed to the weather on a continent-wide scale, even reaching as far east as the West Indies in their influence. How much these weather conditions resulted from changes in the global pattern of weather is currently hard to determine, but it is at least worth considering seriously the possibility that they stem from a world-wide warming trend exacerbated by increased releases of greenhouse gases.

Despite the many mentions of coordinated monitoring efforts in the following reports, we still have a long way to go before it can be said that the reports make the fullest use of breeding season bird data sources. In the past, a major hurdle has been simply getting access to the data in time to meet the rather stringent deadlines that regional editors must adhere to; there simply wasn't time to obtain, to read, and to analyze, say, all the Breeding Bird Survey data from a region in order to incorporate the critical elements of those data into a report. With the advent of electronic submission of BBS data, however, that is changing, and it is now time for all regional editors to avail themselves of this information. Not to become technologically current—and most regional editors now are—serves our readers poorly and shows scant regard for the birds of North America.

Every *Field Notes* season offers a "snapshot" of the continental avifauna. The snapshot offered by this season was a good one to summarize, for it focused on issues that will long be with us in our efforts to understand and protect the great ornithological resource of North America. In the end it is people, lots of dedicated and altruistic peo-

ple in the field (represented by the numerous sets of initials that suffuse the pages of this volume), monitoring as many populations of birds as possible, who will ensure the understanding and continuance of this intriguing and priceless part of our natural heritage. And who knows? If we manage to understand and protect birds, maybe we will receive a bonus by understanding and protecting the rest of the biological world as well.



Corregenda to "Masked" Booby paper (*Field Notes* 52: 276–287). The author, Don Roberson, brings two mistakes to our attention. First, the islands off Chile with an unnamed population of yellow-billed Masked Boobies are the Desventurada Islands, not the "Juan Fernandez Islands" as he erroneously labelled Map 1, p. 277 (the location shown is correct, the real Juan Fernandez Is. are another 10 degrees farther south). Second, the photo in Figure 5 (adult Masked & Nazca boobies standing together) was published reversed, so that the identifications in the caption were the opposite of the true identification.

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