

Maritimes Breeding Bird Atlas

NEWSLETTER



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No. 21

Editor: Brian Dalzell

Spring, 1990

THE BIG PUSH

You hold in your hand what will in all likelihood be the shortest newsletter you ever get from me. It is sort of a hodge-podge of stuff that I have been saving from other newsletters. The reason it is so short is simple—my time is much better spent working out the details of completing the Atlas this summer.

We have left ourselves with fully 38 per cent of our priority squares to be completed. While this is a big job, I'm sure we can do it. Why? Because we are Maritimers, that's why. Because of our geography and history, we have come to be unusually self-reliant.

It doesn't seem to be getting much better either, judging by the constitutional contortions the country is now subjecting itself to. So, as in most other facets of life, we will have to depend on ourselves to finish this project.

However, I would like to thank those very few dedicated helpers from outside the province who are coming to help again this summer. Without your unselfish devotion, it is safe to say we wouldn't even be contemplating finishing this year.

So, without further ado, I wish you all the best of luck finishing off the square(s) you have chosen or been assigned. Most of all though, enjoy yourself and don't take this too seriously. After all, birdwatching is supposed to be fun.

FINDING GOLDEN EAGLES

There are many species of birds which are very rare or unknown breeders in the Maritimes, and the current Atlas has surprised us with how little we really know when it comes to our resident birds.

Because of time and money constraints, many rare species will be overlooked in favor of doing a more complete job on the common ones. That is sure to be the case with the Golden Eagle.

There appears to be a trend toward increasing numbers of this eagle in spring migration in Nova Scotia and New Brunswick. They have even started to winter regularly here in places like Martinique Beach N.S. and Albert County in southeastern N.B.

The Atlas now has tantalizing reports of birds summering in the two provinces. Most notably in the Cape Breton Highlands, south of Antigonish and in the highlands of northwestern N.B. Seeing as how they nest as close to Maine, it seems only a matter of time until a nest is found.

With this in mind, I have contacted Michael Lucey of Bangor, Maine, who is working on a paper concerning the history of the Golden Eagle in that state. I asked him for pointers on finding the nests of these elusive birds, and here is what he had to say:

"Historically, the 15 or so Maine sites were remote... it is apparent these birds will not or cannot tolerate human disturbance.

"There is no documented evidence to prove so, but it appears that site abandonment has been coincidental with encroaching "civilization". In two cases the building of roads, a railroad, lake development and boating activities.

"And of course in the "old days" birds were shot by farmers and whole family units were collected by "scientists". Anyway, remote interior mountain regions seem to be the preferred habitat here.

"All nest bluffs are in association with some body of water, whether it be lake, river or marsh/bog. Because we don't have the open country found in the west, these birds utilize marshes, clear-cuts and burn-overs for hunting.

"Dr. Spofford (a Golden Eagle specialist) writes: "...the wide open country of the Pleistocene bogs are clearly an opening necessary for this eagle living in forest country," and elsewhere: "...the best foraging area for this site is the extensive bogs."

"The principle diet in these areas are young bitterns and young Great Blue Herons. I don't have a lot on food choice here....adult Great Blue Heron, domestic fowl, rabbits, wood chucks, a crow, a fox caught in a trap, bait in a trap—are some that come to mind.

"Spofford wrote me that every nest he's examined in the East had remains of Great Blue Heron or American Bittern, further enforcing they are dependent on bogs and marshes.

"All nests have been on cliffs with the exception of two alternate nests in trees in New York and Maine. In several instances the bluff was on a mountain that

stood alone above lesser hills. In another case four nests were built on cliffs facing each other across a lake. One pair had three nests on three bluffs surrounding a dead portion of a river.

"Also, Spofford writes that even after several years of non-use the rocks beneath a Golden Eagle nest site are noticeably stained orange or brown. This is no doubt due to the presence of lichens that thrive on the nitrogen-rich droppings."

