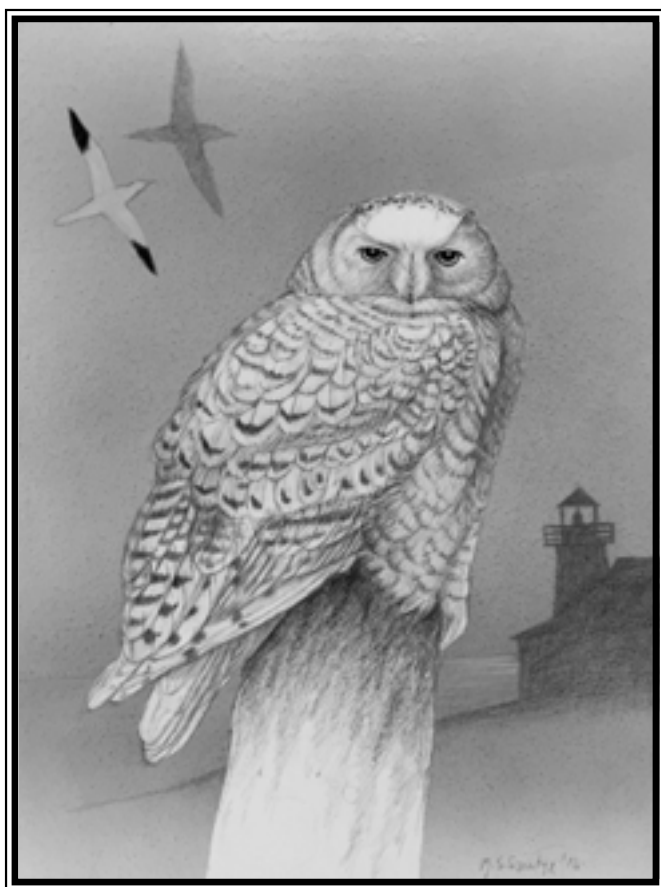


# THE CONNECTICUT WARBLER

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ON THE COVER

**Snowy Owl**

**The winter of 2017-18 has delivered to Connecticut birders a nice flight of Snowy Owls, one the most exciting species to grace our state. Mark Szantyr captures the magic with his stunning cover illustration.**

**ANNOUNCING CONNECTICUT BIRD  
ATLAS PROJECT**

**By Craig Repasz**

Mark your calendars! The state birding community will be called on to help conduct surveys for the Connecticut Bird Atlas Project starting in this year. Broader in scope than its predecessor, “The Atlas of Breeding Birds of Connecticut,” this new project will focus on all of Connecticut’s bird life, whether breeding, wintering, or migrating through our state.

The 2018-2021 atlas will rely on your efforts. Citizen scientists throughout the state will be asked to choose specified sections of the state – “blocks” – and help to survey the bird life of that block. The new data we collect will be combined with that from the first state atlas to assess changes in bird populations since the 1980s.

Preparations for the second Connecticut Bird Atlas have begun, with the planning team directed by Dr. Min Huang of the CT Department of Energy and Environmental Protection (CT DEEP), Professors Morgan Tingley and Chris Elphick of the University of Connecticut, and Craig Repasz as the Citizen Science Coordinator. A steering committee also has been formed, comprised of representatives from the state’s birding organizations including the Connecticut Ornithological Association (COA), New Haven Bird Club, Hartford Audubon, Audubon Connecticut and Connecticut Audubon Society, as well as other land protection organizations.

Funding to launch the project has been procured through CT DEEP, although additional funds will be needed to bring the atlas project to completion.

The scope of the atlas is to understand breeding bird distribution and abundance, to document changes since the last atlas, to describe wintering distributions of the birds in the state, to identify stopover habitat during migrations, and to establish predictive relationships about where species occur on the landscape that will help us to prepare for future changes in

our avifauna. All planning and results will be communicated via a web site where the public will be able to track progress and view results as they are produced.

Such a large effort will yield an abundance of data that could be used by many groups. For example, the project will help support the Connecticut Wildlife Action Plan, allow for improved conservation planning and the development of environment health metrics, and supply concrete data to support the identification of Important Bird Areas.

Atlas Projects can increase interest in birding, and birds, and help to galvanize the conservation community to advocate more passionately for bird habitat conservation. Individual birders also often gain firsthand insights into the status of their state's birds by encouraging them to seek out birds in places they might not otherwise visit.

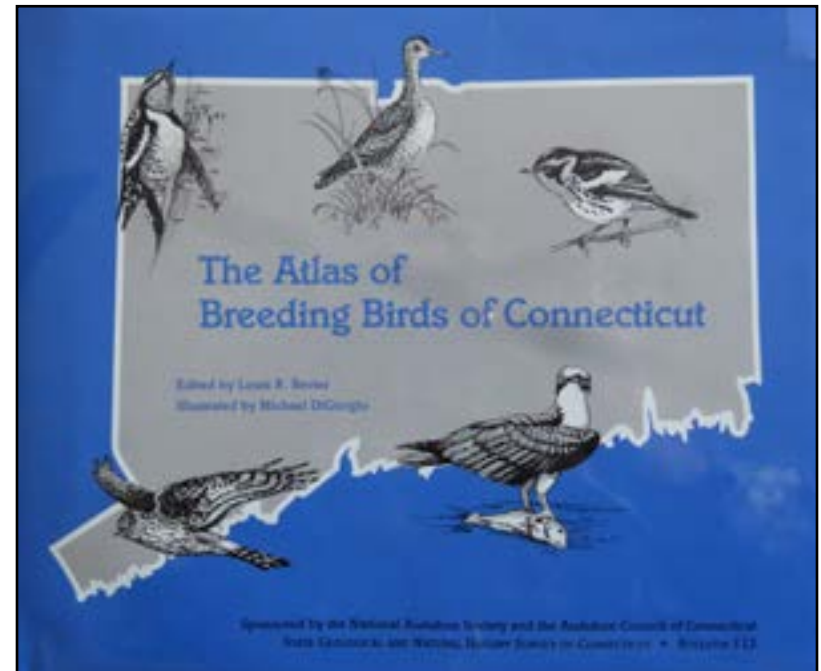
More information about the survey protocols will be coming later this year. The general approach, however, is to subdivide the entire state into a grid of 596 survey blocks. Volunteers will survey each block collecting information on which species occur, what breeding evidence is observed, and how abundance varies. Bird data will then be combined with land cover maps and other geospatial data to determine what factors influence distribution patterns. Understanding these relationships will improve our ability to predict how future landscape changes will affect bird populations.

