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THE ESKIMO CURLEW: IS IT REALLY EXTINCT?



The Eskimo Curlew, like this bird possibly collected at Old Saybrook in 1874, had all but disappeared by 1900. Yet, credible sightings continue to be made.

The Eskimo Curlew is a bird of myth for most bird-watchers. Once widespread, it all but disappeared by 1900.

Or did it? Much of its breeding, wintering and migratory habitat are intact, and competent observers continue to see it.

The species was a common breeder of the western arctic as well as a common fall migrant along northern portions of the east coast. Before departing over the Atlantic Ocean to South America, much of the population staged on the coast of Labrador, although smaller numbers are

thought to have stopped along the south shore of Hudson and James Bay. South of Labrador, most migrants appeared on Cape Cod, Massachusetts and its adjacent islands. Some Massachusetts migrants likely traveled the coast

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This bird, apparently a juvenile based on the deeply cinnamon color on its underparts, is a previously unreported Connecticut specimen taken in New Haven between 1840 and 1844.

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overland from Hudson-James Bay, although larger numbers arriving after coastal storms appeared to be south-bound Labrador migrants.

During migration, Eskimo Curlews were associated with uplands more than with coastal marshes. In these locations, they often co-occurred with American Golden Plovers. Labrador birds fed extensively in low coastal heaths of crowberry. Further south in New England and Long Island, birds fed upon autumn-fruiting coastal plants and on such typically upland invertebrates as grass-

hoppers, butterflies, moths, earthworms and spiders.

Recent organized but short duration attempts to locate birds in the historic breeding range and along the coast of Labrador have failed. However, credible albeit mostly unverified reports of Eskimo Curlews have been made repeatedly, averaging about one observation every 1.5 years, with up to 23 birds being sighted at once. These continued observations have occurred despite the species' inconspicuousness, raising hopes that a viable population may yet exist.

New England sightings have been reported from Plymouth Beach in 1970 and Martha's Vineyard in 1972 and 2002. A bird was also observed carefully in Nova Scotia in 2006. State rare records committees have generally rejected such reports, although their stringent standards for acceptance likely facilitate type II statistical errors- rejection of the hypothesis when it is true.



This paler bird taken in September, 1890 in the Magdalen Islands, Quebec, was reported by the collector to be an adult female.

RESEARCHING THE ESKIMO CURLEW

Our next major research effort will be to establish a multi-year survey with a goal of producing definitive evidence of fall migrant Eskimo Curlews. Long-term data that could lead to multiple observations are aimed at clarifying the population status of the species- a key criterion for developing conservation plans.

We begin this investigation with the working hypothesis that up to several hundred birds still persist. If it is assumed that 1% of migrant shorebirds are identified by competent observers in any one

year, then an individual from a population of 100 would, on average, be detected every year. As birds are detected at approximately 1.5-year intervals, a population of 75 is suggested. However, as the percentage of shorebirds identified is more likely to be less than 1%, a population of 100-200 birds is more plausible, particularly for a species that is inconspicuous.

Survey procedures will consist of foot traverses across dunes, open dune thickets and coastal fields, although adjacent tidal marshes and mudflats will be scanned as they are encountered. Survey

routes are projected to cover up to 10-miles/ day, with new areas covered each day until all available habitat in the study area has been traversed, at which point re-survey of areas will commence. To the greatest extent possible, survey routes will conform to existing trails in order to avoid damage to natural vegetation. Surveys will occur daily from mid-August through the first week of September, and days with easterly storms will receive dawn to dusk coverage. As locations are identified where American Golden Plovers congregate, additional survey effort will be directed

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“We begin this investigation with the working hypothesis that up to several hundred birds still persist.”

ESKIMO CURLEW, CONTINUED

(Continued from page 3)

at these locations. However, broad surveys that include the widest extent of potential habitats possible are intended, as the most important observation made in recent years occurred at a location not usually visited by observers.

In the event that birds are encountered, we will document their presence with photography and video re-

ording. The latter is particularly vital, as the voice of the species has never been recorded. If practical, we also will attempt to mist-net individuals in order to band them. Doing so will permit sexing of individuals and a mark-recapture strategy to be employed for gaining an estimate of populations.

In preparation for this field study, we are examining museum specimens of Eskimo Curlews to develop criteria

for sexing individuals based on measurements and for ageing individuals based on plumage characteristics. Both criteria are poorly documented at present. Measurements taken are bill length, bill depth, tarsal length, length of the middle toe, tail length, and wing chord. Measurement data will be subjected to statistical analysis to segregate males from females and adults from juveniles.

