

# Maritimes Breeding Bird Atlas NEWSLETTER

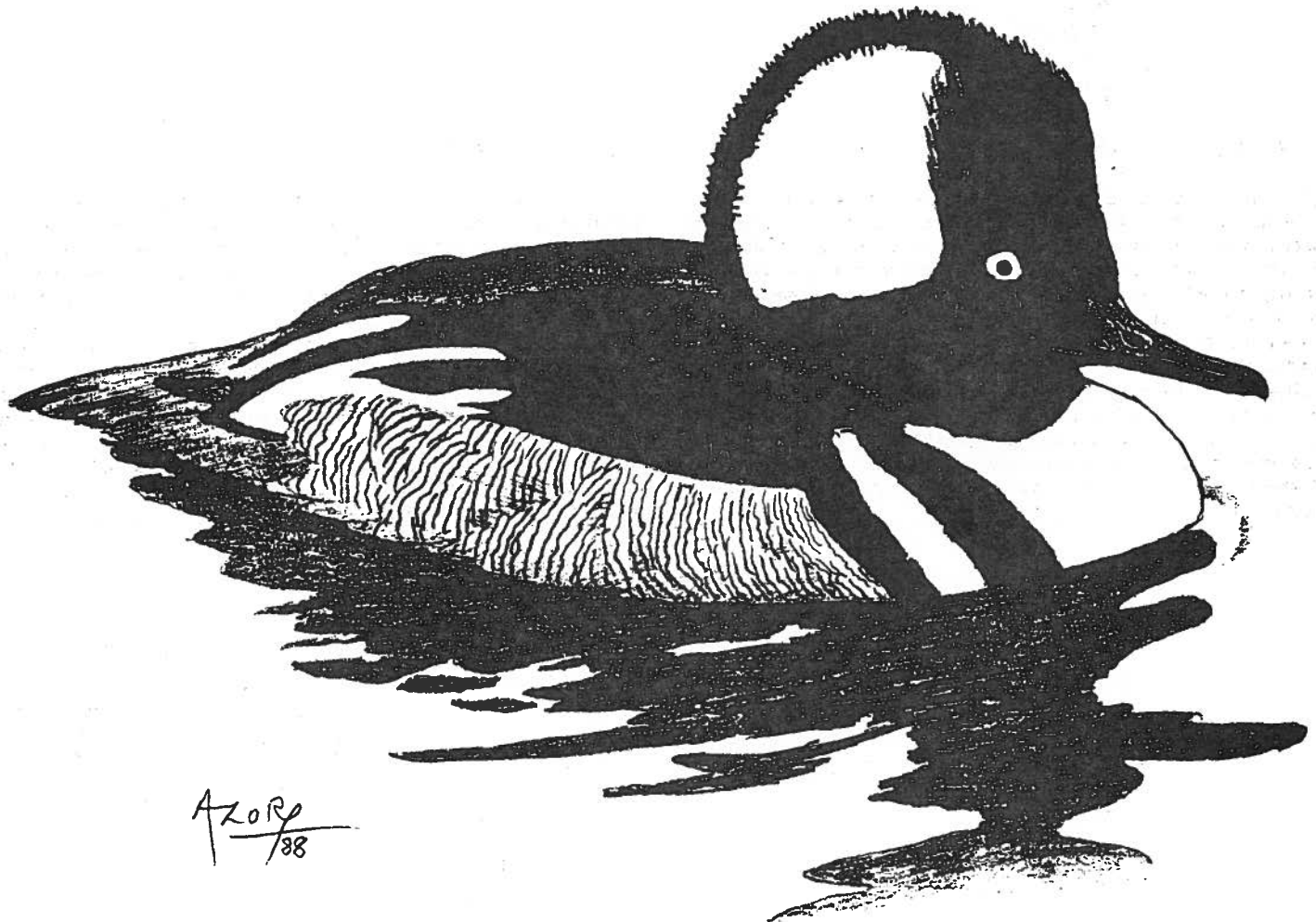


The Maritimes Breeding Bird Atlas is sponsored by the Nova Scotia Museum and the Canadian Wildlife Service, Atlantic Region.

No. 18

Editor: Brian Dalzell

Summer, 1989



## 1986-1988 PRELIMINARY RANGE MAPS

Here, as promised in the last newsletter, is a special collection of preliminary range maps from the first three years of the Maritimes Breeding Bird Atlas. This is sort of a "quick and dirty" issue, as things are very busy here at the office, so please excuse the poor quality of the maps and the computer-generated typeface.

The maps chosen for this issue are all very interesting, and they should serve as sort of a visual reward for all your hard work. From experience I know there is nothing more frustrating than volunteering data for years and seeing it disappear into a black hole, not

knowing what has become of it or how it is being used -- if at all.

Fear not, every sighting you send in will appear on our final maps. One word of caution, these are preliminary maps only and their main function is to help us look for errors, either yours or ours.

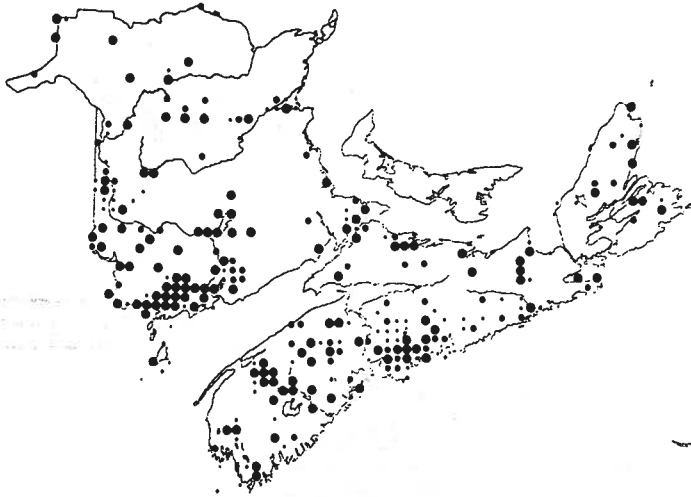
For instance, you will notice Piping Plover as confirmed near Woodstock, N.B. The atlaser probably meant to put down Killdeer, which is on the line just below Piping Plover.

They should also serve as working maps. If you know where any of these species breed and they are still not on the map and you haven't reported them, now would be a good time. You can even look for them next year during your travels.

The season just past has been very productive and all of you deserve a pat on the back. In the next newsletter I will go into more detail on some of the interesting discoveries made this summer, but in the meantime, I will just list them.

Species that made news in 1989 (in no particular order) are: Least Bittern, Green-backed Heron, Gadwall, Redhead, Ruddy Duck, Red-shouldered Hawk, Peregrine Falcon, Merlin, Common Moorhen, Wilson's Phalarope, Solitary Sandpiper, Boreal Owl, Willow Flycatcher, Rough-winged Swallow, Sedge Wren, Eastern Bluebird, Brown Thrasher, Pine Warbler, Indigo Bunting, Fox Sparrow, House Finch, Turkey, Warbling Vireo, Cardinal and Blue-gray Gnatcatcher.

