

Gleanings from the Northumberland Bird Database

THE ATLAS THEN AND NOW - 3

By Clive E. Goodwin

This is the concluding article on the Northumberland results of the two breeding bird atlases, and this month we'll look at those species that have increased since 1985. Readers who have been following the results so far will recall that many 'increases' seemed to be the result of better coverage on the 2005 atlas. I identified these mainly by the fact that there was often a marked difference in the results between the west and east of the region, with the relatively more remote north-easterly squares having poorer results in 1985.

Results, however, differ by species, and some seem to have increased in Northumberland generally, even if their numbers elsewhere are reported as no more than stable, or even declining [the latest atlas results for Ontario as a whole are not, of course, available at the time of writing]. Better coverage could well still be the explanation for species like the woodland raptors [the three accipiters and Broad-winged Hawk] showing some increases: they are elusive birds, especially near the nest. Similarly with Virginia Rail and Sora, where the added use of tape confirmations could also have helped in 2005. But I'm at a loss to explain why we had almost no Hooded Mergansers on the first atlas, or the reason for a dramatic increase in the number of Alder Flycatcher reports. However, a review of the maps in the 1981-5 atlas suggest that both of these were probably more a reflection of coverage problems locally last time than any real absence.

I don't think the same can be said for the increases in some coniferous woodland species. There are a number: Red-breasted Nuthatch, Blue-headed Vireo, Hermit Thrush, Pine, Yellow-rumped, Black-throated Green, and Blackburnian Warblers, and Purple Finch. All show increases; some, like the vireo, are quite dramatic. It was found in only one square before, while in 2005 it was confirmed in that square and recorded in a further 12. I think it's reasonable to conclude that the maturing of the extensive coniferous reforestation that occurred in the county had created new or improved habitat for a range of species that were previously uncommon or absent. It's possible Winter Wren and Canada Warbler are also part of this group.

Black-throated Blue Warbler is more of an enigma, as it is principally a bird of the understory in mixed and deciduous forest. In 1985 it bred mainly north of a line drawn from the bottom of Georgian Bay eastwards, running just north of the Kawarthas. In 2001 it seemingly expanded dramatically: from no records in the first atlas there were 12, with three confirmed. By 2003 there was something of a retrenchment, and the bird had vanished from a number of the squares where it had initially been found. The atlas cannot show this decline, but it will be interesting to see if the text account picks it up, and indeed what it will have to say.

There is no ambiguity about the increases in Canada Goose, Mute Swan, Wild Turkey and House Finch. All owe their abundance to introductions, either intentional or [in the case of House Finch] accidental. The main goose introductions in Ontario were in the 1960's [one wonders how those responsible view the present situation], the swan has increased from an estimated 1985 atlas total of 120 wild birds, while the turkey had a small population in the east of the county which predated the extensive releases since.

Human agency of a different kind accounts for most of the expansion of the next group of birds – they are all recovering from declines. Their recoveries were already occurring in 1985, and have continued since. Double-crested Cormorants, Ospreys and Bald Eagle had all suffered from eggshell thinning in the DDT era, while Sandhill Crane populations had been extirpated in the south of the Province much earlier. Raven likely falls into this group as well, as it suffered from the practice of baiting predators with poisoned carcasses. The dramatic expansion of Merlin, while it might be partly a result of this species becoming acclimatized to breeding in close proximity to man, also may reflect the cessation of earlier persecution and eggshell thinning.

Global warming is already showing its effects as southerners such as Red-bellied Woodpecker, Carolina Wren, Louisiana Waterthrush, Hooded Warbler and Orchard Oriole are all showing signs of expanding their ranges into the county. Some of these expansions are very preliminary indeed – the waterthrush, for example, had one Probable and one Possible Breeding record, while Hooded Warbler had only three Possibles – but there were no records of either within some 100 km. in 1985. The woodpecker and wren both have longer histories here, but as both are mainly resident birds, they are sensitive to severe winter weather. Red-bellied Woodpeckers were found in three squares on the first atlas. In 2005 we had eight records, including two confirmations, but birds were not found in the three 1985 squares, reflecting the rather impermanent nature of the colonization. Similarly, the three Carolina Wren records in the recent atlas included one confirmation at a location where the species had been present for three years, but it was absent there in 2006-7. No birds were found at all in 1981-5. It seems we can expect colonization by these southerners to be a slow process.

Two other birds whose increases just might be a reflection of our warming weather are Turkey Vulture and Great Egret. I'll be discussing the egret more fully in a coming *Gleanings*, but the vulture was already quite well established here last time. However, we had 10 confirmations in the latest atlas versus only four before, and the original expansion [before global warming became fashionable] was also felt to be in part a consequence of warmer weather.

Which brings me finally to the much-studied duo of Golden and Blue-winged Warbler. These birds hybridize freely where their ranges overlap, with the hybrids ['Brewster's' and 'Lawrence's' Warblers] being fertile and the back-crosses creating a confusing melee of intermediate plumages. But the Blue-winged proves to be the eventual winner in this process, and it has been gradually replacing the Golden-winged across much of the latter's former range. I had anticipated this might show up in the atlas results, although the matter is complicated by the fact that these birds typically occur in 'transitional'

habitats. A good example is in Peter's Woods, where Golden-wingeds used to occur in the small pines fringing the north side of the woods proper – in fact, one of the few nesting confirmations in the county came from there, although sadly not during an atlas period. Now, however, the trees have either grown up or died, and the area is no longer suitable. Neither species is particularly easy to atlas; although the songs are very distinctive the birds do not sing for long either during the day or over the period, and they are uncommon birds at best.

Golden-wingeds were recorded in five squares in 1981-5, but in eight in the latest survey. Only in two squares were the birds found on both atlases, and there were no confirmations on either survey. The apparent increase was mainly from the east of the county, but the results do confirm that birds are still present here.

The real change is with Blue-wingeds. Only one square recorded the birds on the first atlas, but there were 10 this time, although only one was confirmed as breeding. In five squares both species were present, although fully half were only 'Possible' records. So we have a part of the evolving story of these two species, and the atlas itself doubtless will be able to give us a more comprehensive picture.

That, of course, is the case with all of these species where Northumberland has experienced changes in status. If the publication schedule of fall 2007 is on time the Atlas may already be available, or due to appear very soon. It promises to provide a fascinating picture of birdlife in our Province.