Initial work to develop these predictive relationships using existing data sets is already underway. Birders will be crucial to collecting on-the-ground observations throughout the state to evaluate these initial predictions, fill gaps in knowledge, and refine the final maps. Most field work will take place in 2018-2020, after which we anticipate at least a year of data analysis prior to release of results online. An initial call for volunteers will go out later this year.

The atlas project is a huge undertaking that will require considerable help from COA members. The knowledge gains, however, will be tremendous. Again, we will be asked to go

birding. It will be a great time to be a birder in Connecticut.

If you have questions about the atlas project, please contact Chris Elphick at [chris.elphick@uconn.edu](mailto:chris.elphick@uconn.edu).



*The Atlas of the Breeding Birds of Connecticut, the 461-page hardcover book published in conjunction with the 1982-86 atlas study, can still be purchased from the Connecticut Department of Energy and Environmental Protection. It can be ordered online from the CT DEEP Store for \$6.13.*

## SINCE THE BREEDING BIRD ATLAS – OBSERVATIONS ON SOME POSITIVE TRENDS

By Chris S. Wood

With the launch of the Connecticut Bird Atlas Project (see COA Bulletin Vol. 32 No. 3) it's timely to look at some of the obvious changes to Connecticut's breeding bird populations since the initial *Atlas of Breeding Birds of Connecticut* conducted from 1982-1986 and published in 1994. In the 30 plus years since the field research for that project was completed, Connecticut's birdlife, and the professional and avocational monitoring of that birdlife, have undergone some noticeable changes, the results of ecological, social and even technological developments.

Changes to Connecticut's natural environment have obviously been responsible for many of these changes. Despite, or because of, regulatory and conservation efforts since the late 1960s, land uses have continued to alter the landscape and habitats that birds use. Development and, ironically, natural ecological succession have been detrimental to many species. Open space protection, habitat enhancement and forest maturation have benefited many others.

While contemporary birders often concentrate on finding or "twitching" rare birds, many ongoing projects keep track of trends in bird populations. Hawk watches, Christmas and Summer bird counts, USFWS breeding bird surveys, and educational and governmental research projects are examples. Others include efforts by conservation and governmental organizations to study and protect specific nesting species, like Piping Plovers, and to conduct banding programs for both research and educational purposes.

eBird, by the Cornell Laboratory of Ornithology, is establishing a robust set of data about bird populations, but reliable long term comparisons are not possible because the effort

("party hours") has only been relatively consistent for the past several years. For instance, 1.25% of all Connecticut June-July eBird checklists in 2017 included Hooded Warbler, with an average of over 16 reports per week, but there were zero June-July Hooded Warbler eBird reports in 2002.

It also turns out to be difficult to compare data from the diverse sources available. Different methodologies and different levels of effort, including researcher capabilities, prevent statistically reliable comparisons of populations over a 30-year period. Certainly, species-specific and perhaps habitat-specific studies can provide very robust trending data, such as Piping Plover and tern species monitoring; USGS Breeding Bird Surveys; and waterfowl surveys. But many other breeding bird population and distribution changes in Connecticut involve species that may be exhibiting trends that could provide significant insight to such concerns as climate change and habitat alteration impacts.

And there is another variable that further complicates longer term comparisons of these incompatible data sets: the improved ability of birders to locate, identify, and record bird occurrences over what might be called the modern birding era. (My definition: since baby boomers took up birding as a hobby.) Think about it: only 30 years ago there were no smart phones, no personal computers, no email or internet, no eBird, no Sibley Guide, and no digital cameras. (Gas was cheaper though.)

In other words, how much of the observed and reported changes we see is actual and how much is due to improved birder numbers and skills, better optical equipment, and instantaneous communications. This might be termed the "enhanced birding effect" and in fact some recent scientific studies have begun to identify the impact of observational variations on data interpretation, including different skill levels (see e.g., "Estimates of observer expertise improve species distributions from citizen science data" as published in *Methods in Ecology and Evolution* 25 July 2017 and "Can Observation Skills of Citizen Scientists Be Estimated Using

Species Accumulation Curves” <http://www.plosone.org/article/fetchObject.action?uri=info:doi/10.1371/journal.pone.0139600&representation=PDF>)

In any event, these demographic and technical enhancements to the practice of birding should help ensure that the new Atlas Project, “broader in scope” than the Breeding Bird Atlas, develops a reliable and replicable look at the status of Connecticut birdlife.

Appropriately, much of the attention to breeding bird population trends focuses on declining numbers and range constrictions. This article is instead a simple attempt to highlight some positive trends in a few representative species’ populations to illustrate two major trends over the past 40 or so years: reforestation of Connecticut’s woodlands (which coincidentally contributes to loss of open land habitat) and protection of coastal wetlands habitat and improved water quality.

Both of these developments may be affected over time by climate change dynamics, such as sea level rise and migration of plant communities. The extent to which climate change has a role in bird numbers and distribution must be left to more rigorous scientific testing, although a few well recognized range expansions north, such as Red-bellied Woodpecker and Northern Cardinal, provide at least anecdotal evidence.

