

BIRD CONSERVATION

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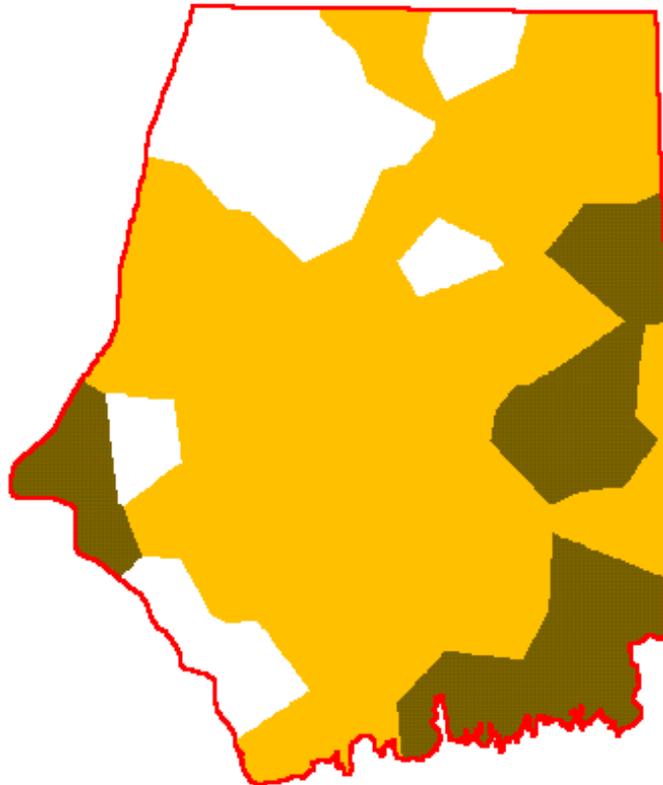
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MAPPING FOREST BIRD DENSITIES



This map of the density distribution of the Great-crested Flycatcher in eastern Connecticut shows that densities average greatest at lower elevations of the coast and along the Rhode Island border.

The next phase in the analysis of our forest bird data is mapping species densities across Connecticut and Rhode Is-

land. In order to make maps, it is necessary to know densities at specific points across the landscape. We, therefore,

calculated densities at each of our 148 survey transects and organized

(Continued on page 2)

FOREST HABITATS- CONTINUED

BGGN	EABL	VEER	HETH	WOTH	AMRO	GRCA		
	0	0	26.186	1.0089	9.662	3.81	9.2643	
7.2584		0	36.006	1.0089	13.527	11.43	64.85	
7.2584		0	19.639	4.0355	9.662	7.6201	9.2643	
14.517	2.8318	32.732		0	7.7296	0	46.321	
14.517		0	13.093		0	11.594	22.86	55.586
7.2584		0	32.732	1.0089	17.392	7.6201	9.2643	
43.55		0	42.552		0	13.527	3.81	18.529
	0	0	36.006	7.0622	1.9324	3.81		0
7.2584		0	32.732	1.0089	34.783	22.86		9.2643

An excerpt from a spreadsheet shows densities of birds/ km² at each of a series of transects.

(Continued from page 1)

the data into a table of species vs. transect densities.

The illustration above shows a small portion of this table. It reports densities at nine transects for the Blue-gray Gnatcatcher, Eastern Bluebird, Veery, Hermit Thrush, Wood Thrush, American Robin and Gray Catbird. Even this small section demonstrates that the Eastern Bluebird is not widespread within primarily forested habitats. The

Veery, in contrast, is one of the most abundant species across the entire region. The American Robin and Gray Catbird, not often thought of as forest birds, are surprisingly common and widespread as well.

Notably, however, the whole data set indicates that the ground-nesting Veery is far less common in areas where forest is surrounded by extensive urbanization. Ongoing studies on forest fragmentation will study such patterns further.

Such data are converted into maps by making use of geographic information systems computer software. We employ Arcview, which is also used by most towns across Connecticut and Rhode Island as well as by other regional land planning agencies. Our goal is to provide conservationists with mapped data that they can incorporate into their own natural resource databases.

“...the ground-nesting Veery is far less common in areas where forest is surrounded by extensive urbanization.”

Bird Conservation Research Blog

Recent news from Bird Conservation Research, Inc. about its work on the conservation of New England's birds and on the promotion of environmental education.



IVORY-BILLED GHOST BIRDS

BCR's blogs now have 16,000 readers. One of our most popular, first posted on *Blogspot*, is reproduced below.

I have tucked away in an old file a letter addressed to me from James Tanner. He was someone who I had known of since my early teens, although when I initially corresponded with him I didn't let on that I did. Back in the days before computer generated form letters, he replied to me with a personal and eminently polite note concerning the graduate program at his institution.

At that early point in my scientific career, I was debating in whose footsteps I might wish to follow. Would it be those of Tanner- the last individual to study the Ivory-billed Woodpecker- a guide across the Styx into the world of ghosts? Or, alternatively, would it be with someone who could tutor me in the practical and possible? My decision turned out to be somewhere between those opposing poles- I would follow an

individual who had already left this world, John Sage, a founder of the American Ornithologists Union who was ending his career about the time that Tanner was beginning his. He was also a student of Connecticut birds, so continuing on his distributional studies was something that I could actually do. Back in the early 1970s, when it was still possible to sit in a university collection room alone and unsupervised, I would spend my late evenings in front of Sage's hand-written catalogs and his tray of preserved Passenger Pigeons, contemplating the individual who had collected them. To this day, I continue largely in Sage's shadow .