FLOODPLAIN VIDEO ON INTERNET

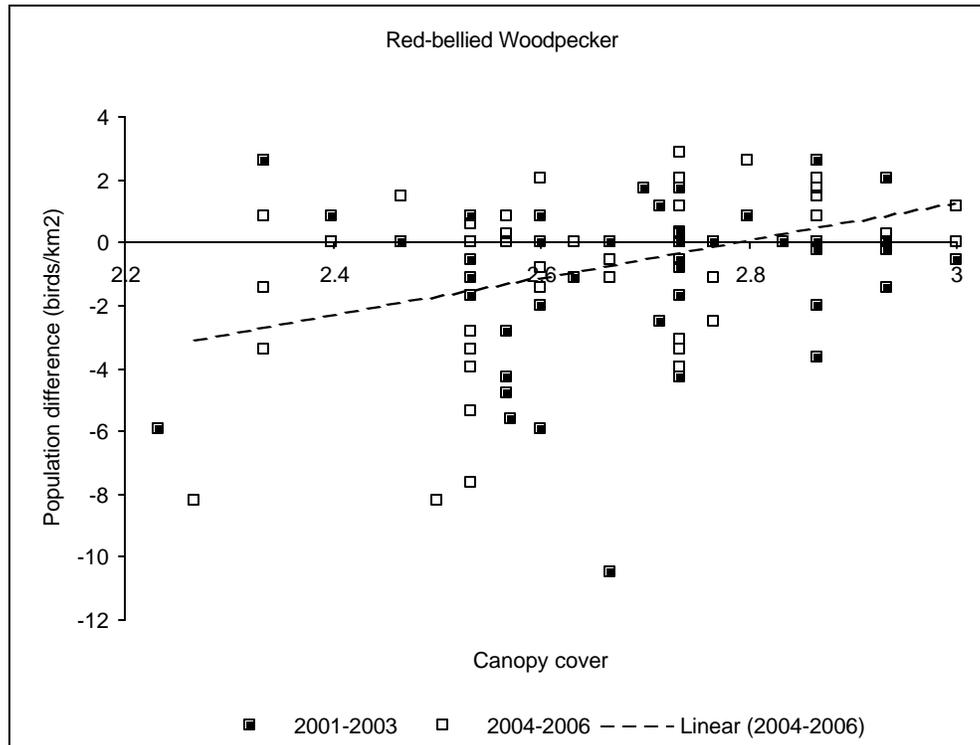
The first of our planned series of video productions on New England habitats is now available for download from our web site, www.birdconservationresearch.org. To accommodate our expanding selection of educator resources, we have added a web page devoted solely to showcasing these resources. From the entry page, click on the Educator Resources tab, and then click on the video link.

Although we view this first video as a pilot project and plan on producing more sophisticated videos in the future, this one already provides the most in-depth and detailed view of New England floodplain environments available anywhere. It is offered at no cost to the education community.



Dr. Craig examines a stem of River Bulrush in the video production *Floodplains*.

FOREST BIRD SURVEY CONTINUES TO YIELD FINDINGS



Winter Red-bellied Woodpecker populations increased (numbers less than one) over those of summer in forests of more open canopies (numbers less than 3).

Of 10 permanent resident bird species studied, the Tufted Titmouse, Blue Jay and Northern Cardinal showed consistent, significant population declines, whereas the Black-capped Chickadee showed significant increases from summer to winter and the Red-bellied Woodpecker had nearly significant winter increases. Five species showed no clear seasonal trend. In addition, populations of 6 of 10 species became significantly more concentrated from summer to winter at lower southern elevations of the

study area.

Aside from two species that shifted their seasonal populations based on canopy cover, few significant changes occurred in seasonal use of habitats at the population level. At the individual level, four of six species occupied winter habitats with significantly lower elevation/ latitude than those of summer during at least one set of study years, and all six species showed trends toward wintering at lower elevation/ latitudes. Three species also exhibited a significant seasonal change in use

of vegetation types during at least one set of study years.

Hence, despite observed population movements by most resident species, including those thought to be largely sedentary, the few clear and consistent shifts in association of species with forest habitat structure suggests that the principal factor related to seasonal population movement is wintering at lower elevation/ latitudes. Doing so brings birds to locations with milder climates, which reduces their metabolic energy consumption.

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these services, we need your continued support! Membership applications and payment options are also available at www.birdconservation-research.org