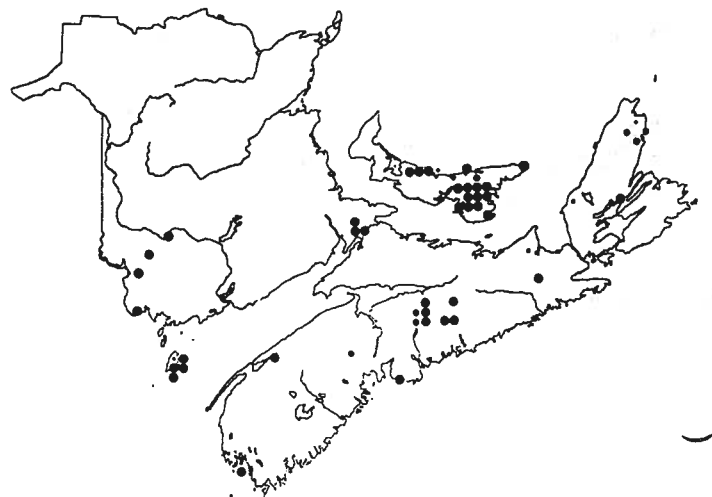
Reminder: Data Cards must be sent to your Regional Coordinator by August 31. Please make their job, and ours, easier by meeting this deadline.



COMMON LOON TO 1988

The haunting cry of the loon is one of the quintessential calls of the wild, and the species seems in no immediate danger of disappearing from the Maritimes. It is concentrated in SW New Brunswick and most of Nova Scotia where there is an abundance of glacially-carved lakes, but is absent from P.E.I. Elsewhere in eastern North America, acid rain sterilization and recreational use by man (power boats) have excluded loons from many of their traditional lakes.

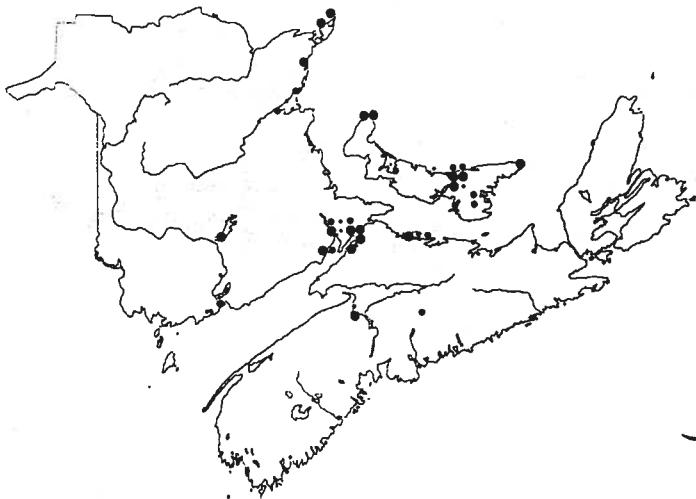
This is also starting to happen here, so now is the time to take steps to ensure a healthy loon population into the next century. It occurs on many more lakes than are shown here. If you have nesting loons at your summer home on a lake, or know of any nesting loons not shown here, let us know so we can compile a more complete picture.



CANADA GOOSE TO 1988

The wariest of waterfowl, the "honker" or "Canada's", as they are known to sportsmen, are a fairly recent addition to the avifauna of the Maritimes. Most people are familiar with them during spring and fall migration, when their long V-formations and urgent honking send a chill of excitement up one's spine -- a sure sign of the changing seasons.

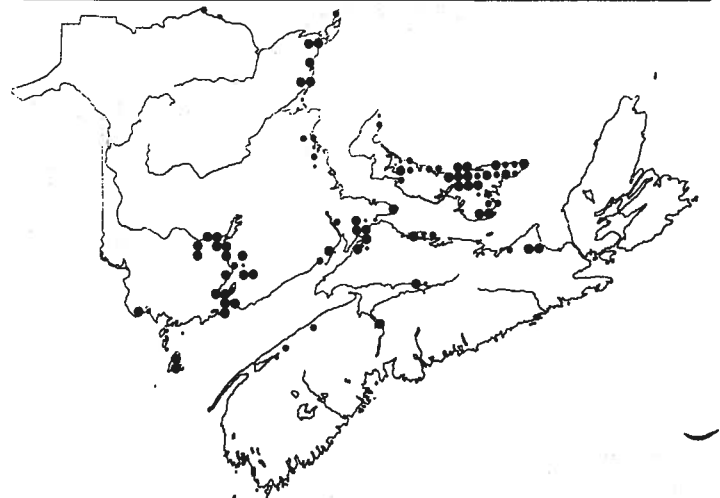
Our present population originates with escapees from various private collections, such as the Shubenacadie Wildlife Park in Nova Scotia, or deliberate introductions such as those made in the Cape Breton highlands by the N.S. Department of Lands and Forests. Injured wild birds have augmented these flocks as well. Proof of their adaptability is found in the Grand Manan Archipelago at the mouth of the Bay of Fundy, where they raise their young in the ocean like eiders.



NORTHERN PINTAIL TO 1988

More at home on prairie ponds and sloughs, the pintail was apparently always rare here until the late 1930s and 1940s, when deliberate attempts were made to enhance waterfowl habitat in the region. They are most common in the lower Saint John River valley, the N.B.- N.S. border region and throughout P.E.I., but have spread to a few other areas, notably the Acadian Peninsula of New Brunswick.

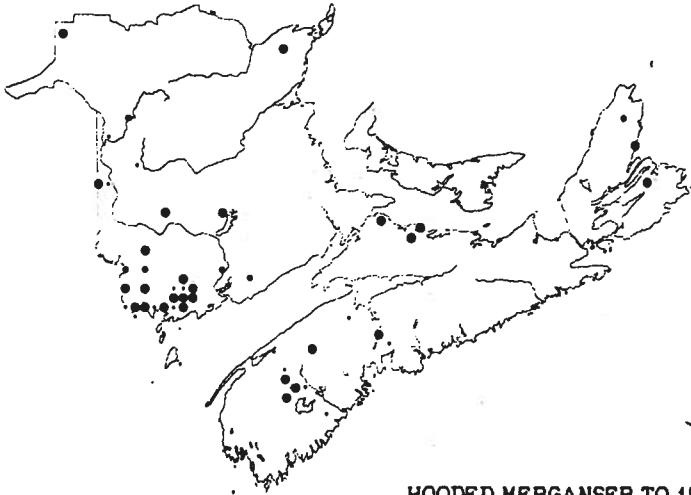
With the construction of more prairie-like marshes by Ducks Unlimited in this region, it can be expected to increase slightly in numbers. At present, it is estimated there are about 1,100 pairs in New Brunswick, 600 in Nova Scotia and 700 in Prince Edward Island. The elegant drake with its long tail streamer is second in size only to the Black Duck and Mallard among our native dabbling ducks.



AMERICAN WIGEON TO 1988

The wigeon, or "baldpate" as it was formerly known, is another western duck that has increased dramatically in this region during the past few years, starting in the late 1950s and early 1960s. During the latter decade it staged a spectacular increase in New Brunswick, with the first breeding record in 1961. Their habitat requirements are not as strict as that of the Pintail, and they commonly nest in places such as flooded gravel pits and small sewage ponds.

