

The State of Pennsylvania Ornithology, 1988

During the past two years, the study of birds in Pennsylvania has advanced in several ways. In other ways it has moved not at all.

Noteworthy was confirmation in the summer of 1986 that the Osprey re-introduction program was working. Fledged young from at least one nest had returned to the Poconos to successfully raise a brood of their own. In 1987, the success was repeated. This satisfying story testifies to what can be accomplished when professional and amateur ornithologists cooperate with conservation groups and state agencies.

The state's *unofficial* bird list grew by one with the appearance of a Green-tailed Towhee in late December 1987. The *unofficial* consensus puts the Pennsylvania bird inventory somewhere in the 380's. We emphasize "unofficial" because there still is no state records committee to judge on matters of status and acceptability. While there is no dispute about such well-documented birds as the Green-tailed Towhee, less certain reports remain to be examined. For example: the status of Broad-winged Hawk in winter, Northern Fulmar in central Pennsylvania in 1985, and so on. Until birders throughout the state constitute a records committee to make such judgments, it's every birder's choice. In short, chaos.

Some might consider a records committee to be frivolous or superfluous; some may just be indifferent to it. But, like it or not, the potential survival of some of our avifauna is at stake. The "list" is not just an enumeration of bird species with rulings on rarities, but rather an indication of a bird's status, season, abundance, range and so on. These elements have a potentially important environmental impact. Given the well-known vulnerability of well-meaning but politically sensitive state agencies, an independent source of reliable data, representing the consensus of the state's best birders, is a vital ingredient in evaluating any species' future in the commonwealth. To neglect the creation of this committee any longer is a disservice to the birds we profess to enjoy and protect.

Perhaps the appearance in 1987 of the journal *Pennsylvania Birds* will be a useful step in accomplishing the goal of creating not only a records committee, but a long-overdue state ornithological organization. At minimum, the journal has already provided a source of communications for all serious birders throughout the state. To that extent it is a colossal step forward. By documenting the diversity, populations, changing seasons, and rarities, *Pennsylvania Birds* has already made an important contribution. It needs support and deserves support, not only from our organization, but from all quarters of the state.

Very few now doubt the success of the Pennsylvania Breeding Bird Atlas Project. Pennsylvania birders, supported by an array of state agencies and funding sources, conservation groups, and natural-history museums, have delivered,

by the end of 1987, a project well on its way to a successful mapping of the state's breeding birds. Only 750 of about 4,000 blocks remain to be atlased in the concluding year. In 1987, over 1,000 volunteers participated. Clearly, this major ornithological inventory in the state's history is on its way to a successful conclusion.

The Atlas Project experience is testimony to what can be done in Pennsylvania ornithology. The obstacles that impede movement in other areas of Pennsylvania ornithology can and should be dealt with with the same resolve and energy as illustrated in the Atlas experience. Too much is at stake for continued foot-dragging.

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The State of New Jersey Ornithology, 1988

The avian "state of the state" is perhaps best understood by a recent case study that is best explained as a failure of both environmental regulation and the environmental community in New Jersey. This case study involved a site in southern New Jersey that was important for its migratory bird use. The regulatory structure, including threatened- and endangered-species legislation, was not sufficient to protect the site from development, and the environmental community, due to a shortage of manpower and particularly a lack of information on the bird use, never followed the issue at the hearing level or beyond. The site and the birds were lost, not only the "unlisted" breeding Blue Grosbeaks and Summer Tanagers, but also a hundred or so acres of valuable migratory bird habitat.

New Jersey has never really come to grips with the migration issue. The importance of migratory bird habitat has never been fully documented; its value has yet to be scientifically studied to the degree to which it might become part of the environmental impact decision-making process. This issue is at the forefront of ornithology today in New Jersey, migration being so prominent an aspect of the state's bird life. It is conceivable that many migratory birds may be as stressed by the loss of South Jersey habitat as by the destruction of South American forests. Indeed, the destruction of migratory habitat may be masking the effects of the loss of rain forest, as fewer and fewer birds are concentrating more and more in dwindling migratory habitat, so that numbers *appear* the same.