However, some of the examples discussed below clearly represent recovery from historic depredations and restoration or protection of suitable habitat rather than any climate response. Good baseline data from the new Bird Atlas will help provide insight into the potential disruption of bird populations and distribution by climate change.

To identify some examples, I simply went through the Atlas publication and the recent Summer Bird Count compilations by Joe Zeranski and Patrick Comins to identify a few species that have obviously shown increasing populations during breeding season. I also looked at the past 5 years of

eBird data to identify recent trends, if any, or at least some indicator of current abundance. Finally, I consulted the well-known reference works *The Birds of Connecticut* by Sage, Bishop, and Bliss and *Connecticut Birds*, by Zeranski and Baptist for historic context.

While this is not a comprehensive analysis of the status of Connecticut breeding birds, it is an attempt to identify some indicators of future trends that the Bird Atlas, the Summer Bird Counts, and other research may confirm.

The data provided in the following table is not necessarily intended to demonstrate definitive trends; rather it is an illustration of how the various sources are difficult to compare with each other and with anecdotal evidence from general field observations.



*Julian Hough photo*  
Black Skimmer was first confirmed nesting during the initial Breeding Bird Atlas. It nested a few times subsequently but not in recent years. Will it be found during the new effort?

## Summary of some available population data on select breeding species in Connecticut

Coastal	Frequency of Reporting to eBird <sup>1</sup>	Atlas Block Reports <sup>2</sup>	Summer Bird Count Totals <sup>3</sup>
<b>Osprey</b>	2017 – 20.71% 2012 – 14.9%	5.0% of Atlas blocks	2016 – 131 2012 – 16 1994 – 9
<b>American Oystercatcher</b>	2017 – 7.18% 2012 – 7.9%	1.5% of Atlas blocks	2016 – 56 2012 – 78 1994 – 13
<b>Willet</b>	2017 – 7.04% 2012 – 7.0%	1.5% of Atlas blocks	2016 – 29 2012 – 25 1994 – 1
<b>Double-crested Cormorant</b>	2017 – 16.45% 2012 – 18.11%	6.7% of Atlas blocks	2016 – 547 2012 – 969 1994 – 843
<b>Black-crowned Night-Heron</b>	2017 – 6.17% 2012 – 6.59%	9.4% of Atlas blocks	2016 – 81 2012 – 414 1994 – 170

Woodlands	Frequency of reporting to eBird	Atlas Block Reports	Summer Bird Count – Species Totals
<b>Yellow-crowned Night-Heron</b>	2017 – 4.85% 2012 – 4.5%	1.5% of Atlas blocks	2016 – 6 2012 – 7 1994 – 2
<b>Common Merganser</b>	2017 – 1.2% 2012 – 1.48%	Reported in 5.5% of Atlas blocks	2016 – 195 2012 – 234 1994 – 78
<b>Black Vulture</b>	2017 – 1.12% 2012 – 1.09%	Not Recorded	2016 – 27 2012 – 47 1994 – 4
<b>Red-shouldered Hawk</b>	2017 – 5.63% 2012 – 4.76%	28.4% of Atlas blocks	2016 – 96 2012 – 120 1994 – 31
<b>Common Raven</b>	2017 – 3.53% 2012 – 2.30%	1.5% of Atlas blocks	2016 – 170 2012 – 110 1994 – 12
<b>Pine Warbler</b>	2017 – 7% 2012 – 5%	13% of Atlas blocks	2016 – 512 2012 – 450 1994 – 190

Hooded Warbler	2017 – 1.25% 2012 – 1.13%	17% of Atlas blocks	2016 – 58 2012 – 46 1994 – 23
Yard Birds	Frequency of reporting to eBird	Atlas Block Reports	Summer Bird Count – Species Totals
<b>Ruby-throated Hummingbird</b>	2017 – 14.28% 2012 – 9.64%	42% of Atlas blocks	2016 – 281 2012 – 236 1994 – 47
<b>Orchard Oriole</b>	2017 – 2.67% 2012 – 2.93%	22.3% of Atlas blocks	2016 – 72 2012 – 93 1994 – 21

1. Average percentage of eBird checklists June-July reporting subject species (per eBird: "Frequency" is the percentage of checklists that report a species within a specified date range and region. This is the most common way of displaying the eBird data and provides a good idea of relative occurrence and seasonal timing.)

2. Percentage of 521 Atlas research block reporting evidence of subject species breeding

3. Total number recorded on Summer Bird Counts of subject species

## Examples

### Examples of Coastal Birds Exhibiting Possible Population Increases

Natural range expansions, species recovery from depredations (such as harvesting of herons and egrets for millinery), habitat protections (coastal area regulations), and water quality improvements all play a part in the increases witnessed over the past 30 -50 years in populations of several coastal bird species. A few examples follow.

#### Double-crested Cormorant

Double-crested Cormorants (DCCO) were described as "Rare spring and fall migrant(s)" in the account by Sage Bishop and Bliss, which included no breeding records. The first successful breeding in Connecticut by this species was on East White Rock off the Norwalk coast in 1979. As of the 1990 account by Zeranski and Baptist, DCCO was "a common coastal visitor in summer, but seldom nests." During BBA research, nesting was possible or confirmed in most of the coastal research blocks but confirmed as breeders at only four locations.

Recent June-July eBird reports find this species to now be abundant along the coast during breeding season. From 2012 to 2017, the total number reported June through July nearly doubled to 15,286 while reporting frequency only increased slightly.

This abundance is despite the documented destruction of trees by nesting Cormorants at island nesting colonies, presumably reducing nesting site availability (Lemmon, Bugbee, Stephens; "Tree damage by Nesting Double-crested Cormorants in Connecticut" Connecticut Warbler Vol. 14 #1, January 1994). The species finds suitable nest sites on man-made structures (lighthouses and day-markers) and bare rocks along the Connecticut shore, as well as, presumably, treed islands where available.