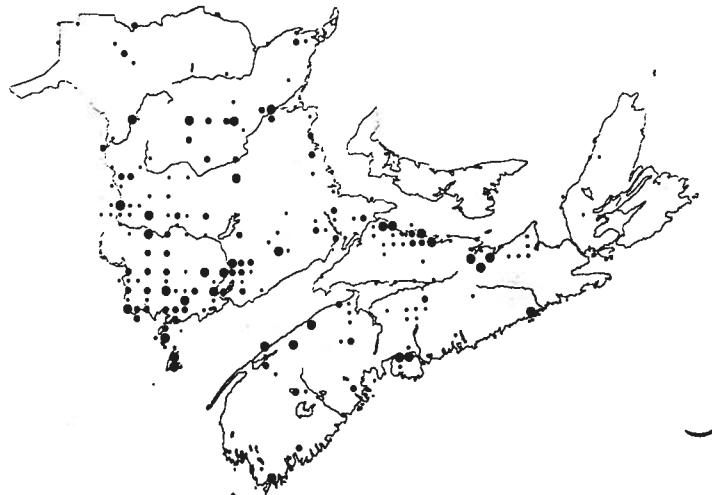
Some of the Nova Scotia population may have originated as escapes from the Shubenacadie Wildlife Park. It has also found P.E.I. much to its liking, with its many small farm ponds and freshwater marshes. A first breeding record for Cape Breton was found near Baddeck in 1988, but does not yet show on the map. There are an estimated 2,800 pairs currently nesting in the Maritimes.



HOODED MERGANSER TO 1988

The smallest and rarest of our three breeding species of mergansers, the handsome "Hoodie" is on the increase here. Unlike the other two mergansers (Common and Red-breasted), it rises quickly from the water and is particularly swift in flight. It was always rare in New Brunswick, but has been increasing since the 1940s, and is most common in the SW of the province. In the north, it is sometimes shot along with the Common Merganser by anglers and game wardens -- accused of eating salmon parr.

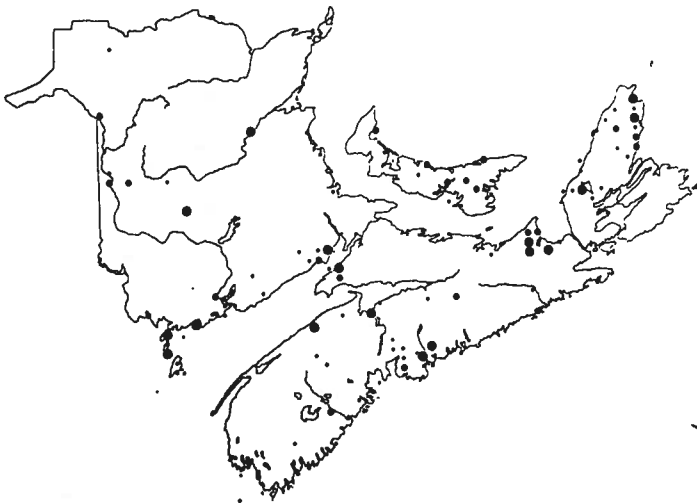
In Nova Scotia, the first recorded nesting was in 1962 on the Shelburne River in Queens County. It is still most common in the southwest, but is spreading, particularly in northern Nova Scotia and Cape Breton. It may breed on P.E.I., but current evidence is inconclusive. It is partial to tiny lakes and beaver ponds, and has benefited from the construction of small Ducks Unlimited impoundments.



BROAD-WINGED HAWK TO 1988

This is our smallest, and along with the Red-tailed Hawk, our most common and easily observed buteo, at least in New Brunswick and Nova Scotia. It has certainly increased in recent years in Nova Scotia, and with several observations on Prince Edward Island this summer it appears to have finally crossed the strait and may now nest there.

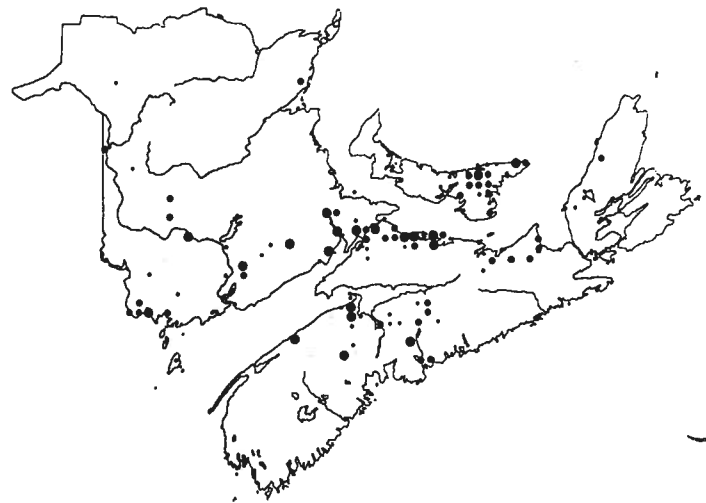
As many as 3,000 have been seen exiting Nova Scotia via Brier Island in early October over a two-day period, so there are probably good numbers nesting in the province. However, it is possible many of these birds originate in New Brunswick. This species prefers to nest in hardwood stands, often in the vicinity of a watercourse or lake, and in the interior of northern N.B. where clearcuts and conifers predominate, "Broad-wings" are restricted to such habitat.



MERLIN TO 1988

Here is a good example of a species about which little was known concerning its breeding range in the Maritimes before the Atlas. It was known to nest at scattered sites along the coasts of Prince Edward Island and Nova Scotia, as well as Cape Breton Island, but had yet to be confirmed in New Brunswick. That has now changed.

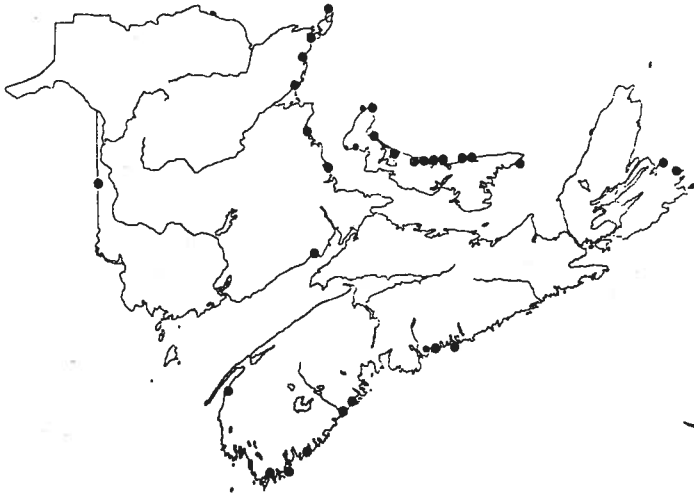
As can be seen from the map, it is more widespread than was thought, especially in New Brunswick, where we now (1989) have at least a dozen confirmed nestings. It is thought the Merlin is rebounding from DDT problems similar to those that led to the demise of the Peregrine Falcon. The "Pigeon Hawk", as it used to be known, is surprisingly tolerant of human activity, having been found nesting during the current Atlas in wooded parks within urban areas such as Halifax, Antigonish, Moncton and Fredericton.



SORA TO 1988

This diminutive marsh bird is more often heard than seen, and a lot of atlasers are unfamiliar with its call. A high-pitched descending whinny, somewhat reminiscent of that of a horse, is its most distinctive vocalization. It is surprisingly widespread in the Maritimes in its preferred habitat -- freshwater marshes with plenty of cattails. Sometimes, a taped call will draw the bird out of cover during the day, but more often at night.

