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Marsh Birds of the Connecticut River



The elegant Great Egret has become widespread along the Connecticut River.

This year's studies of Connecticut River marsh birds have expanded beyond the freshwater portions of the river to include salt and brackish regions close to the river mouth. Doing so assists with gaining a better understanding of distributional changes that have occurred during the past 52 years of investigation.

A number of species have greatly expanded their range since studies began in 1974. In still other instances, species have largely or entirely disappeared from the river's marshes. By documenting such changes, we seek to understand the processes that have produced these patterns.

Connecticut River- *continued*

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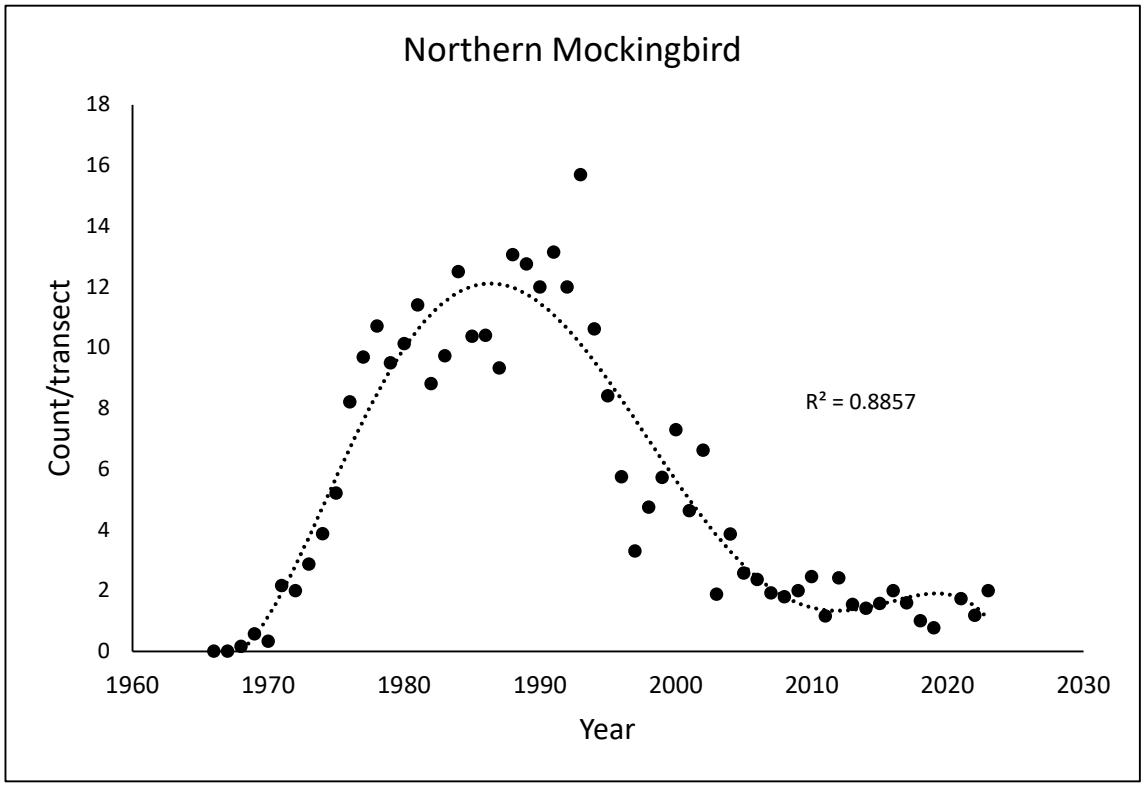
The Connecticut River's freshwater tidal marshes generally succeed to stands of wild rice during late summer.

Among the species that have expanded populations and distributions are the Bald Eagle and Osprey. Both these species had populations reach a low point in 1974 as a consequence of persistent pesticide-induced infertility. The Bald Eagle was entirely absent, with its summer occurrence not being recorded until 1999. In 1974, the Osprey was reduced to a single pair of birds that unsuccessfully attempted nesting on Great Island in Old Lyme. At present, there are about 1000 Osprey nests in the state, with many of these occurring along the Connecticut River.

Other species that have expanded their numbers and range include the Great Egret, Great Blue Heron and Fish Crow, which in 1974 were largely limited in their occurrence to near the river mouth. At present, they may be found along much of the river.

Species have undergone declines. The Snowy Egret was the commonest heron along the river, although it is now largely restricted to near the river mouth, where it occurs uncommonly. Similarly, the Black-crowned Night Heron, once common, has largely receded from the river.

Bird Population Trends



The Northern Mockingbird's population exhibited a strong increase followed by a strong decrease.

One of our ongoing projects is to examine the population trends of all of Connecticut's bird species. By taking such a broad view, we hope to identify the major environmental factors that affect populations. This work expands upon long-term studies of the Connecticut River and the forests of northeastern Connecticut.

