

Birdwatch #29, July 2007

Birding by Car and Bird Decline by Philip Krajewski

I have been doing a lot of car birding lately. A Pennsylvania Breeding Bird Atlas (PBBA) geographical block is a 3.5 by 4 mile rectangle covering approximately 14 square miles. Walking or sitting in one place is the optimal way to watch birds. However, with few PBBA participants, collecting data efficiently in 84 blocks would require a person to have wings in order to watch these winged creatures. I am able to fly in my dreams, but reality is the Icarus-inspired creation of Henry Ford, and I find myself awake, birding behind the wheel of my 1995 GMC Jimmy.

I drive the main and back roads of southeastern Tioga and northern Lycoming Counties for short distances and stop, either at an eruption of bird activity, usually in a field, or when I sense that a habitat will produce ample bird sightings. For instance, if I am trying for a particular bird, like the sound of a veery, wood or hermit thrush, I pull over in a wooded area, get out, and listen. If I have already documented this triumvirate of flute-like sounds in the block, I attempt to listen for, or catch sight of, the elusive wood warblers.

Tentacles of green growth which devour open space in rapid photosynthetic expansion makes seeing warblers in the summer difficult at best. If it wasn't for the red-eyed vireo singing as if it was wearing nature on its sleeve, or the ovenbird yapping like a person tattooed, hatted, and t-shirted with their defining moments, the summer woods would be a morgue looking for an avian body. I walk down the road lamenting with the thought that it **is** true: birds **are** in decline!

Warblers have not declined as precipitously as the bobwhite (84% decline), eastern meadowlark (72%), or ruffed grouse (54%), but one wonders how long these fragile birds can withstand the encroaching world. The annual cycle of the blackpoll warbler is demanding enough without the increased pressure of habitat loss. This 6-inch bird weighs less than 0.5 ounces and flies over 1,800 miles non-stop, about 90 hours across the Atlantic Ocean during fall migration, trusting that the forested areas of South America will still be intact upon arrival. In spring, its migration route through North America is dependent on finding rest-and-forage stopping points undisturbed.

The blackpoll warbler has little influence on whether a housing complex/ golf course combination replaces its favorite set of willow oaks in North Carolina. Fatal consequences lurk everywhere. A half-ounce creature does not fare well smacking into a communication tower cable on a foggy night or ramming into a tractor trailer at 70 mph. Oddly, the lynx, northern goshawk, and northern shrike of the boreal forests await as welcome natural adversaries.

While warblers, as a collective group, show a moderate decline in the separate species, the overall decrease in numbers is more drastic, and is represented by the silence of their

summer singing or the repeated statement of field observers: “Where have all the warblers gone?”

Warblers do not hide from view but act in a manner that is commensurate with their species. They are very active, flying rapidly from branch to branch, looking for crawling and flying objects to eat or feed to their young. The lack of warbler sightings, therefore, is an indication of too few warblers rather than a matter of concealed movements.

A more poignant example of bird decline is the grasshopper sparrow. Unlike the eastern meadowlark or bobolink, this field bird is rarely seen. The grasshopper sparrow is an occupant of grassland habitat and can be active and nesting in a field which is familiar to local people and never be noticed. The song is high pitched and can go undetected even when the male is singing in the open. This secretive species spends most of the time out of view, skulking around in the grass, while eating and performing the nurturing tasks of raising a brood.

The decrease in the number of farms throughout north central Pennsylvania has contributed to the decline of the grasshopper sparrow. Uncultivated fields give way to shrubs and trees, or farms are sold and developed in other ways. The loss of farmland has a tornadic effect on local culture and the grasshopper sparrow is caught up with the farmer in that their niche and way of life disappear together.

The grasshopper sparrow in its secretive and quiet existence symbolizes how vitality and abundance of life has either declined or gone extinct: without a whimper, without a sound of protest, just peacefully leaving the planet forever.

I am lucky during my car birding when a grasshopper sparrow alights on a sign post and I see one for the first time ever. The moment is turned into an occasion of thankfulness and my spirit is humbled. This ethereal encounter becomes unified as our eyes meet and I perceive that we will have similar fates: that we both will eventually blow away like pieces of tumbleweed in search of a landing spot.

A gratifying sense of unimportance follows as I get into the car, turn the engine on, and drive down the road, looking for a flock of pigeons to help me feel, with a sense of sobriety, that all is well with the world.

Birdwatch appears the second Wednesday of each month in the Outdoor Section. Please volunteer for the Pennsylvania Breeding Bird Atlas (PBBA) survey by calling me at 570-324-2492 or by accessing the Tiadaghton Audubon Society website at www.tiaudubon.org