

BIRD CONSERVATION

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LIFE HISTORIES OF PACIFIC ISLAND BIRDS



A Saipan Reed-warbler flies from the hand after being color banded and measured.

BCR is collaborating with Cornell University's *Birds of the World* initiative to produce life histories of birds of the tropical Pacific. Most species remain largely unstudied and many are also endangered, so

synthesizing existing information and adding to it original observations is producing essential data for conservation.

To date, we have completed life history studies of two species

from the Mariana Islands of the western Pacific—the Rota White-eye (<https://www.birdconservationresearch.org/pdf/rota%20white-eye%20birds%20of%20the%20world.pdf>) and

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PACIFIC BIRDS

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“DNA studies have been transforming our understanding of how species are distributed across the tropical Pacific.”



The Yellow Bittern, a close relative of the North American Least Bittern, is widespread in southeast Asia and native to the Mariana Islands, where it might represent a separate species.

Saipan Reed-warbler
(<https://www.birdconservationresearch.org/pdf/reed-warbler%20BNA.pdf>).

Both are only recently recognized as distinct species and both are also designated as U.S. endangered.

DNA studies have been transforming our understanding of how species are distributed across the tropical Pacific. In a number of instances, populations long thought to represent single species are now known to be derived from

separate island colonizations. Some, like the Rota White-eye, appear to be descended from a different ancestral species than that of other populations of superficially similar individuals.

The Marianas Yellow Bittern in the photo above is an example of a virtually unstudied species. There have been no behavioral or ecological studies performed on it except for several general population surveys. Its plumage differs from that

of other Yellow Bittern populations and it is principally an inhabitant of uplands. In contrast, southeast Asian populations are associated with marshes. DNA studies may yet determine that it is a separate species.

MARSH BIRDS OF THE CONNECTICUT RIVER



The Least Bittern is a secretive species of marshes that is among the least studied of North American birds.

This spring will begin the 50th year of studies on tidal marsh birds of the Connecticut River ecosystem. Initial studies began in the spring of 1974, when all major marshes of the river were surveyed from the river mouth to the Massachusetts border.

Major field observations were repeated in 1987 and 1994, and detailed studies of a series of eight freshwater tidal marshes were undertaken in 1999 and 2000. This spring, we will repeat this latter study—the first

undertaken by BCR, (<https://www.birdconservationresearch.org/pdf/species-area.pdf>) and this will produce a 25 year update of our initial work. Many of these sites were also visited in 1974, so we will have a 50 year perspective on the dynamics of these marsh bird communities.

Such a long series of observations is a rarity in ecological investigations. This long-term study will compliment our previous 35-year study of forest birds at Yale-Myers Forest (<https://birdconservationresearch.org/pdf/Yale%20Forest.pdf>) and

20-year investigation of northeast Connecticut's forest birds (<https://birdconservationresearch.org/pdf/NECT%20forest%20birds%20publisher.pdf>). We will be examining changes in bird species composition, population densities and habitat.

“Such a long series of observations is a rarity in ecological investigations.”

FOREST FRAGMENTATION

“...our studies also demonstrated that natural forest breaks like those related to watercourses have little negative effect on forest bird communities.”



Selectively logged forests like this one in Yale Forest, Union, CT provide habitat for a variety of forest gap species—those that specialize in occupying small forest openings.

Although our studies of forest fragmentation effects (<https://birdconservationresearch.org/pdf/forest%20fragmentation.pdf>) have demonstrated numerous deleterious effects on bird communities, our studies also demonstrated that natural forest breaks like those related to watercourses have little negative effect on them. Similarly, the effects of such activities as selective logging appear to have a positive impact on the community.

A number of forest bird species are associated with forest gaps—those areas in the forest where openings occur in the canopy. These openings can occur due to the presence of watercourses, marshes or tree loss due to storms or disease. Selective logging can mimic these types of disturbances and, once sunlight reaches the forest floor, vigorous growth by shrubs and sapling trees occurs.

Such species as the Chestnut-sided Warbler, Baltimore Oriole, Rose-

breasted Grosbeak, Eastern Towhee and Least Flycatcher are regular inhabitants of upland gaps. Along watercourses and marshes, such species as the Eastern Phoebe, Eastern Kingbird and Common Yellowthroat are particularly common. The presence of these types of species adds to the richness of the forest bird community.

THE NEW FIELD STATION



The lower Connecticut River and its associated floodplain forests and tidal marshes form a rich environment for numerous bird species, including some found almost exclusively in this area.

Some of the same issues that we dealt with previously have followed us to our new location. Our field borders are again overgrown with invasive alien shrubs and vines, the emerald ash borer has decimated ash trees in the region and a number of invasive hybrid butternut trees must be removed from the property. Work on removing butternuts has already begun.

The butternuts are derived from native butternuts (*Juglans cinerea*) hybridizing with

Japanese butternuts (*J. ailantifolia*). The offspring exhibit hybrid vigor in that they are disease resistant, grow rapidly and produce large quantities of viable seeds. In southern New England, pure native trees are now virtually exterminated.

One great advantage of our new location is its proximity to the lower Connecticut River ecosystem. Unlike most major New England rivers, it has no major city at its mouth and so it and its associated tidal wetlands have survived

in their wild state largely intact. In addition, much of the uplands surrounding the river have been protected through establishment of state parks, state forests and land trust properties. The region remains one of the most heavily forested portions of Connecticut.

“One great advantage of our new location is its proximity to the lower Connecticut River ecosystem.”

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Bird Conservation Research, Inc.

Membership

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The Red-winged Blackbird will be one of the targets of our ongoing studies this spring.

MEMBERSHIP

It is time to renew your membership for 2024. If you have not yet become a member, you may do so online through GoFundMe ([https://](https://www.gofundme.com/f/1nqlss)

www.gofundme.com/f/1nqlss). Memberships remain one of our principal means of funding the projects that we conduct, so please consider joining us.

Membership applications and contribution options are also available on our web site: <https://www.birdconservationresearch.org/membership.php>.