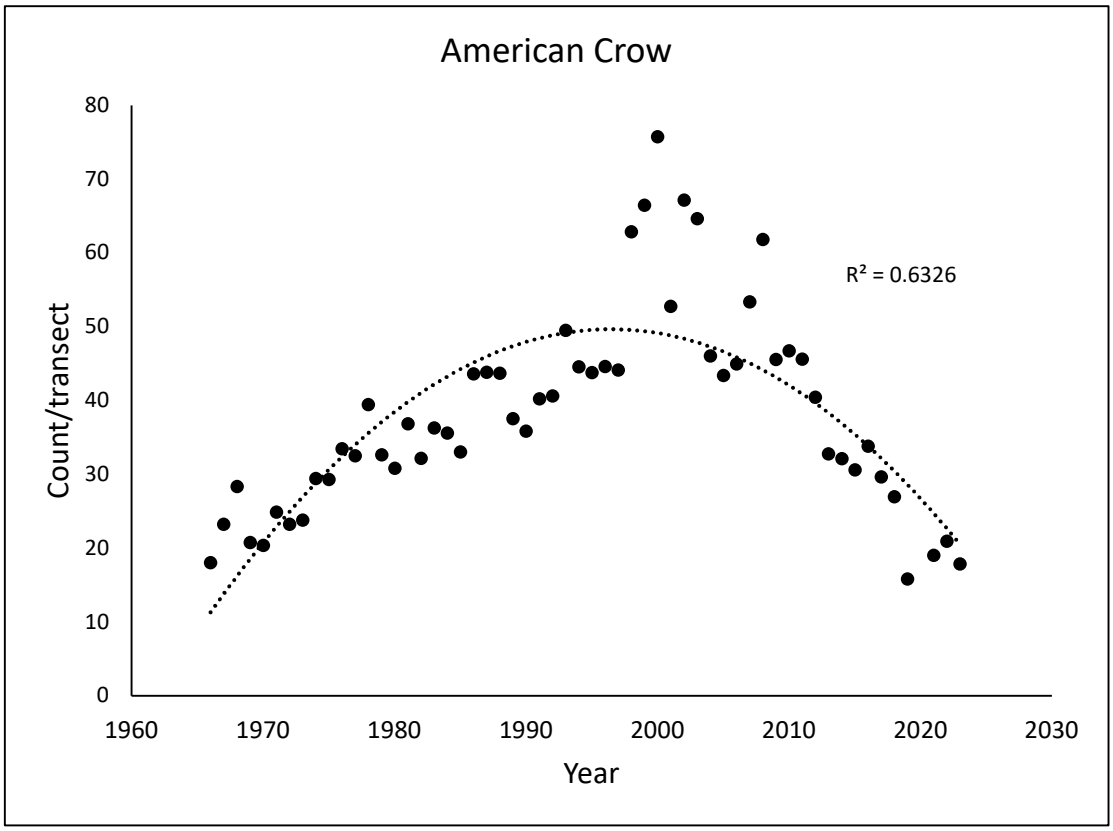
In our studies to date, it is clear that comparatively few species have exhibited long-term population stability. Most species are either increasing or decreasing. This trend is apparent even among species groups as different as waterfowl and songbirds.

There are a number of potential agents associated with population changes. These include habitat change, climate change, human activity, changes in food availability and the emergence of diseases. However, distinguishing among these and other causative agents tends to be a complicated undertaking. Oftentimes, there is no clear link between observed patterns and the processes that cause them.

One example of this difficulty in assigning a cause is the case of the Northern Mockingbird. During much of the past century, numbers grew explosively throughout

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Trends- *continued*



The American Crow similarly expanded Connecticut number into the 1990s and then declined sharply.

The timing of the species' decline directly corresponds to the virus's arrival into the state.

Connecticut and elsewhere in the Northeast. It is a species that is tolerant of human activity and often appears to prosper in human-associated landscapes such as gardens, farms and even suburban and urban settings. And yet, by the 1990s, numbers began to decline rapidly despite the continued expansion of the human footprint across the state. What is driving this decline is unclear. Potential agents include interaction with other species that are expanding local numbers, the emergence of a disease agent or the occurrence of some subtle habitat change that is not immediately apparent.

In another instance, that of the American Crow, numbers similarly increased into the 1990s and then sharply declined. In this case, a new disease can be directly linked to the decline—West Nile Virus. The American Crow has been demonstrated to be exceptionally susceptible to this virus. The timing of the species' decline directly corresponds to the virus's arrival into the state.

Habitat Management



This former lawn was allowed to grow up to weeds for two years. It was mowed for the first time this summer to eliminate invasive woody species. Trees are also being thinned and the remains of one recently cut tree can be seen in the foreground.

In ongoing efforts to create some earlier successional habitats for those bird species that inhabit such areas, we have now reached the next stage in transforming an acre of former lawn. In late summer, we mowed for the first time to encourage herbaceous growth and to eliminate invasive alien woody plants. At present, the site is developing into a savanna-like habitat that is being colonized by a variety of herbs such as asters, goldenrods and native grasses. We are broadcasting seeds of additional herbaceous plants such as New York ironweed and milkweed in order to diversify the developing community further.

To date, a number of bird species have begun to use this area. Chief among them is the Eastern Bluebird, for which the current conditions are ideal. Birds perch on low branches of the remaining trees (which will be thinned further this winter) and hunt for insects among the tall grasses.

Additional species that regularly use this area include the Rufous-sided Towhee and the White-eyed Vireo. Both these species are otherwise declining as Connecticut summer residents.

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