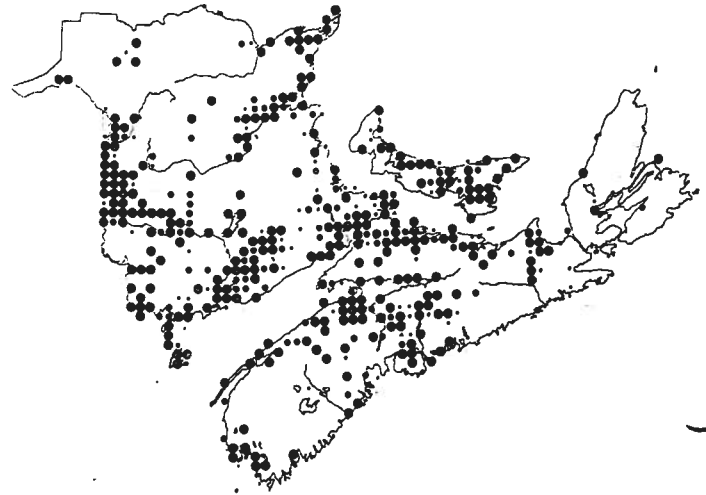
It is most common in the marshes along the N.B.-N.S. border and on P.E.I., but can be found in almost any good-sized marsh in the Maritimes, and also in some very small ones. It has even been found in the highlands of Cape Breton and is known to nest in southwestern Newfoundland. When defending territory, Soras have been known to "attack" tape recorders (set on the ground) issuing their calls.



PIPING PLOVER TO 1988

Unless efforts currently underway here to exclude humans and animal predators from their nesting sites during the breeding season are successful, this species could be virtually extinct in the Maritimes by the year 2000. Because man prefers the same sandy beaches for his recreational pursuits as the plover does for breeding, it is being relentlessly driven from our beaches.

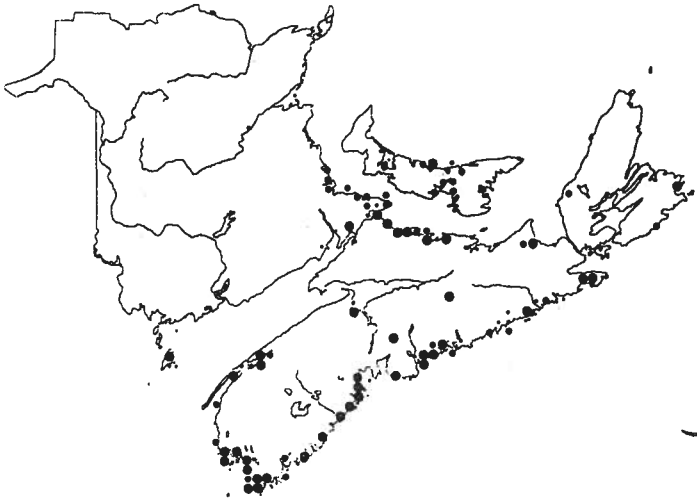
Good results have been obtained by park wardens at the beach adjunct of Kejimikujik National Park using wire enclosures to protect Piping Plover nests. If you would like a copy of their study, I have several on hand. Roland Chiasson (et al) of Antigonish in a 1986 study lists 84 known nesting locations in the Maritimes for this species, so our map is far from complete. We could really use your observations of breeding Piping Plovers.



KILLDEER TO 1988

This large plover is most at home on open areas such as airports, athletic fields, gravel roofs, beaches, golf courses, plowed fields, rail yards, pastures, gravel pits -- you name it, there are probably Killdeers there. It is also the easiest shorebird to confirm, giving a "broken wing" distraction display (DD) whenever young or the nest is nearby, thus explaining the large number of confirmations.

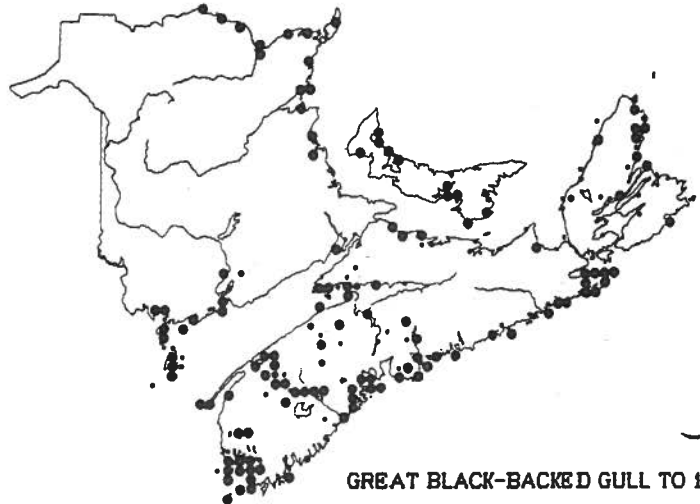
Providing its basic habitat requirement of open areas is met, it can obviously accept many variations on the theme. During fieldwork in the deep forest interior of northern New Brunswick this past summer, I also found it in almost any cutover where earth-moving equipment had laid bare large patches of ground. Unlike the Piping Plover, the Killdeer has certainly benefited from its association with man.



WILLET TO 1988

If it is possible, here is a member of the shorebird family that is even noisier than the Killdeer. It needs little provocation to bombard an intruder with a rapid barrage of "pill-will-willet, pill-will-willet!", and it is often joined in this pursuit by several others of its kind. Found along the coasts of Nova Scotia, Prince Edward Island, and still expanding up the Gulf of St. Lawrence shore in New Brunswick, this species has staged quite a comeback.

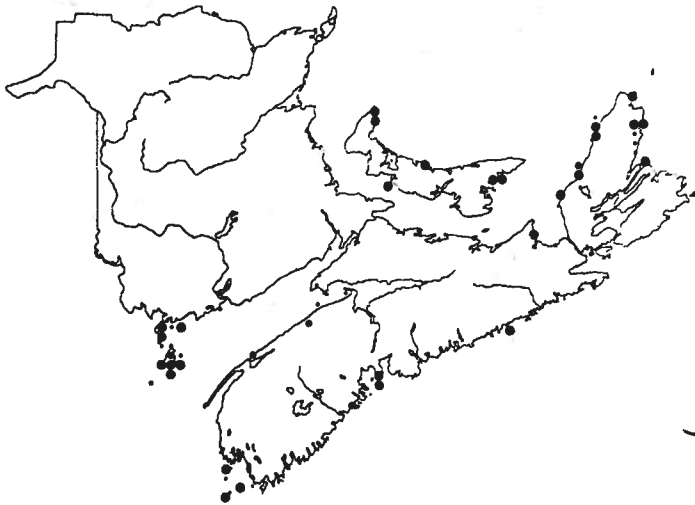
Because of its penchant for harrying intruders, it made a target impossible to resist for early gunners, and was almost wiped out along the East Coast by the early 1900s. Protected by law, this flashy shorebird has gradually built its numbers up, and over the past 30 years has made a complete recovery. For a change, a tale with a happy ending in this era of far too many wildlife horror stories.



GREAT BLACK-BACKED GULL TO 1988

Larger and more aggressive than the Herring Gull, it is hard to say anything good about this larid, except that it consumes copious amounts of garbage we conveniently provide for it. On the negative side, the "Black-back" is hard on other species of marine birds, especially Common Eiders, terns and puffins. Sometimes called the "Farmer gull" by fishermen, it can decimate eider colonies by eating the ducklings when natural food is low. It also displaces terns from their traditional nesting sites and pirates food from incoming puffins intent on feeding their young.