The problem is the failure to adequately classify the importance of habitats due to an ongoing lack of ornithological and other scientific data. Many times species are locally extirpated long before we even realize they are there, and, as our case-study experience points out, they are often lost even when we *do know* they are there.

Ornithology today must involve environmental activism. Gone is the "ivory tower" approach of pure scientific study or mere recreational birding. New Jersey cannot bear an ostrich-like generation of ornithologists with heads in the sand while the habitat erodes all around. The cancerous decay of habitat will not only erode the opportunity for scientific study but our opportunities for birding as

well. Today's birder needs a degree of involvement to protect both the birds and the sport.

The recent rush to protect the Saw-whet Owl roost in Thorofare, in the face of impending development, is a good example. We should have moved to protect it years ago, before it was threatened. We had the data; we failed to use it. We need to protect key areas before the fact, not after.

Despite the number of knowledgeable birders in New Jersey, what we don't know is legion. We know precious little about breeding-bird distribution, particularly for many of the threatened and endangered species. New Jersey does not have a complete Breeding Bird Atlas, in part because New Jersey birders never showed the necessary interest, and never participated to the needed degree. Lack of cooperation and rivalry between environmental groups has led to a lackadaisical approach that has bogged down New Jersey Atlas efforts and probably has meant the destruction of important habitats because we did not know what was there. An Atlas Project should be a top priority.

The average birder today spends much of his or her time chasing rarities and listing as opposed to the "old-fashioned" documentation of what is found either breeding, wintering or migrating in key local areas. Many of these areas may be very important, and yet, they are virtually unstudied. Ninety-nine percent of New Jersey birding is done in about one percent of the habitats, in known areas such as Brigantine, Cape May Point, and Princeton Woods. There exists an overwhelming need for documentation of the other 99 percent of habitat in New Jersey. Filling this need should become a priority in New Jersey birding. In lieu of or in addition to an Atlas, the establishment of June Bird Surveys, using Christmas Bird Count rules and circles (as is currently being done in Cumberland County, Boonton and Walnut Valley) might be pursued.

An active and praiseworthy *non-game* program in New Jersey is carried out by a few highly skilled and dedicated people with woefully little funding. That should be remedied. The accomplishments of this program cannot be gainsaid. However, due to legislative make-up, certain *game* species cannot be listed, despite the fact that their populations in New Jersey might be severely threatened. Sora is an example. Its highly concentrated populations are still hunted (with bag limits of 25 birds a day often achieved).

A viable state blue-list, reviewed annually, could help evaluate the status of little-known species, such as, Least Bittern, Black Rail, and Saw-whet Owl. These populations and their habitats need to be studied and protected.

So, too, should responsible research be supported. Responsible research must be differentiated from recreational banding and projects whose data never reach the hands of those who can apply it. Research should focus on habitat protection and problem-solving. Perhaps more emphasis is needed on endangered habitats (as opposed to endangered species)—areas used by large numbers of birds—even common birds. Thousands of songbirds cross the Cape May Canal heading north almost each morning in autumn. More leave Cape May than stay. Where are they going? Where do they put down?

Certainly New Jersey Audubon's "World Series of Birding" has been one of the state's major birding events in the past few years. It is great fun and a great fundraiser. Significant discoveries have been made in the process, upwards of \$60,000 per year has been raised for conservation, and individual participants have keenly improved their birding skills as a result. This event should be supported by the birding community.

There are many positive aspects in New Jersey ornithology today. Our state is far more heavily "birded" than our neighboring states. Our non-game programs and reintroduction efforts are among the best and are models for other states. Record-keeping here is among the finest and has served as a model for our neighbors. But, lack of an active records committee has prevented the establishment of a valid state bird list.

The recent announcement of the proposed establishment of a 16,000-acre Cape May National Wildlife Refuge represents inestimable good fortune for New Jersey birds, birders, and ornithology, and this project should receive our *active* support at all stages. It is time to apply our knowledge and birding skills both in the field and, if need be, in the meeting room and courtroom to protect the habitats on which our birds and birding depend.

—Clay Sutton