It may be that this species is approaching maximum breeding

density, at least along parts of Connecticut's coast. Future Bird Atlas data may confirm or rebut this speculation.



*Double-crested Cormorants commonly nest on permanent man-made structures on the water.*

### **Black-crowned Night Heron/ Yellow-crowned Night-Heron**

Black-crowned Night-Herons (BCNH) were once a numerous, if somewhat local breeder in Connecticut, according to historical records reported in *The Birds of Connecticut*. These records describe several large inland rookeries prior to the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, none of which were discovered during Atlas research. This species was located in nearly every one of the research blocks along the coast during the BBA research, but with only 56 reports of breeding behavior.

Although Summer Bird Count records show lower BCNH numbers in 2016 than in 2012, recent eBird checklists included nearly three times as many BCNH reports in 2017 as in 2012, while frequency of reporting only increased slightly. Whether this is an artifact of increased observation hours or reflective of stable populations may be answered by upcoming Bird Atlas research. Discovery of inland breeding by

BCNH would indicate a strong recovery for this species. (It should be noted that there are only two coastal Summer Bird Counts: Greenwich and New Haven, thus this data does not reflect conditions on the eastern Connecticut coast).

Yellow-crowned Night-Herons (YCNH), which were not reported at all in *The Birds of Connecticut* and were considered "a rare nester" in the 1990 *Connecticut Birds*, appear to be increasing in numbers and breeding success in Connecticut. BBA results found nesting evidence in only 8 of 23 coastal research blocks. Even though reporting frequency did not change significantly, 2017 June-July eBird checklists include 747 reports, mostly from the western Connecticut coast, compared to 371 reports from the same period in 2012. Casual observation in 2017 seemed to reveal more juvenile YCNH than juvenile BCNH in many locations.

YCNH expanded their range northward during the mid-twentieth century, reoccupying what was apparently historic range, according to the Cornell Laboratory of Ornithology/ Birds of North American Online (BNA Online) account. However, specific causes for range contraction and expansion have not as yet been identified. The apparent increase in YCNH in Connecticut indicates a continuation of that range expansion.

In an observation that applies in coastal Fairfield County, BNA Online cites a report by B.D. Watts for the statement "Unlike Black-crowned Night-Heron, which avoids nesting in close association with houses, Yellow-crowned Night-Heron frequently nests in wooded neighborhoods that have open understories and a park like appearance." (Watts 1989 Nest-site characteristics of Yellow-crowned Night-Herons in Virginia. *Condor* no. 91:979-983). As a species that is not a historical nester in Connecticut, the growth in the YCNH population, particularly compared to that of Black-crowned Night Herons, is an interesting development that future research may illuminate.





*Juvenile Yellow-crowned Night-Heron enjoying a favored food source.*

### **Osprey (*Pandion haliaetus*)**

Osprey are something of a poster child for a species recovery success story, and that success is very evident in Connecticut. Largely due to reductions in hydrocarbon pesticides, as well as abundant prey fish resulting from improved Long Island Sound water quality, Osprey are now common nesters along the Connecticut shore and even inland. Where during the Atlas project only 14 confirmations of breeding were recorded, now even casual observation finds Osprey nests in virtually every town along the shore. It's doubtful that many more Osprey pairs can squeeze onto the coast, but the Bird Atlas project will probably identify a trend of nesting expansion inland.



*Osprey have benefited from artificial nest platforms, but they are pretty resourceful, attempting to nest recently on an operating crane in Black Rock Harbor.*

### **American Oystercatcher**

The American Oystercatcher (AMOY) is another well-documented coastal success story over the past 30 years, with nearly triple the number of birds reported on June-July eBird checklists in 2017 compared to 2012, even though the frequency of reporting (% of checklists) was about the same. According to Zeranski and Comins, the 2012 Summer Bird Counts recorded an all-time high for AMOY in 2012 (Connecticut Warbler Vol. 31, #4); 2016 totals were even higher (Connecticut Warbler Vol. 36, #4). However, note that the Summer Bird Count data is further complicated by the fact that only two areas of the coast – Greenwich and New Haven – are covered by counts. The Norwalk area, Stratford/Milford, and the eastern shore are also well populated by AMOY during nesting season.

Where BBA results found breeding evidence in only 6 of 23 coastal research blocks, 391 eBird reports from June-July 2017 found this bird all along the coast. Again, the extent to which

this represents better observation coverage over the past five years as opposed to actual increases in numbers remains to be seen, although clearly this species has demonstrated recovery from historic depredation from hunting.



*American Oystercatcher nest on Cockonoe Island in Westport.*

### **Willet**

Frequency of this species on eBird checklists did not change 2012 to 2017, with twice as many checklists reporting twice as many Willet, so short term trends are not evident. In just the two coastal Summer Bird Count areas, however, Willet numbers increased significantly between 1994 and 2012, with a new high number set in 2015. Since this species is far more numerous on the extensive saltmarsh around the mouth of the Housatonic and east of the New Haven area, the Summer Count data cannot provide a full picture. Sage, Bishop and Bliss reported only that it was recorded nesting at Stratford. *Connecticut Birds* reports that it “nests very locally...from Guilford east...” and that it had attempted nesting in Stratford.

Once again, how much of the observed increase in this species population is attributable to enhanced birding and how much to improved coastal habitat or other ecological factors may be revealed with a longer term and consistent data base.



*Willetts seem to be much more abundant on expansive marshes in recent years.*

### **Examples of Woodlands Birds Exhibiting Possible Population Increases**

Connecticut’s well documented forest regrowth has resulted in habitat improvement and availability for several species, some of which have only a limited historic presence in the State. At the same time, forest area expansion, coupled with farmland abandonment and continuing development, have significantly reduced open meadow and successional habitat, reflected by the decline in many grassland and scrub species, viz. the near disappearance of Eastern Meadowlark as a breeder in Connecticut in recent years.