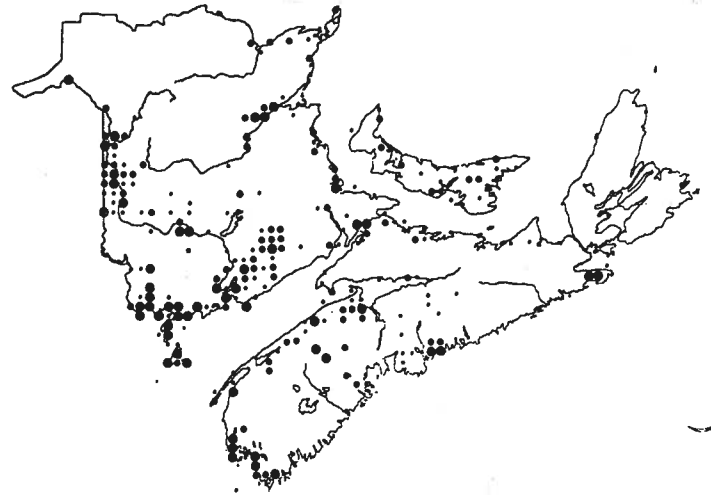
It is much more likely to nest inland on large lakes with small islets than the Herring Gull, which the map clearly shows for Nova Scotia. In New Brunswick there are few lakes which meet these requirements. Where Herring and Black-backs nest together, the latter species soon takes over the best sites, relegating the former to less desirable ones, as is happening on Bon Portage Island off southwestern Nova Scotia.



BLACK GUILLEMOT TO 1988

Our smallest and most common breeding alcid in the Maritimes, the guillemot is found in a wide variety of habitats along our shores. On Kent Island in the Bay of Fundy it nests under large boulders on the beach just above the high tide mark. On nearby Grand Manan Island, it nests hundreds of feet above the ocean in crevices in the sheer basalt cliffs. On P.E.I. it is found nesting among the low sandstone cliffs. It is even found in the turbid waters near the Minas Basin at Cape Split.

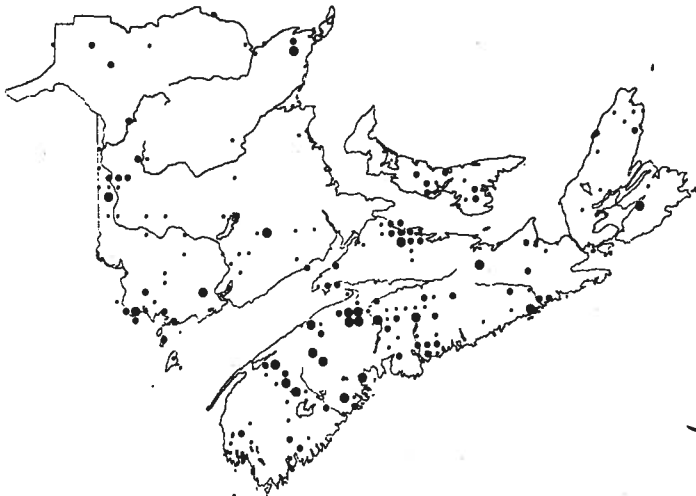
The guillemot is a year-round resident in the region, and is easily seen from shore riding out the pounding surf, quite at home on rocky shores. It is one of the toughest of seabirds, and regularly winters into the high arctic wherever there is open water. Often known as the "sea pigeon", it can also excavate burrows in the soil for its nest, a report which Robie Tufts passes on from Inner Bald Island off southwestern Nova Scotia in 1956.



MOURNING DOVE TO 1988

The fortunes of this gentle bird appear to have taken a turn for the better in this region over the past 30 years, to the point where 500+ were reported from Christmas Bird Count circles in Wolfville and Fredericton last year. It is restricted almost entirely to the vicinity of settled areas, seldom being found far from human habitation. It is marginally adapted to our northern winters, which has enabled it to get an earlier start on nesting every year over the past decade.

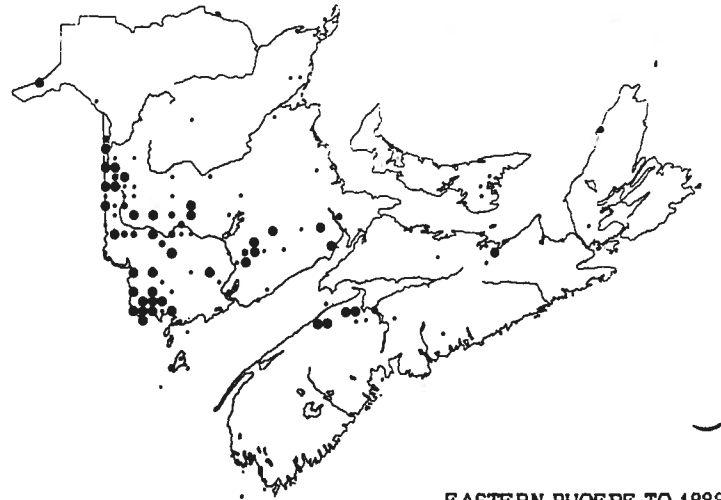
There are several reports of Mourning Doves at winter feeders lacking toes and feet lost to frostbite, which they are ill-equipped to cope with. All indications point to a continued steady increase in the population here, and it is starting to make inroads even in Cape Breton and northern New Brunswick. Surprisingly, it is shot as a game bird in most U.S. states, which may account in part for its seeming timidity.



BARRED OWL TO 1988

Of all the owls in the Maritimes, this species and the Great Horned Owl have been reported most often during the Atlas. Still, it is known from other Atlas projects that owls are notoriously underreported, due to their nocturnal habits. During the period from March to May, the Barred responds quite readily to imitations or tapes of its call and can be found with relative ease in suitable habitat. Its call, which sounds roughly like "Who-who, who cooks for you?" is also rather distinctive.

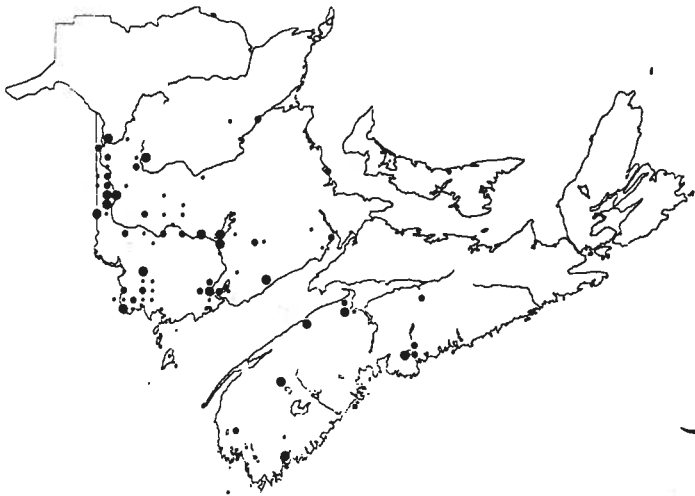
For nesting and hunting, it prefers areas with old growth hardwood, but will tolerate a certain amount of intermixed conifers. It seems that natural nesting cavities and hollow stubs are at a premium these days, as it will use specially-constructed nest boxes placed in suitable habitat for this purpose. Some atlasers have even reported nests within sight of their homes, further reinforcing the cavity shortage possibility.



EASTERN PHOEBE TO 1988

Certainly much more common here than in pre-settlement days, the phoebe has benefited from its adaptability to manmade nesting sites such as bridges and buildings. The Atlas has already shed considerable light on its present range in the Maritimes, showing its core range in the Saint John River valley of New Brunswick. The first nesting record for Nova Scotia was in 1963 at Carleton in Yarmouth County. It is still uncommon in the province, being found most often in the Annapolis Valley.

