

The Wingbeat

A Quarterly publication of the Vermont Breeding Bird Atlas

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Wingbeat archives: <http://www.uvm.edu/~vbba/Newsletters.htm>

Note from the Director: Atlas field cards and home sheets for the 2006 season will soon arrive in your mailbox. If you need more or did not receive any, please feel free to contact the atlas. Have a great atlassing season!

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1. VBBA TIME

The following is a fun poem written to Bennington atlassers by Ruth Stewart, Northern Bennington Coordinator. It may serve to inspire (or at least bring a smile) to the rest of us!

Owls, woodcocks, hawks and raven
These early nesters we're a-craven.
It's time to check out what birds are here
For the VBBA now in the fourth year.

Pull out the binos, find your papers
Head into the woods for early spring capers.
Let's pull out the plugs for our best year yet
So our intrepid leader (Roz) will not have to fret.

Please let me know that you will again participate
Attached is some information to which you can relate
Remember how important we all are
Because this project will be useful both near and far!

2. SPECIES WATCH

As the atlas matures into its fourth season, it's time to take stock in our statewide species list. What species might be missing or underrepresented? What species have we not yet confirmed?

For one reason or another, some species are more prone than others to being underreported, even if their true distribution did not change since the first atlas. These include species that:

- 1) are difficult to detect in the field
 - 2) are difficult to distinguish from other species
 - 3) require specific methods or extra effort
 - 4) are specialists that can be missed if their habitat is limited or overlooked
- or
- 5) occur in "irruptions" and breed in Vermont sporadically

Of course, these species could simply have a more limited distribution compared to the first atlas. The only way to feel confident about that is to feel confident that we didn't miss them. Below are some of the species on the atlas "hit list." Keep an eye out for them, and make sure you can i.d. those that could breed in your blocks. You just might make a new discovery!

A. Species that appear to be underreported in this atlas (so far) include:

...Owls owls owls! We need more of them. See winter 2005 newsletter for more details.

...Philadelphia Vireo: sounds like a Red-eyed Vireo, easily overlooked. You need to actually see this bird in order to confidently identify it. Found on 20 blocks in the first atlas, but on only 2 (so far) in this atlas! Not yet confirmed.

...Yellow-throated Vireo: If you're not tuned into their song, it can be easy to tune them out, mistaking them for Red-eyed Vireos.

...Vesper Sparrow: Song can be mistaken for Song Sparrow or "blocked out" in the background. Found in 35 blocks in first atlas, but only 16 in this atlas.

...Red and White-winged Crossbills: irruption species. Found but not confirmed.

...Pine Siskins: we often don't see them until the juveniles are flying to our feeders, and then it's too late to count them for the atlas.

...Olive-sided Flycatcher: they are not very rare but they are also not abundant, where they do occur. You have to be in the right habitat to find them. See winter 2005 newsletter for more details.

B. The following are rare species that were found in the first atlas but have not yet been reported in this atlas. Those that are not already listed above include:

Gray Partridge
Red-headed Woodpecker
Loggerhead Shrike

C. Rare species we have found but have not yet confirmed include:

American Wigeon
Lesser Scaup
Bufflehead
Northern Shoveler
Northern Pintail
Green-winged Teal
Red-breasted Merganser
Common Nighthawk
Tennessee Warbler
Cape May Warbler
Prairie Warbler
Bay-breasted Warbler
Cerulean Warbler (best to search in early June for these)
Wilson's Warbler
Yellow-breasted Chat

3. BLOCKBUSTING FIELD NOTES PART II

- by Julie Hart

This is Part II of notes written by field biologists about their experience blockbusting in the Northeast Kingdom, 2005.

This past summer, two of my joys—birding and spending time in the Northeast Kingdom—came together and made for the best field experience I have ever had. I have spent the last few years traveling all over the country and even around the world pursuing a career in ornithology. I have spent time studying terns off the coast of Maine, loons in New Hampshire, Kokako in New Zealand, and, yes, even Ivory-billed Woodpecker in Arkansas. But all this travel has only made me yearn for home. I didn't bird as a youth growing up in southern Vermont nor did I bird while a student at the University of Vermont. I didn't take an ornithology class until I went to work with National Audubon and the Cornell Lab of Ornithology. Traveling around so much the past few years means that I still haven't been able to spend much time birding in Vermont, that is, not until Roz Renfrew hired me to help her with the Breeding Bird Atlas. And what luck it was for me that she needed help in the Northeast Kingdom. My grandparents have a

camp on Lake Willoughby and it has always served as a retreat for me. It's the perfect backdrop to slow down and commune with nature. And what better way to do it than to go birding!