Another curious trend is the increasing populations of Yellow-bellied Sapsuckers, expanding their range from north to south, as described by Paul Carrier back in 2006 (*Connecticut*

*Warbler* Vol. 26, #1). Perhaps an indicator of forest health, further insight into this range expansion and, as Carrier notes, whether it continues, may be provided by future eBird and Connecticut Bird Atlas data collection.

### Common Merganser

Zeranski and Baptist in *Connecticut Birds* described the Common Merganser (COME) as “a rare nester in the northern Farmington River watershed” and the BBA research confirmed breeding at 15 locations in that same area of the state. By 2012, however, eBird June-July checklists included 351 reports. Most of these reports were also from the Farmington River and the Pomperaug River watersheds where their preferred nesting habitat of mature riparian forests are available.

Common Mergansers were an uncommon find on the Woodbury-Roxbury Summer Bird Count from its inception in 1978 up to 1992, when 15 of these ducks were recorded. The 2016 tally was 83. As with Wood Ducks and Hooded Mergansers, mature riparian trees with cavities are necessary for this species, and regrowth of the Connecticut forest likely is a factor in this species’ localized increases.

BNA Online notes that “trend data suggest that the North American population is generally stable or increasing, with many northeastern US populations expanding south into former range...” but continues that not enough is known about this duck’s population size or dynamics. What may be most relevant regarding this species’ population increase in Connecticut is its role as a top aquatic predator and thus “an indicator of environmental health both for contaminants (pesticides, toxic metals) and lake acidification.”



*Common Mergansers are a common nesting species along the Pomperaug River in western Connecticut.*

### Black Vulture

Although the eBird data does not show a significant difference in frequency of reporting between 2012 and 2017, personal observation is convincing that Black Vulture (BLVU) numbers continue to increase in Connecticut. 310 reports of BLVU were included on June-July eBird checklists in 2017, compared to 80 such reports in 2012.

Black Vultures are known to rely on Turkey Vultures to locate food sources and the increase in Turkey Vultures, believed due, at least in part, to the increased deer herd (in turn due to reforestation), is likely largely responsible for Black Vulture increases in Connecticut.

*Birds of Connecticut* (Sage, Bishop, and Bliss, 1913) noted only two Black Vulture records, one from 1901 and one from 1879. The Connecticut Breeding Bird Atlas project data from 1982 – 1986 includes no reports of potential breeding Black Vultures. Zeranski and Baptist (1990) reported that BVs were “very rare visitors from the south, but increasing.”



*Black Vultures have followed Turkey Vultures into Connecticut.*

### **Red-shouldered Hawk**

In the 1982-1986 BBA research period, breeding evidence was reported from almost 30% of the total research blocks, pretty evenly distributed across the state. The 2012 Summer Bird Count summary noted an all-time high (for the counts) for Red-shouldered Hawk (RSHA), with even higher numbers in subsequent count summaries by Zeranski and Comins.

This trend is supported by eBird data that shows a relatively small increase in eBird checklist frequency from 2012 – 2017 for this species but with a nearly 50% increase in the number reported (335 – 491). Along with significantly higher Summer Bird Count numbers in recent years, these observations would indicate a strong population growth. While known to prefer extensive but open forests, particularly in bottomlands, flood plains, and riparian areas, RSHA seem to be adapting to human activity in many areas.



*Red-shouldered Hawks soar over most Connecticut towns.*

### **Common Raven**

Another well-documented breeding population growth example, the Common Raven was considered only a casual visitor by Sage, et al but now nests from the interior uplands all the way to the coast. BBA research did not confirm breeding, but it was confirmed shortly after the research period concluded. Summer Bird Count numbers show significant increases just over the past five years and eBird data indicate a noticeable increase in reporting frequency.

Common Raven range expansion into Connecticut continues a regional trend begun as long ago as the 1940s. Although BNA Online notes that in certain areas “particularly forests of the ne. and e. U.S., (CORA) prefers wilderness and often avoids areas with human activities,” this appears to be a diminishing habit of this species, at least in Connecticut, where they can be found easily in suburban and even urban areas.



Common Ravens now nest as far south in Connecticut as East Rock Park in New Haven.

### **Pine Warbler**

According to BNA Online, Pine Warblers (PIWA) prefer a "Variety of upland pine (*Pinus* spp.) and pine-hardwood forest types..." (BNA Online) and breeding success is better in mature pine stands. With the ongoing regrowth of pine forests, increases in this species breeding populations should be expected and, in fact, "BBS data for 1966–1996 indicated significant population increases of 8.2%/year ( $p < 0.01$ ) in n. New England, and in s. New England (12.0%/year;  $p < 0.01$ )." (BNA Online)

Zeranski and Baptist in *Connecticut Birds* note that "the nesting range of the Pine Warbler has decreased..." (as of publication in 1990). BBA research found breeding evidence in 13% of the research blocks and recent Summer Bird Count and eBird data show steadily increasing numbers of reports of PIWA. eBird shows increases in both frequency of reports and total numbers reported from 2012 to 2017.

PIWA are difficult to find visually and difficult to distinguish vocally from Chipping Sparrows and Worm-eating Warblers,

both of which may nest in proximity. An interesting question is whether or not enhanced birding skills will have anything to do with the increased numbers reported.



Pine Warblers can be difficult to locate and identify.

### **Hooded Warbler**

As Mark Szantyr speculated in his Hooded Warbler species account in the *Atlas of Breeding Birds of Connecticut*, increases in this species population in some areas may be attributable to increased forest understory growth creating preferred habitat as a result of gypsy moth defoliation. Additional data from eBird reports and Bird Atlas research may help confirm this theory as forests recover from gypsy moth defoliation.

In the meantime, both Summer Bird Count data and eBird reporting indicate increases, with the total reported over the two month breeding period nearly tripling 2012 to 2017 while reporting frequency remained about the same (i.e., more HOWAs per report). The enhanced birding effect may account for some of that.