But still, thoughts of Ivory-bills never quite faded. Over the decades intervening between then and now, I have quietly launched solitary albeit unsystematic searches for them. In all,

my searches have been limited in scope, never reaching the magical thousand-hour threshold that seems the minimum for recording low probability events. But still, I've tried and will likely try more. There are so many thousands of acres of habitat and so few people out really looking that it has seemed just possible that birds might survive somewhere.

The inaccessible and inhospitable nature of the species' last known refuges- bottomland forests- also appeared to argue that it could be persisting undetected. Suggestion has also been made- and seems to be backed up by observed patterns of sightings and disappearance- that any remaining birds might be nomadic, so where they are one year is not necessarily where they are the next. Such a possibility would make documenting their occurrence doubly diffi-

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“As our continent's supply of mature bottomland forest continues to grow, we may yet see this bird emerge from its present ghostly status ...”

cult.

Like so many others, when several years ago credible evidence surfaced in Arkansas and Florida (in the latter case, right near where I had been searching myself) that Ivory-bills were still extant, I was exhaltant. I knew it. They had to be somewhere. I watched the videos and listened to the recorded calls posted on the internet. I found the videos modestly convincing, but the sounds? Certainly. In their cadence and phrasing and horn-like quality, it seemed to me that they could be nothing else. I had burned into my head those very sounds from 1930s recordings I had listened to years before.

And then, enter the naysayers. It is a venerable tradition in academia that critique follows assertion- tire-some and apparently self-serving at times- but most would say essential nonetheless. In this case several groups took on the evidence presented and negated it point by point. The images could have been this, the sounds could have been that, statistical inference indicated no no no.

One suggestion was that the sounds might have been those of Blue Jays. I could see why one might think so, but I disagreed. I've just completed, a la John Sage, eight years of surveying Connecticut's forest birds (see this work here) in which I detected individuals via vocalizations under varying field conditions, topography and distance. During those years, I counted the better part of two thousand jays and in

the process heard what seems likely to be every variation on a jay call theme. My ears told me that those recordings were not of jays.

And then there was the issue that one of the naysayers had not too many years before edited a volume on Connecticut birds. In that volume, it stated that it was absolutely, positively and otherwise definitely impossible to survey quantitatively the birds of the entire state. Well, as it turns out, I just did that, alone and on my own dime, covering over a thousand miles on foot, and not just in summer but in winter as well, and I threw in the whole state of Rhode Island for good measure. So, assertions to the contrary aside, it was possible. Dogged determination, persistence and belief go a long way toward making the impossible possible. I hope traits like these will guide the serious searchers for the Ivory-billed Woodpecker in the years that follow.

It was, thus, with some dismay that I read that one of the key institutions behind re-discovery attempts, the Cornell Lab of Ornithology (Tanner's alma mater, by the way), was discontinuing its intensive field efforts to find birds. This led me to investigate who was behind the surveys. From the photos I located, it appeared that the teams consisted principally of young students. Physical stamina is certainly an advantage in the daunting work required of a survey of this sort. I discovered my own decreasing stamina limits late

last summer when, during field searches for migrant Eskimo Curlews, my legs began giving out after hour upon hour of trudging along Cape Cod dune trails. However, there is a trade-off between stamina and experience. Back in Tanner's day, the senior Arthur Allen and Peter Kellogg were out with him during those historic Ivory-bill studies. I regularly see how my own years of experience give me a substantial advantage over the less practiced in distinguishing subtleties, in understanding how to look and in detecting what others might miss. I hope this generation of senior Cornell figures has, similarly to their predecessors, made a significant field contribution to the recent efforts.

Despite professions by some of the scientific elite that the Ivory-bill is either extinct or beyond saving, my feelings remain different. What I see from published reports is a species that appears to have persisted for a century over significant portions of its former range without any human help. As our continent's supply of mature bottomland forest continues to grow, we may yet see this bird emerge from its present ghostly status back to that of a resilient and revered member of our wildlife community.

ESKIMO CURLEW SEARCH ENTERS THIRD YEAR



This apparent juvenile, collected on Spotted Island, Labrador on August 20, 1918, was one of the last Eskimo Curlews ever collected.

Last year's search for the Eskimo Curlew focused on Barnstable and Chatham on Cape Cod—both locations where birds were collected historically. This year we plan to extend our searches further north to the outer Cape, where birds also occurred historically.

For the first time last year, we obtained tantalizing evidence that curlews may still be passing through the Cape unnoticed in locations where

birders rarely think to go. Most observers focus on tidal mudflats for their fall bird watching, as this is where most shorebirds congregate. Eskimo Curlews, however, were not reported to have used such locations commonly. Instead, they appeared in coastal fields, dune swales and low heaths with fruiting shrubs.

Most curlews appeared to leave North America via the coast of Labrador as they journeyed across

the Atlantic Ocean to South America. Especially during times of coastal storms, however, significant numbers were blown from their ocean route to the shores of Cape Cod. Such appearances continued into the final years of the 19th century. Curlews were last collected from the Cape in 1890, although a bird was collected further north at Newburyport, Massachusetts as late as 1908.

“For the first time last year, we obtained tantalizing evidence that curlews may still be passing through the Cape unnoticed ...”

The Newsletter of
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Bird Conservation Research, Inc.

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Just like with these American Woodcock eggs, we need help to hatch and grow.

MEMBERSHIP

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options are also available at www.birdconservation-research.org