There was an ominous start to the summer season when it rained for nearly two weeks at the end of May. But the season turned out to be an amazing success. It was a rewarding and educational experience I won't soon forget. As a birder, you are taught to look for field marks to identify a bird to species, and if you are more advanced, to sex or age. As a field ornithologist, I have often found myself studying just one species and conducting behavioral observations; identification skills are not emphasized. Atlassing combines both skills and requires you to be quick—quick to identify a bird to species with just a brief glimpse or a short call note and quick to find the bird, lift your binoculars, and determine its breeding status. It is important to assess the microhabitat, how far along in the breeding season it is, and the local geography, all of which help predict what species might be encountered and what kind of behaviors to expect. A few miles of latitude, historical land use, and local geography can change the breeding status of a species by a week or more.

I can't begin to recount all of the amazing birding moments of this past summer. Among the most memorable were watching the elaborate figure-eight courtship display of a male Ruby-throated Hummingbird, thrushes coming up to investigate me with their bills stuffed full of insects, and discovering the territories of our boreal specialists—the elusive Black-backed Woodpecker, Yellow-bellied Flycatcher, Boreal Chickadee, Rusty Blackbird, and Gray Jay. I tracked down the nests of Warbling Vireos, American Redstarts, Red-eyed Vireos, and Eastern Kingbirds. And even though I spent five months in Arkansas studying woodpeckers, it was here that I finally was able to study the habits of breeding Yellow-bellied Sapsuckers and watch them wriggle their way in and out of their nesting cavities.

Even our base camp near Notch Pond was surrounded by breeding wildlife. The intersection of Notch Pond Road and Route 105 is probably the best location in the state to see bull moose or cows with young. A little farther up the hill is where the local bear cub would hang out. Osprey nested on a telephone pole over our parking spaces and the mere act of parking could be delayed while waiting for a Wild Turkey and her one or two-day old chicks to move down the hillside. Simply walking up the driveway to the camp might flush an Ovenbird or lead to an encounter with a frantic Ruffed Grouse barking and scurrying back-and-forth across the path while her fledglings hid in the leaves. The lone Common Loon that resided on Notch Pond wailed us to sleep at night.

I don't want to give the impression that there were no negative aspects to the work I did this summer. The wet weather created one of the worst mosquito seasons on record; many songbirds failed in their first nesting attempts because of the storms; I found my first biting ticks; and some mornings I spent nine or ten

hours confirming only two species. Despite all the time I spent in the field, I still have not seen a Northern Goshawk or a Spruce Grouse. But these drawbacks were offset by the innumerable glimpses of what it takes to survive as a bird in Vermont's boreal forest. I feel privileged to have spent so much time observing their daily battles and triumphs. And while I know that none of my experiences are unique, they will remain as special memories from a time I was able to combine my passion of being outdoors and watching wildlife with exploring a place very dear to my heart.

4. THE WHEREABOUTS OF WHIP-POOR-WILLS

All evidence points to a dramatic decline in Whip-poor-will populations in recent decades. However, typical bird monitoring programs do not adequately quantify trends for this crepuscular species. Baseline information about Whip-poor-will habitat preference, the extent and degree of its decline, and reasons behind the decline are unknown. Last year dozens of Vermonters (many of whom were atlassers) conducted evening roadside listening routes as part of a pilot Whip-poor-will survey. Part of a region-wide Nightjar monitoring effort in the eastern U.S., the survey's aim is to establish a long-term monitoring program for Whip-poor-will populations throughout its breeding range.

Using last year's pilot results, the survey protocol and routes are currently being updated and improved. New routes are being established for 2006, and in May people will be able to sign up for a route.

Sign up for a route, and by spending **one hour listening for Whip-poor-wills on a moonlit night** you will...

- 1) help us determine the "state of the state" in terms of where Whip-poor-wills are breeding in Vermont
- 2) help kick off a ground-breaking regional monitoring program for this declining species
- 3) participate in a blossoming range-wide database on Whip-poor-will occurrence
- 4) help gather the information needed to develop conservation strategies for this species
- 5) have a good time!

If you'd like to sign up for a route, please send your address, phone number, and email address to rrenfrew@vinsweb.org or call 802-457-1053 X 127. In May we will be sending out survey information and matching people with routes in their region(s) of interest. Routes are scattered throughout the state, the sooner you sign up, the sooner you can grab one in your area of interest!

5. MEET THE COORDINATORS: TOM BARBER, CHITTENDEN COUNTY

(Blockbusted in first & 2nd NY atlases).

My birding background...

My mom threw stale bread out to feed the birds in suburban Philadelphia and I began trying to identify them about age seven. I remember being fascinated by the "oil slick on water" colors of the purple grackle in sunlight. My first field guide, arriving via Santa that year, was the Golden Pocket Book of Birds. A family friend and member of the Delaware Valley Ornithological Club would include me on any birding trip he took that did not interfere with school. By age 15 I had traveled from Machias "Seal" Island in Maine to Key West, Florida, just birding.

While in college I and another birder spent an entire summer driving and camping along the gulf coast, south into central Mexico, up the west coast to the Olympic peninsula, east to Glacier National Park, north to Jasper, Alberta, and east across Canada to Montreal.

More recently my wife (a bird sympathizer) and me traveled for 2-1/2 years across North America, and birding made a lot of the direction decisions!