AN ENDEMIC BIRD FOR THE MARITIMES?

There are very few birds indeed whose core range occurs in the Maritime Provinces. Actually, I can't think of any right off the top of my head that might qualify. Most birds with ranges that overlap the Maritimes are also found more commonly to the south or north of us.

However, that may all change if Dr. Joe T. Marshall can convince the American Ornithologist's Union (AOU) to resurrect the "Bicknell's Thrush", formerly a subspecies of the Gray-cheeked Thrush. In a letter dated Dec. 31 to Region 2 coordinator Dave Christie, (who led Joe to an enclave of Gray-cheeked Thrushes in June 1988) Joe says he is now confident the Bicknell's is a distinct species.

"My study has now developed to where I can definitely say that *Catharus bicknelli* is a distinct species based on song and morphology," says Joe. "In independent studies, Allan Phillips is recognizing it as a species on morphology (form and structure) for his Volume 2 of "Known Birds", and Henri Ouellet (of the National Museum of Canada) has found the biochemical evidence for a big species difference genetically from the nominate race *minimus*.

"I have to get the AOU committee to see the light too, and I would be extremely gratified if you people of the Atlas would quit calling it "Gray-cheeked Thrush." It has a gray cheek indeed, but so does the Veery. Furthermore, it is endangered and I'm working on that aspect, going to Dominican Republic in February to see how it's winter range is (being) clobbered.

"It is your ONLY ENDEMIC MARITIME SPECIES and I'll sure appreciate your continued support in studying it and trying to get the USA to cut out the acid rain that affects its mountain top habitat in New England. I could not find it along the north

shore of the Gulf of St. Lawrence last June — where it used to breed, but the habitat is still good!"

It thus appears there are fairly optimistic grounds to believe that most of the remaining range of the Bicknell's Thrush is in the northeastern part of North America, specifically the Maritimes. It therefore seems only proper that this endangered species be recognized before it possibly goes extinct. Stay tuned.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

December 12, 1989

It certainly is that time of year. I can tell this by the countless quarts of sunflower seeds feeding "all my children." It is certainly worth it when you see someone new, or strange or just sometimes the regulars. I have a Yellow-rumped Warbler with me this year and I am not sure what it is eating, but there is lots should it decide to stay.

At our Pine Lake camp last July, we were sitting at the table saying that whereas Gray Jays nest early, it would be hard to confirm then as early as other summer birds. No sooner had that remark left my mouth when I heard all this squawking and racket, and "bingo", there they were! The parents had brought their two begging young to our "dump", and proceeded to feed them mouthfuls of bread.

Over the years, the Blue Jays have at times taken over my feeders. No problem. They always used to warn me if a hawk was in the area and I would go outside to scare it off. Lately, the jays have taken to making a racket just for fun and to scare off any other birds that happen to be at the feeder, so they can have it all to themselves.

The other day there must have been 10 Blue Jays and an assortment of others at the feeder, the jays "pigging out", of course. A tiny little chickadee flew from the hedge with all its might just a squeaking and cleaned the whole lot of them out — Blue Jays first, then proudly settled in to feed. It was quite a sight, just a little getting even I guess.

Sincerely,
Rebecca Ellis,
Bear River, N.S.

February, 15/90

When I set up the bird feeder at the beginning of last season, a pair of Blue Jays were soon coming regularly to feed off the sunflower seeds. Then came the time when they would stuff their crops full to overflowing and fly off with them to the spruce woods which border the top of the rise behind our house. They invariably came from that direction also.

Later on in the summer they would have two squawking youngsters following them that would sit in the little spruce tree a few yards from the feeder. It was up against the front step balustrade and I was able to watch over the ensuing days how they were 'weaned' to feed themselves.

Finally there were up to eight jays coming (I did not ever observe more than that number around the feeder at one time) so I thought maybe a second family had joined them. By that time they all looked like adult birds and I couldn't distinguish the "originals" as there was much coming and going and squabbles of the 'pecking order' variety.