*Hooded Warblers are a sparkling woodlands jewel.*

### Examples of “Yard Birds” Birds Exhibiting Possible Population Increases

Birders watch their yards closely, and two species that are often found in suburban yards and gardens (and orchards) are Ruby-throated Hummingbird (RTHU) and Orchard Oriole (OROR). RTHU are unmistakable but fleeting glimpses at OROR males may not be sufficient to distinguish them from Baltimore Orioles or even American Robins and female orioles are always challenging.

#### **Ruby-throated Hummingbird**

Birders of all skill levels and intensity of observation have taken to the little sugar birds that are easy to attract with nectar feeders. Both eBird and Summer Bird Count numbers indicate increasing numbers of Ruby-throated Hummingbirds (RTHU) in Connecticut, with both total numbers and frequency of reports to eBird increasing over the past five years. Perhaps continuing attention to this backyard cohabitant will help determine if populations changes are real or the result of more feeders and closer attention by even casual birders.



*Ruby-throated Hummingbirds are exceptionally comfortable with artificial nectar feeders.*

#### **Orchard Oriole**

Observed as an “uncommon but increasing nester” as of the late 1980s by Zeranski and Baptist in *Connecticut Birds*, nearly twice as many Orchard Orioles (OROR) were reported on 2017 eBird June-July checklists compared to 2012, although this may just be a function of the increased number of checklists. There were 40 confirmed breeding records out of 133 total reported by BBA research; most records were coastal or along major rivers. This pattern appears to continue according to eBird maps of OROR reports.

BNA Online reports “Increases in numbers and range expansion documented in Pennsylvania, Indiana, Ohio, Michigan, Wisconsin, and Ontario...” Documentation of increases here in Connecticut would be consistent with those observations.

As with the Common Merganser, increasing numbers of mature riparian trees may be contributing to OROR increases. The BNA Online account for OROR notes that “Compared to Baltimore and Bullock’s orioles, Orchard Oriole prefers smaller-diameter, shorter trees, more densely spaced for nest-

ing.”

Increasing reports of this species may reflect the enhanced birding effect, with more and better birders identifying this bird more frequently. However, habitat suitability will likely be the key variable in future population increases or decreases which the Bird Atlas project should help identify.



*Orchard Orioles do like orchards, but riparian habitat is more important.*

## Conclusion

While these observations of population increases and possible range expansions are encouraging, there are many other species showing declines. Research projects like the upcoming Bird Atlas are more necessary than ever if we are to identify and attempt to remedy the problems and build on the improvements in Connecticut's breeding bird populations and diversity. However, the disparate data used here can only poorly describe, much less explain, observed population increase trends. A better surveying system, as envisioned by the upcoming Bird Atlas, and more years of eBird data collection should provide us with a more definitive understanding

of breeding bird populations and distribution in Connecticut, increases as well as decreases. Perhaps just as important is the satisfaction birders can add to our enjoyment of nature by contributing to a better understanding of our living environment.

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All photos © C.S. Wood

*Chris S. Wood, a resident of Woodbury, is a long-time Connecticut birder. He chaired the Connecticut Breeding Bird Atlas Steering Committee and has served as member of the Avian Records Committee of Connecticut and as a compiler of the Woodbury-Roxbury Christmas Bird Count.*

## CONNECTICUT FIELD NOTES

Summer season, June 1 through July 31, 2017

By Greg Hanisek and Frank Mantlik

The breeding season serves as the heart of summer, and with the new Connecticut Bird Atlas underway this year, there will be a special emphasis on the state's population of nesting birds. This atlas will also broadly track bird populations throughout the year, and the summer season serves as a crossroads for northbound and southbound migration, in addition to encompassing most of the nesting activity. It's also a prime time for lingering and wandering species. As always these field notes break up the June-July season into its various components.

### Northbound Migration

On June 8 at Long Beach in Stratford, eight species of late northbound shorebirds consisted of one Black-bellied Plover, three Semipalmated Plovers, three Ruddy Turnstones, 10 Sanderlings, one Dunlin, one Least Sandpiper, one White-rumped Sandpiper and 135 Semipalmated Sandpipers (FM). Three Red Knots were off Westport June 10 (NB). The typically sparse spring flight on Black Terns included singles on June 4 at Sherwood Island State Park in Westport (TG) and at Falkner Island in Guilford, where two Bonaparte's Gulls were also present (CD).

On June 1, 35 Common

Nighthawks were feeding over Little Pond in Litchfield as they moved through at dusk (GH). Scattered migrants in early June included six on June 7 at Aspetuck Reservoir in Easton (TM). Single Yellow-bellied Flycatchers were still on the move in early June at six locations, the last on June 8-9 at Little Pond in Litchfield (MD, BB). A late Swainson's Thrush turned up in Hampton on June 4 (JMe). On a typical migration schedule that often produces June sightings, Mourning Warblers were at East Rock Park in New Haven on June 1-3 (MSc et al.), in Hamden on June 3 (JOs), in Avon on June 4 (JMe) and at Bent of the



*Tina Green photo  
Common Loons nested again at Benedict Pond in Norfolk. This pair escorted a chick on June 8.*

River Audubon in Southbury on June 9-10 (RN, NH). The usual early June flurry at the end of the Blackpoll Warbler movement finished with a late report June 11 from Boston Hollow (JL),

### Southbound Migration

Early southbound migrants included two Lesser Yellowlegs at Shell Beach, Guilford, on July 1 (PDe) and two Least Sandpipers and a Short-billed Dowitcher at Sandy Point, West Haven, on July 2 (PDe). The shorebird of the season was a **Marbled Godwit** July 10 at Short Beach in Stratford (FM). The first Stilt Sandpipers arrived

July 11 at McKinney NWR in Stratford (NB) and the Stratford Greenway (FM). A mid-summer Western Sandpiper appeared at Stratford Point on July 15 (FM). A Northern Parula was marooned between seasons on July 23 in East Granby but probably profiled best as an early southbound migrant (PDe).