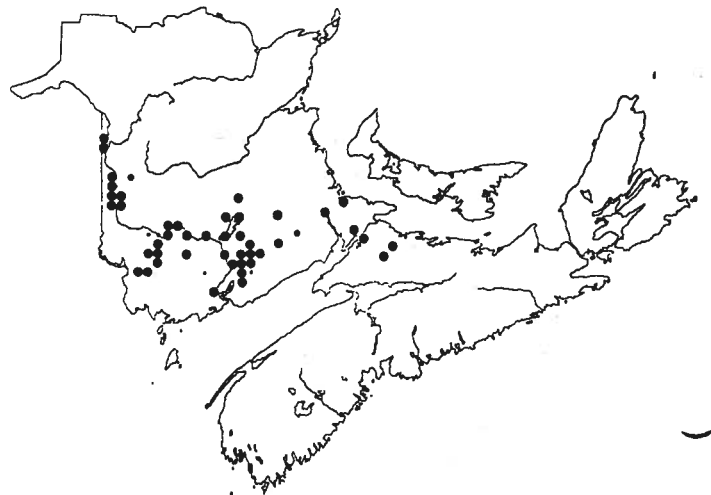
The phoebe often appears far beyond the limits of its range and stakes out a territory, usually failing to attract a mate. This may explain the two dots shown in Cape Breton. However, should a male be successful in attracting a female in such situations, they usually nest. The picture is still unclear for P.E.I. where there have been several more reports of birds in suitable habitat this year (1989), but still no confirmations. It may also nest in the Acadian Peninsula of New Brunswick.



GREAT-CRESTED FLYCATCHER TO 1988

Atlassing has shown this large and colorful flycatcher to be rather common in parts of New Brunswick and Nova Scotia. Notice how similar the map is to that of the Eastern Phoebe. Its call is often mistaken for that of the Evening Grosbeak, but with practice, can be easily picked out. It is found most often in hardwood areas near streams, rivers, lakes or beaver ponds, where it nests in old flicker holes or occasionally in nest boxes.

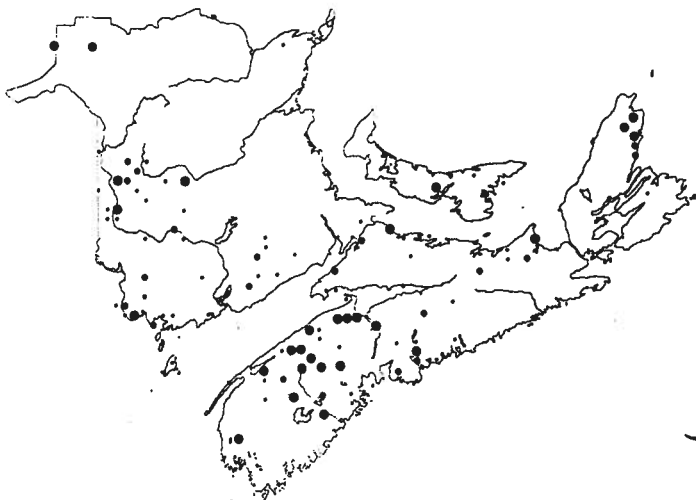
It is a recent arrival in Nova Scotia, having first been confirmed nesting near Halifax in 1956, where there is apparently a localized breeding population. There are as yet no good records from P.E.I. The Great-crested Flycatcher can — true to its family name — be a tyrant at times, vigorously defending its territory from many species (besides its own), and even rarely killing smaller birds.



PURPLE MARTIN TO 1988

Many are the birdwatchers who would love to have a colony of these, our largest native swallow, on their premises. So dependent has this species become on man for its nesting requirements, that it is no longer found nesting in natural cavities in eastern North America. A few still use old woodpecker holes on the West Coast though. In the Maritimes it is almost entirely restricted to the Saint John River valley in New Brunswick and around Moncton, being almost gone from Nova Scotia.

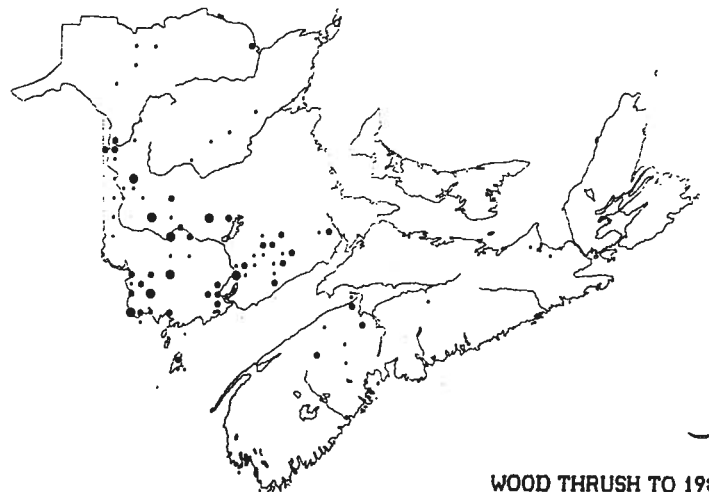
The species is very susceptible to extended periods of cold, damp weather and high mortality occurs in some springs. At present, there are small colonies in Amherst, Oxford and Collingwood in northern Nova Scotia, but many years ago it was known to nest in Truro, Shubenacadie and Windsor. Any reports of active colonies would be greatly appreciated.



WHITE-BREADED NUTHATCH 1988

Appears to be more common in Nova Scotia than in New Brunswick. This nuthatch is found exclusively in hardwood forests, which explains its relative absence in P.E.I., where such habitat is few and far between. It should still be reported from several other areas of Nova Scotia and New Brunswick that have yet to be atlased, but perhaps it is being underreported because of confusion with the Red-breasted Nuthatch which has a similar call.

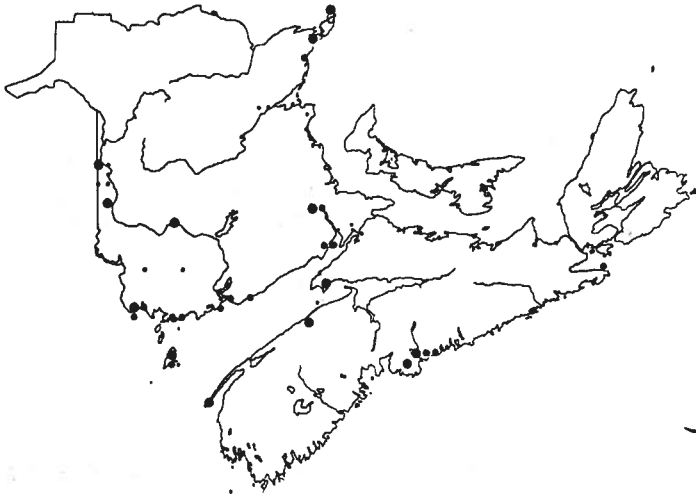
The records from northern Cape Breton were thought to be in error but are quite valid, there being plenty of hardwood habitat in that area. As well, experienced atlasers on Prince Edward Island this summer were able to locate several more birds in Queens County to go along with the confirmation in Charlottetown in 1986. It should be found in summer wherever it is found in winter, so if you have them at your feeder during the winter months, keep an eye and an ear open for them next spring.