My son, Gerry (Lunn), phoned me to ask if I would let you have the preceding information, since it was on these observations that he categorized the Blue Jay as breeding in this area.

Although I do not now have the same means/ability/conditions or whatever to do much birdwatching nowadays, birds have been and always will be my 'first love' of God's creations. Any bird song or wing flutter automatically gets my attention still!

This stems from the wonderful grounding we had when we lived in Ontario, particularly in one home where we were able to do extensive banding on our property of many species. A nice variety nested, including the Blue Jay, and I well remember when Dalton Muir, the famous photographer, came to record the young being fed at the nest.

I miss the abundance of birds we used to enjoy so much in Ontario; but here I can be thrilled any day by the sight of a Bald Eagle soaring up into the blue, being harried by a raven, or in winter, sitting out on the harbour ice. With or without companions — or catching a fish and planing off with it to the forest — ever on majestic wing as it has often been described.

That eagle has made one Biblical scripture very real to me: "But they that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings as eagles; they shall run, and not be weary; they shall walk, and not faint." (Isaiah 40:31).

Sincerely,
Gwendolen C. Lunn,
Louisbourg, N.S.

RULE OF THUMB

Both of the above letters were sent in response to inquiries about certain breeding codes used in relation to the Blue Jay and the Gray Jay. Whenever someone uses the code 'AY' for jays or crows, we have to wonder what was actually seen, because crows and jays often carry food for themselves, either to eat elsewhere or to store for future use.

So remember, if you see adult jays, crows, ravens or other birds with their young in tow, use the 'FL' code instead. As soon as the young are old enough to leave the nest, they are considered fledged (FL), even if the parent birds are still feeding them.

Letter from Yellowknife

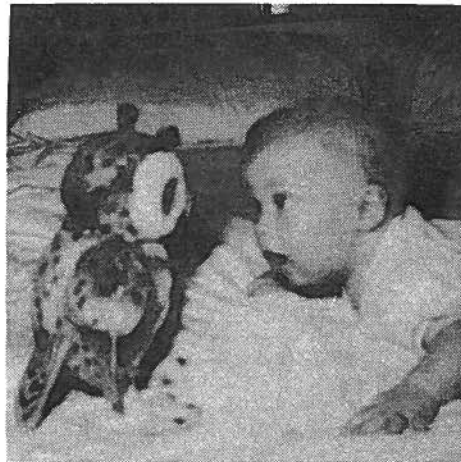
Your fall newsletter was re-routed to me by Canada Post, which reminded me that I hadn't sent a change of address card to you. My wife and I enjoy receiving news from home and, after finally doing some

atlassing in the Sandy Cove area of Digby County in 1989 (hope this was of some value to the project), are interested in the progress of the Atlas.

Birding in the North during winter is quite different than what we are used to in Halifax and Digby counties. For example, we took part in the Yellowknife Christmas count and only found 3 species — raven, house sparrow and willow ptarmigan. The entire group of 16 birders, who braved -37C temperatures that day, only combined for nine species.

Many of these were found in one small area which included a dump. This will change in May, when Great Slave Lake serves as a staging area for birds awaiting ice-breakup before heading further north. I'm happy to hear that 1989 was a successful year.

Sincerely,
Andre d'Entremont,
Yellowknife, NWT.



Guess whooo? A chance encounter at any early age may have been responsible for your atlas coordinator's lifelong fascination with birds, especially owls.

ARE YOU FINDING ANY OWLS?

Since I began my position as Atlas Coordinator some 18 months ago, I have distributed almost 100 cassette tapes of owl vocalizations to interested parties.

However, almost no one has written back to tell me of any success they have had in attracting owls. If you got a tape and have had the good fortune of locating an owl, or owls, would you PLEASE let me know?

I did not go to all that time and effort to raise money for the Atlas. Indeed, we only broke even. My hope was that you would inform me of your success.

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