### Lingerers, Wanderers and Strays

Up to 50 Brant were still at Milford Point on June 7 (DH et al.) and four were present there through the period (JOs et al.). A Gadwall, which seems to have collapsed as a breeder in the state, was at



Short Beach in Stratford on June 17 (FM). An American Wigeon, not noted for late stays, was in New Haven on June 10 (MA). A pair of Ring-necked Ducks on June 27 at Bantam Lake in Litchfield suggested possible breeding, but they were not reported again (GH). A male Greater Scaup June 8 at Long Beach in Stratford may have been present for more than a month (FM). A second was at Shell Beach in Guilford June 27 (EHa). Another sparse lingerer, a male Common Goldeneye, was at Wilcox Park in Milford on June 23 (SS). Even more unexpected was one July 22 on the Connecticut

River in Middletown (CF). The high count of lingering Long-tailed Ducks was four on June 27 at Penfield Reef in Fairfield (AK). Single Red-breasted Mergansers were at six coastal locations with a high count of two to three to at least July 6 at Greenwich Point (CEh). Single Ruddy Ducks were present to at least June 6 at Batterson Pond in Farmington (PCi) and June 11 on the Mianus River in Greenwich (CE).

A Red-necked Grebe lingered June 4-14 at Cockenoe Island in Westport (TG); another was at Long Wharf in New Haven June 22 (EHa). Ferry



Bruce Finnan photo  
 This Wilson's Storm-Petrel was one of a few present in mid-summer in eastern Long Island Sound, where they could be seen from the New London to Orient, N.Y., ferry.



Patty Morris photo  
 This King Rail enjoyed a long stay at a tiny wetland oasis in downtown Stamford.

trips between New London and Orient Point, N.Y., produced **Wilson's Storm-Petrels** starting with one on July 26 and up to three through the end of the period (SMi et al.). An **American White Pelican** made one of its increasing visits on July 16 at Sandy Point in West Haven (MSt et al). Black-crowned Night-Herons found their way inland with an adult on the Still River in New Milford on July 6 (AD) and an

immature at Bantam Lake in Morris on July 7 (GH). The only **Cattle Egret** was found July 15 along Interstate 95 in Westport (JHu). A **King Rail** took up residence in downtown Stamford, remaining in a tiny wetland oasis called Scalzi Riverwalk from at least June 10 through the season and deep into autumn (PM et al.). There were more tantalizing reports of two **Sandhill Cranes** in Norfolk and Colebrook, but still



*Russ Smiley photo*

*This pair of Black Skimmers, shown here on June 6, courted at Sandy Point in West Haven, but nesting could not be confirmed.*

without any solid evidence of breeding (RS et al.).

The bird of the season by a wide margin, the state's second **Bridled Tern**, was found July 28 in the tern colony on Falkner Island in Guilford (CD). It remained well into August and was accessible to birders only by boat (m.ob.). The unpredictable wanderings of Caspian Terns brought singles to Mystic on June 3 (JC), to Stamford June 21 and July 11 (PDu), to Harveys Beach in Old Saybrook July 4 (TB), and to Milford Point July 21 (MW). Two Royal Terns were at Milford Point on July 15 (SMu, BM). Black Skimmer sightings, which included a

high of eight on June 17 at Short Beach in Stratford, did not produce any evidence of breeding (FM).

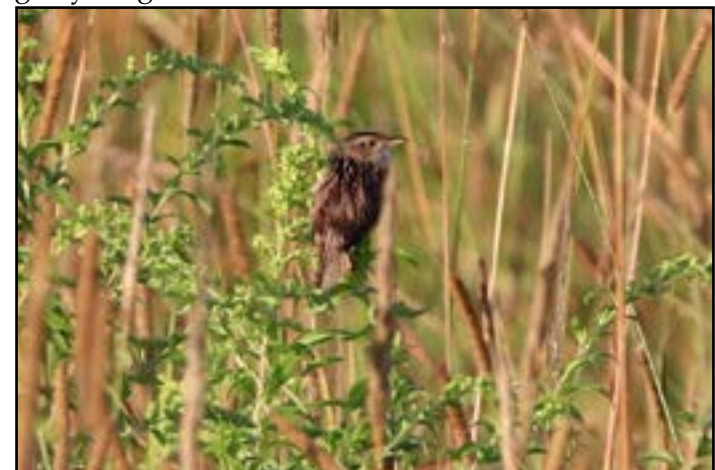
It's hard to decide on a seasonal category for a single Common Nighthawk on June 23 in Seymour (BB). Red-headed Woodpeckers were reported from East Haddam (PG), Southbury (AL et al.) and Simsbury (PDe), but evidence of breeding remained elusive. Single **Yellow-breasted Chats**, potential breeders, were at a Coventry powerline from mid-May to June 4 (PT et al.) and at Quinebaug Fish Hatchery in Plainfield June 18-24 (RD et al.), neither with any evidence of a mate. A **Dickciss-**

**sel** July 4 at Bradley International Airport in Windsor Locks was part of broad eastward dispersal (GH). A Pine Siskin was unexpected July 1 in Clinton (RB).

