

# BIRD CONSERVATION

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## YEAR 51 OF CONNECTICUT RIVER STUDIES



This photo illustrates the entrance to Selden Creek at 4:40 a.m. in June, 1974—the first year of bird studies on the Connecticut River.

This spring, we will be completing a duplicate of our freshwater tidal marsh study first undertaken in 1999 (<https://www.birdconservationresearch.org/pdf/species-area.pdf>). This duplicate survey permits us to

evaluate 25 years of change in the bird communities of the lower Connecticut River. Such a long-term perspective provides insights into the dynamics of this system—have species colonized or disappeared from these places; have the densities of common

species increased or decreased? Finding answers to these sorts of questions is a first step in understanding the mechanisms that drive community change.

Our perspective on this

*(Continued on page 2)*

# CONNECTICUT RIVER

## -CONTINUED

**“Although the habitat changes at these freshwater marshes have been comparatively small compared with those at brackish marshes, subtle changes have occurred.”**



In 1974, the Snowy Egret was by far the commonest egret on the Connecticut River. Now its larger relative, the Great Egret, predominates in freshwater tidal marshes.

system is actually much longer than 25 years. These same sites were first visited in 1974 and they were visited again during the 1980s. The survey protocols differed during these earlier visits but the results are still generally comparable, which permits us to gain a 50 year perspective on the dynamics of this system.

During these years, a number of profound changes have occurred. Among them, Bank Swallows and gulls, particularly Herring Gulls, have largely disappeared, whereas they were abundant in 1974. Moreover, Ospreys

have returned after being reduced to a single infertile pair in 1974 and egrets have continued to rebound from early 20<sup>th</sup> century market hunting.

An integral part of this investigation has involved evaluation of habitat changes that have occurred over the course of the study. Vegetation was mapped in 1974, 1999 and 2024. Although the habitat changes at these freshwater marshes have been comparatively small compared with those at brackish marshes, subtle changes have occurred.

We are also comparing results of our marsh bird studies with those from concurrent studies on forest birds (e.g., [https://www.birdconservationresearch.org/pdf/NECT\\_forest\\_birds\\_publication.pdf](https://www.birdconservationresearch.org/pdf/NECT_forest_birds_publication.pdf)). These similarly occurred over 25 years. Turnover in species composition in this instance exceeded 30%. Such change was consistent with predicted effects of climate and habitat change, but much of the shift was unrelated to phenomena like these.

# PACIFIC ISLAND BIRDS: LIFE HISTORIES



The extensive native forests on the south coast of Rota are among the last refuges of the Mariana Crow.

Our latest complete life history study is for what may now be the world's most endangered crow—the Mariana Crow ([https://www.birdconservationresearch.org/pdf/Mariana\\_Crow\\_bow.pdf](https://www.birdconservationresearch.org/pdf/Mariana_Crow_bow.pdf)). As part of ongoing studies to understand population trends and habitat use by this species, we have recently authored a work that examines for 108 individuals habitat occupancy during the wet and dry seasons (<https://www.birdconservationresearch.org/pdf/MarianaCrow.pdf>). This analysis demonstrated that, as is traditionally assumed, the majority of birds occupied forest. However, when habitat

use and availability were compared, they did not differ statistically. Hence, when crows were still common in the 1990s, they were best characterized as being habitat generalists. When the population was large, individuals occupied preferred forest habitats but also sub-optimal ones from which they have since receded.

In more recent studies, the Rota population has been found to have plummeted from nearly 1,000 in the early 1990s to under 200 now. Survivorship of particularly first year birds has been low, apparently as a consequence of predation by feral cats and an as yet unidentified

disease. A captive breeding program has been established that is returning birds to the wild, thereby sustaining the population while cat control is undertaken.

A population of birds also once occupied neighboring Guam, although this population succumbed to predation by the introduced Brown Tree Snake, with the last native individuals observed in 2003.

**“...we have recently authored a work that examined for 108 individuals habitat occupancy during the wet and dry seasons.”**



# CONNECTICUT'S CHANGING COMMUNITIES

“A number of tree and shrub species we’ve highlighted... are species that range primarily through the Southeast and are near their northern range limit in Connecticut.”



Although commonly planted as an ornamental, the River Birch is native to Connecticut River floodplains—particularly around the Enfield area.

As we’ve been documenting in previous editions of *Bird Conservation*, Connecticut’s natural habitats are changing. A number of tree and shrub species that we’ve highlighted, including the Post Oak, Chinkapin Oak, American Holly,

American Redbud and Tulip Poplar, range primarily through the Southeast and are near their northern range limit in Connecticut. Some are now showing signs of rapidly expanding their local populations as global climate warms.

Another species that is

characteristic of the Southeast is River Birch—a tree primarily associated with floodplain habitats. It is found in some floodplain tracts along the Connecticut River. However, like American Holly, it is a commonly planted ornamental and can escape from cultivation. Although a

# COMMUNITIES *-CONTINUED*



This mixed Turkey and Black Vulture roost in Hadlyme, CT is of comparatively recent occurrence. Black Vultures have invaded the state from the south in recent decades.

**“As  
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fairly sizeable native population exists in floodplains in the Enfield area of northern Connecticut, it is now also present even away from floodplains in woodlands bordering the lower Connecticut River. At least some of these individuals are likely escapes from cultivation.

As Connecticut’s habitats evolve, so do the birds that live within them. The Black Vulture, a species whose northern range limit was once the extreme southern tip of New Jersey, is now a

fairly common sight throughout the state, where it frequently flocks and roosts with the Turkey Vulture.

Other typically southeastern coastal plain birds have in recent decades similarly become well-established. These include the Pine Warbler, Red-bellied Woodpecker, Tufted Titmouse, Hooded Warbler and Northern Cardinal. Still others, like the Prothonotary Warbler, are beginning to establish a foothold in the state. As climate warms

and habitat evolve, more such changes are to be expected.

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# Bird Conservation Research, Inc.

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The Pied-billed Grebe is one of the Connecticut River's rarest breeding species.

## MEMBERSHIP

It is time to renew your membership for 2025. 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](https://www.gofundme.com/f/1nqlss)). Memberships remain one of our principal means for 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>.