

Gleanings from the Northumberland Bird Database

THE ATLAS THEN AND NOW - 2

By Clive E. Goodwin

Last month I discussed the Northumberland results of the two breeding bird atlases, in 1981-5 and 2001-5 respectively, together with some of the issues surrounding those results. This month we'll look at some of those species that have declined in the 20 years between the two surveys.

Only three species were recorded in '85 that were not found at all on the 2005 survey: Loggerhead Shrike, Henslow's Sparrow and Cape May Warbler. Of these three the warbler is the oddity: it was never expected in our area in the first place. It is a bird of mature coniferous forest with its southern Ontario centre of abundance at that time in Algonquin Park, and all the other atlas records of the species were 150 km. or more north of Northumberland. As such, it would seem to have been a lingering, out-of-range bird, and falls into the same category as the eight such birds from 2005 mentioned last time.

The story of the other two species is a sad one: both are experiencing some of the most serious declines of any North American birds. These declines were already apparent in 1985, although the history of the two in the county is very different.

The shrike is a bird of brushy pastures, and eggs were collected in Northumberland as long ago as 1861, with the species recorded annually in the 1910 decade and subsequently. It never appears to have been very common, as we only have 113 records in all, but birds seemed to have been seen in most of the years prior to 1985. We had 5 records over the atlas period, but interestingly there were no breeding confirmations, and only one pair recorded. Perhaps this was an indication of things to come, as there have been only 16 reports in the subsequent years, and only one nesting. Only some three birds have been reliably reported in the last 10 years.

Henslow's Sparrow, on the other hand, is an elusive bird of heavy grassland. My own main experience with the species was from a survey plot of an old field in King Township in the '60's, where we [the late Gord Bellerby and I] found the birds nesting in the moist depressions, among the dense growth of goldenrods and asters. Here they would sit among the tangled vegetation and sing – a valiant little hiccup, that seemed to require formidable effort to produce! They're now long-gone from King Township and just about everywhere else in the Province, but the 1985 atlas produced a couple of records in Northumberland, although again, no confirmations of nesting. In keeping the bird's inconspicuous character, its history in the county is quite limited. A small colony of some 35 birds was located at Willow Beach in 1953, but we have only 25 records in all, only four since 1985, with one in the last 10 years.

These very dissimilar birds have seemingly little common, but they're both grassland species. And other grassland birds do not seem to be doing very well. Upland Sandpiper

shows the most noticeable decline, with birds confirmed on the first atlas in squares where they now no longer appear. Several species on the 'ambiguous' list are also open country birds: Northern Harrier, American Kestrel, Wilson's Snipe, Horned Lark, Eastern Towhee, Vesper Sparrow and Grasshopper Sparrow. Of these the two hawks, snipe and Vesper Sparrow all show relatively poorer results in the west of the region, a result that, as discussed last time, is strongly suggestive of a decline.

The comparisons also highlight a new problem area, a decline in some insectivorous birds that capture their prey on the wing. Both of the once-familiar nocturnal species, Common Nighthawk and Whip-poor-will, appear to have declined seriously, and Chimney Swift records were down as well. Swallows are very common birds and a decline with them might not show as clearly, because the atlas is not a very good measure of such declines. For a bird to be recorded as confirmed it must be found nesting or with young once during five years in a 10km. square. Barn Swallows, for example, could probably decline by over 50% and still meet these criteria. That said, however, there were in fact two squares on the 2005 atlas where it was not confirmed. This, of course could be quite meaningless, but in the context of declines in other, less common species it cannot be arbitrarily dismissed. In the same vein, the 2005 results for Purple Martin, Northern Rough-winged Swallow and Bank Swallow imply some decline from those of 1985.

Readers may recall the April article on crows. Does the atlas reflect the decline we discussed then? I hadn't expected so, in the light of crows' abundance and conspicuousness, and the relatively recent appearance of West Nile. I had expected to find crows confirmed in all 24 squares on both surveys. They were not: four squares in 2005 were only able to list them as 'probable'.

Waterbirds are a third group where we find problems. I mentioned loons last month. Three herons – both bitterns and Great Blue – also fall into the 'ambiguous' category, with American Bittern showing a distinct decline in the west of the county. Once the most conspicuous marsh bird, Common Moorhen's decline is partly masked by an increase in records from the east, and there were fewer American Coot records in 2005. Black Tern is a waterbird that feeds extensively on the wing, so its insectivorous habits are a likely contributing factor to its serious decline. However, seeming declines in Common Tern may be more a reflection of the health of the Presqu'île colony than a reduction in birds nesting elsewhere.

So for all the ambiguities about coverage and the difficulties the atlas has in detecting declines in commoner species, some disturbing trends emerge among three groups of species. Can we identify any reasons for these problems? Certainly there is an abundance of familiar candidates. Loss of grasslands to reforestation and [increasingly] conversion to arable cropland, changes in farming practices away from more traditional methods, more pervasive pesticide use resulting in fewer insects, and degradation of wetlands doubtless all play a part. But it's too easy to simply attribute declines to a few broad issues. If the experience in the United Kingdom is any guide, while the broad issues may hold the reasons, they're often too broad to be of any value in arresting the losses.

I mention the U.K. because they're much further down this sorry path than we are. Wholesale declines in even some of the most familiar countryside birds, and 'red listing' once-abundant garden species such as House Sparrow, have all combined to capture the national attention. There the research typically has identified a range of causes particular to each species that have led to the bird's decline. Sometimes these causes overlap – what helps Sky Larks, for example, may also help flocks of wintering finches - sometimes they're limited to the one species.

It's a slow, often discouraging business, but sadly there are no 'quick fixes'. But all this is only part of the atlas picture, and next month we will look at those species that have increased since 1985.