WOOD THRUSH TO 1988

This woodland thrush is a bird of the 20th century in the Maritimes, not known to have nested here prior to about 1918, when a nest was found in St. Stephen, N.B. It was rare even in southern Maine in 1908, so it must have moved rather rapidly in our direction. However, it was not until the 1950s that its population in New Brunswick really started to increase. It is still rare in Nova Scotia, where the first nest was found at Kejimikujik National Park in 1973. The two records near Antigonish may be in error, and require further scrutiny.

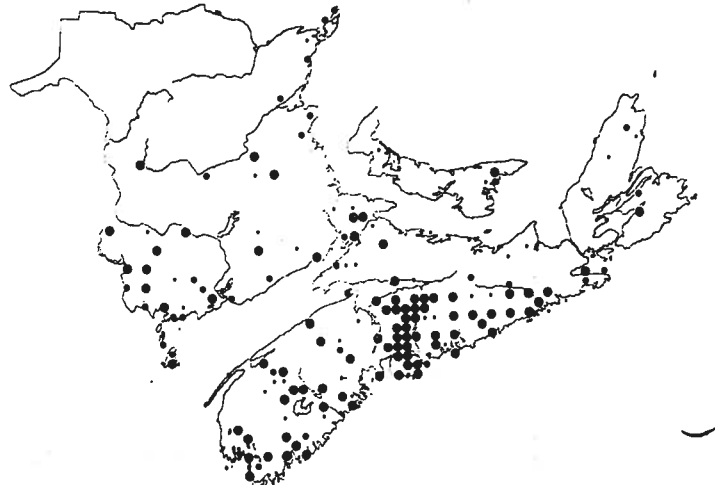
The habitat preference for the invading Wood Thrush lies in between that of the Veery and the Hermit Thrush. Studies in Maine have shown that the socially dominant Wood Thrush has displaced the latter two species, moving the Hermit Thrush into relatively dry situations, and the Veery into damp deciduous forests. Where they occur together, all three species should coexist if there is sufficient habitat ranging from dry to wet woodlands.



**NORTHERN MOCKINGBIRD TO 1988**

The mockingbird appears to be a most enigmatic species if one has ever found it on its breeding grounds in the southern United States. Having met with it in the dry Mesquite and brush country of south Texas, I find it constantly amazing this accomplished mimic can withstand our cruel winters. But withstand it does, often with temperatures down to  $-30^{\circ}\text{C}$  or less. Maybe that is why they decided to call it the Northern Mockingbird.

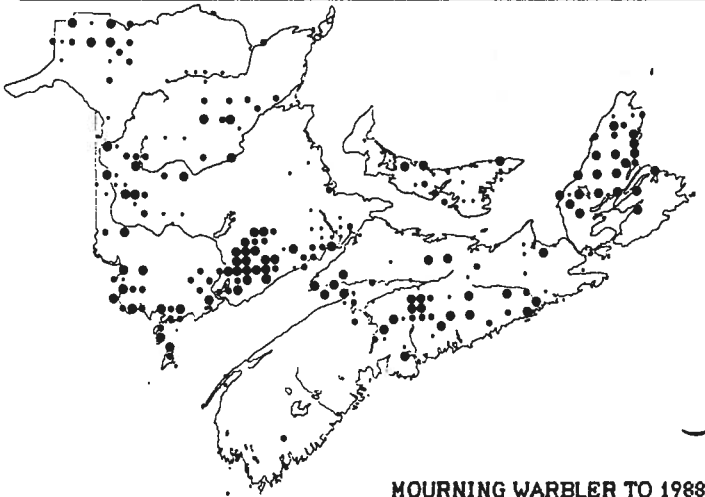
Its expansion into this area may have been natural vagrancy, but the presence of Multiflora Rose (with its hips) ensured it would have a winter food supply to see it through the year. Good numbers exist around urban centers such as Moncton, Halifax-Dartmouth and Fredericton. It has recently (1988) nested on the Magdalen Islands so should nest on P.E.I., and nests at Glace Bay in Cape Breton but no one there has yet reported it to the Atlas. Look for it in spring and summer wherever it is found wintering.



**PALM WARBLER TO 1988**

If ever there was a misnamed bird, this must be it. Far from nesting in or near Palm trees, this tail-flicking warbler prefers instead the cool, damp bogs so common in parts of the Maritimes. It is one of the first warblers to return in the spring and is rather hardy, occasionally being found on Christmas Bird Counts along the coast of Nova Scotia. As the map shows, its preferred habitat of bogs is most common in that province.

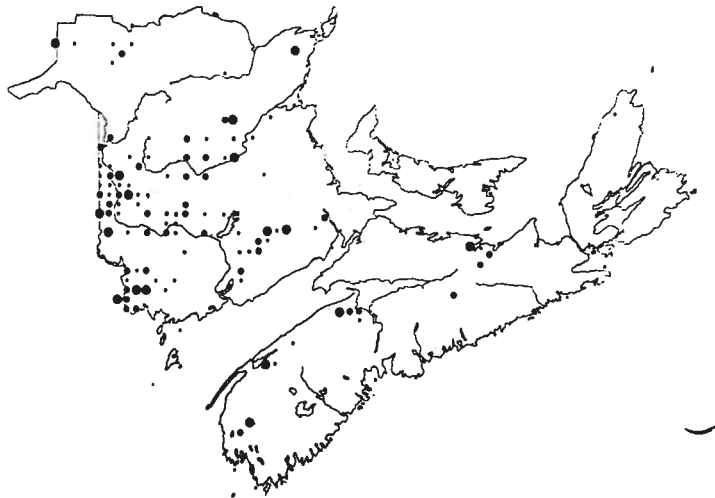
In northern New Brunswick where there are few such bogs, the species is almost totally absent. It is one of our more colorful warblers, with a bright rufous cap and mostly yellow plumage, but its song is an uninspired trill that can be confused with that of the Swamp Sparrow, Dark-eyed Junco or Chipping Sparrow. In parts of New Brunswick, it can often be found nesting in wet sedge under young Jack Pine plantations.



**MOURNING WARBLER TO 1988**

The most striking thing about the range of this species in the Maritimes is its almost total absence from Nova Scotia west of a line drawn from roughly Wolfville to Halifax. Habitat that is apparently suitable occurs there, but some subtle factor may be lacking. What that is remains a mystery. The Mourning Warbler is a bird that thrives in recent forest cutovers or clearings growing up in raspberries or ferns. It will inhabit this kind of cover until it is overgrown with large trees and there are no longer patches of brushy cover.

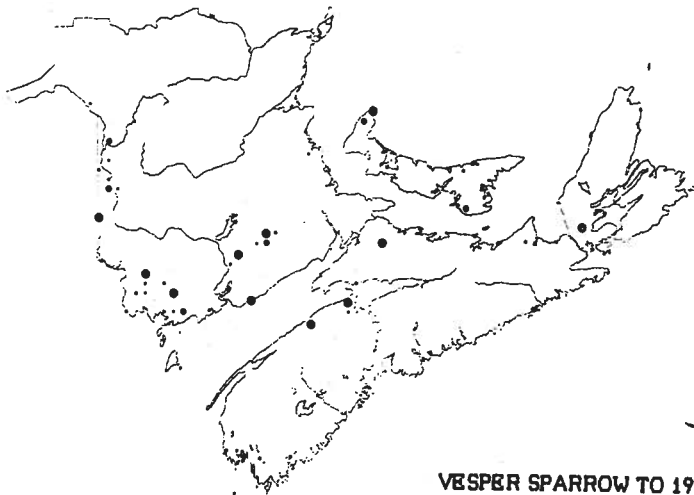
Accordingly, it has done quite well in the wake of today's forestry practices which advocate clearcutting, leaving behind large tracts of stripped land to regenerate into raspberry and other quick-growing bushes. Spruce budworm deforestation also leads to this kind of habitat. A lack of these factors or a combination of them may explain why it has not been found to date in southwestern N.S., despite widespread atlassing in that region.