### Breeding Season

A female Common Merganser escorted a brood of 24 ducklings on the Pomperaug River in Southbury on June 10 (NH). Farther east, where they're not as well established, eight were on the Connecticut River in Suffield on July 25 (PDe). Large broods of this sort often consist of the output from more than one nest or more than one female. A pair of Common Loons again fledged young on Benedict

Pond in Norfolk (JMa et al.). An American Bittern was a good find June 7 in Shelton (GWA). Two were unexpected flyovers June 15 in Coventry (CEI), and others were in Cromwell on June 15 (RS), at Roy Swamp WMA in Sharon on July 12 (BD) and at Quinnipiac River Marsh in North Haven on July 15 (EHa). Three Least Bitterns revealed themselves in the Quinnipiac River Marsh on July 11 (MA), where on July 26 one was taken by Red-shouldered Hawk (EH). Other reports came from Durham Meadows (SB et al.), Station 43 in South Windsor (SZ et al.), Griswold Point in Old Lyme (JHa), and McKinney Refuge in Stratford (FM). After a



*Bruce Finnan photo*

*This Sedge Wren was one of two singing males in fields in Newtown from late July into early August.*

good spring for **White-faced Ibis**, one was still at Barn Island WMA in Stonington June 3-4 (DW, AV).

Jay Kaplan provided the following information on our rarest breeding raptors: "The **Mississippi Kites** that successfully nested in 2016 returned to Simsbury in late May. There was no nesting noted through June, at least in the nest used the previous summer. After a powerful micro-burst on 30 June in the immediate area of the 2016 nest, a storm that took down numerous trees and caused loss of power to residents in West Simsbury and parts of Canton, the kites disappeared... and are presumed gone from the area."

The state's apparently healthy population of Virginia Rails was on display June 3 when a night foray in Essex, Old Saybrook and Old Lyme detected 21 (NB, PR, GWi). An amazing 43 Piping Plovers (25 adults and 18 hatchlings) were counted at Long Beach in Stratford on June 22 (FM). A group of 20 American Oystercatchers June 17 at Cockenoe Island included six juveniles (TG). Upland Sandpipers persisted

at Rentschler Field in East Hartford despite preparations for commercial development, with four present on June 9 (ADa). One at Windham Airport on June 27-July 2 did not appear to have any companions (PR et al.). The carefully monitored breeding colony of Roseate Terns on Falkner Island in Guilford held 48 nests on June 4 (CD).

Habitat management by Connecticut DEEP in Naugatuck State Forest accounted for four Whip-poor-wills heard in the Hunters Mountain area on June 2 (JS). Up to two **Sedge Wrens**, both apparently singing males, were in Newtown at a potential breeding site July 23-30 (PDu et al.). A Brewster's Warbler was banded June 15 at Bent of the River (BS). A **Kentucky Warbler** July 5-12 in Newtown was a possible breeder; the species hasn't been confirmed nesting in many years (PDu, WK). One of the fast-dwindling Eastern Meadowlarks was a heartening find June 3 at Samuel Reed Park in Bloomfield (PCi). Another was at Topsmead State Park in Torrington on June 14 (DT). But ground zero for this grassland species appears to

be Windham Airport in North Windham. A total of seven on June 25 included a family group of two adults and three recently fledged juveniles and a second family consisting of one adult and one juvenile with additional fledglings expected (PR). A flock of 22 Boat-tailed Grackles that included young of the year was at Long Beach in Stratford on July 13 (FM).

Observers – Mark Aronson, Rob Ballinger, Bill Banks, Tony Belejack, Nick Bonomo, Steve Broker, John Calogero, Paul Cianfaglione (PCi), Al Collins, Patrick Comins (PCo), Andrew Dasinger (ADa), Paul Desjardins (PDe), Buzz Devine, Angela Dimmitt (ADi), Robert Dixon, Michael Doyle, Patrick Dugan (PDu), Cedric Duhalde, Cynthia Ehlinger (CEh), Chris Elphick, Corrie Folsom-O'Keefe, Frank Gallo, Pete Govert, Tina Green, Ed

Haesche (EHa), Jack Hali-bozek (JHa), Greg Hanisek, Ewa Holland (EHo), Dan Hubbard, Jim Hunter (JHu), Nick Hawvermale, Aidan Kiley, Jay Kaplan, Gil Kleiner, Wendy Knothe, Justin Lawson, Adrian Lewis, Patricia Lindsay, Frank Mantlik, John Marshall (JMa), Jamie Meyers (JMe), Shai Mitra (SMi), Patty Morris, Tom Murray, Brendan Murtha, Sean Murtha (SMu), Russ Naylor, John Ogren (JOg), John Oshlick (JOs), Phil Rusch, Ed Sadowski, Mark Scott (MSc), Russ Smiley, Ben Sonnenberg, Steve Spector, Maria Stochmal (MSt), Jack Swatt (JS), Jory Teltser, Peter Thompson, Darcey Thurrott, Anthony Vicciarelli, Doug Warner, Mike Warner, Greg Watkins-Colwell (GWa), Glenn Williams (GWi), Sara Zagorski.

## PHOTO CHALLENGE



You encounter a small, secretive sparrow skulking in weedy vegetation. You work patiently to get a good look and eventually you determine it has the short-tailed look of a bird in the genus *Ammodramus*. You'd love it to be a Henslow's Sparrow, but the bird shows buffy-orange rather than greenish tones on the head. There's too much orange for a Grasshopper Sparrow, but that still leaves a few possibilities. Since you're at an inland location, it's probably not a Saltmarsh Sparrow. The subspecies of Nelson's Sparrow most often encountered in Connecticut is grayer than this bird, and normally found on the coast, but the inland races of Nelson's are brighter birds and need to be ruled out. That means we're down to the nominate race of Nelson's Sparrow or LeConte's Sparrow. There are distinctive features that separate the two. The problem is getting a good look. Eventually your patience pays off when you see the white central crown stripe and chestnut streaks on the nape that rule out Nelson's (and Saltmarsh) Sparrows. This LeConte's Sparrow was photographed by David Winston on Oct. 21, 2017 at Cove Island Wildlife Sanctuary in Stamford.



Photo Challenge No. 100

## THE CONNECTICUT WARBLER

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Illustrations and photographs are needed and welcome. Line art of Connecticut and regional birds should be submitted as good quality prints or in original form. All submitted materials will be returned. We can use good quality photographs of birds unaccompanied by an article but with caption including species, date, locality, and other pertinent information.

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