**SCARLET TANAGER TO 1988**

Perhaps our most brilliantly-plumaged native bird, the male Scarlet Tanager draws gasps of amazement from those seeing it here for the first time. Can such a bird actually nest here? It seems out of place, looking like it would be more at home in the cloud forests of Costa Rica. In stark contrast to the gaudy red-orange of the male, the female is a drab olive-yellow and is often overlooked.

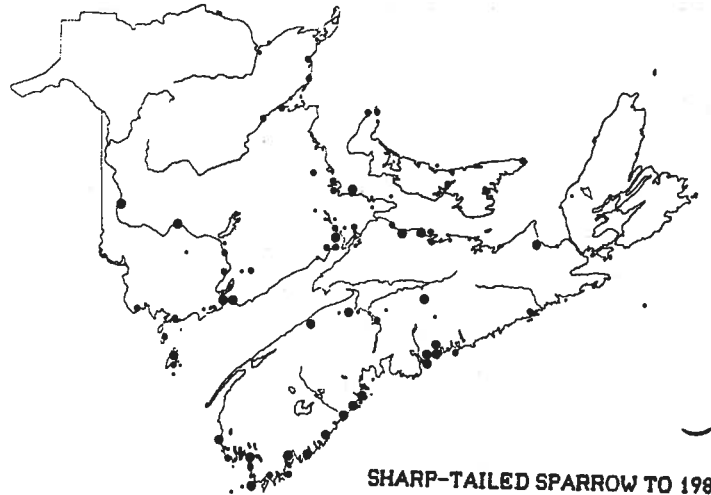
The song sounds like a robin with a sore throat, and can be heard most easily in hardwood forests in New Brunswick, though it seems to be making real progress in Nova Scotia. The "Birds of Nova Scotia" (1986) accords them only vagrant status, so it has either appeared here rather suddenly or was unrecognized as a resident in the past. The records in Canso and the Cape Breton Highlands may represent prospecting males.



VESPER SPARROW TO 1988

Described as one of the commonest sparrows in southern New Brunswick in the late 1890s, this species is certainly on the decline all across the Maritimes and is becoming decidedly uncommon. The main reason for this decline is probably lack of habitat. The Vesper Sparrow finds areas of bare ground or sandy soils with scattered or stunted bushes most to its liking. As old fields revert to forest, this kind of habitat is at a premium.

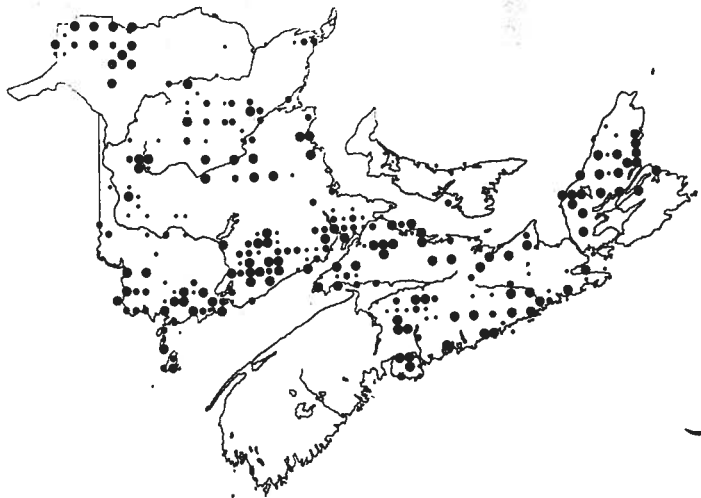
It is still hanging on in the blueberry barrens of southwestern New Brunswick, northern Nova Scotia and P.E.I., and the farming belt of the upper Saint John River valley but elsewhere is rare and local. The prospects for an increase in numbers for the species look dim, unless there is a return to the large-scale forest-clearing for subsistence farming that prevailed here during the 18th and 19th centuries.



SHARP-TAILED SPARROW TO 1988

One of the very few, if not the only bird, that makes its home in the coastal salt marshes of the Atlantic coast. When surprised, the Sharp-tail often prefers to run mouse-like through the grass rather than fly. When it does flush, it usually flies low over the cordgrass before dropping out of sight again. Rather than defend a specific territory, male Sharp-tails have been found to share them with 3-4 other males.

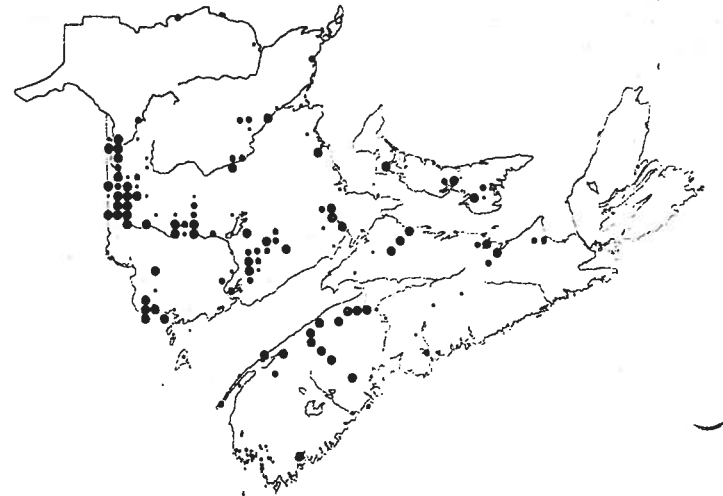
One surprise from atlassing has been the discovery of the extent to which this species is found up the Saint John River from the sea. It had previously been reported from islands in the river above Fredericton 100 miles from the sea. Atlassers in Region 6 turned them up in similar habitat above Woodstock, extending their range another 50 miles or more upriver. It is doubtless more common than shown in P.E.I.



LINCOLN'S SPARROW TO 1988

Compare this map to that of the Mourning Warbler shown earlier. See any similarities? The total absence of this species from southwestern Nova Scotia is most striking. Here again, the reason remains a mystery. The Lincoln's is another successional species which inhabits regenerating conifer forest until the trees reach a certain size, after which it can no longer breed there.

Strangely, it is also found in open bogs with stunted black spruce in New Brunswick, so why it is not found in similar situations which abound in SW Nova Scotia is not clear. It is quite common in northern New Brunswick where it nests in conifer plantations and cutovers.



NORTHERN ORIOLE TO 1988

When it comes to incredibly brilliant plumage, the oriole is the only other Maritime bird in the same league with the Scarlet Tanager. However, it is much more widespread and better known to most birders. It has declined somewhat in recent years as Dutch Elm disease has swept the region, destroying its favorite nesting tree. However, it seems to be adapting to other more marginal species such as maple and poplar. It is absent from Cape Breton.

Note the band of confirmations between Middleton and Bridgewater which follows exactly the path of Highway 10 between those communities. This feature can be seen to a certain extent with other species such as Mourning Dove and Killdeer, and may disappear as other nearby priority squares are completed.

#### MAP LEGEND

- Confirmed Breeding     ●
- Probable Breeding     ●
- Possible Breeding     ●



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