

ISSN: 0034-2165

*The* **REDSTART**

VOLUME 90, NUMBER 3

JULY, 2023



**PUBLISHED BY THE BROOKS BIRD CLUB**

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# The REDSTART

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VOLUME 90, NUMBER 3

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*The Redstart* is published quarterly in January, April, July, and October at P.O. Box 4077, Wheeling, WV 26003. The journal of the Brooks Bird Club, it is mailed to all members in good standing. Nonmember subscription price is \$17. Individual copies are \$4, except the Foray issue, which is \$8. Changes of address and requests for back issues should be mailed to P.O. Box 4077, Wheeling, WV 26003. Articles for publication and books for review should be mailed or emailed to the editor. Printed on recycled paper. ISSN: 0034-2165

# Canaan Valley Resort State Park Species Accounts: Sparrows

John Northeimer and Marjorie Keatley

Species accounts are based on the 2002 and 2003 breeding bird surveys outlined in *Determining Breeding Bird Occurrence and Distribution Using Fixed-Radius Independent Double-Observer Point Counts, Canaan Valley Resort State Park, West Virginia* by Northeimer and Keatley (2022).

Nine sparrow species were detected during the point counts: Chipping Sparrow (*Spizella passerina*), Clay-colored Sparrow (*Spizella pallida*), Field Sparrow (*Spizella pusilla*), Dark-eyed Junco (*Junco hyemalis*), Vesper Sparrow (*Pooecetes gramineus*), Savannah Sparrow (*Passerculus sandwichensis*), Song Sparrow (*Melospiza melodia*), Swamp Sparrow (*Melospiza georgiana*), and Eastern Towhee (*Pipilo erythrophthalmus*). Vegetation classification and mapping followed descriptions from Cowardin and Golet (1979) and Fortney (1997).

## Chipping Sparrow

The Chipping Sparrow prefers open woodlands, edges of rivers and lakes, forest edges, and brushy fields (Middleton 2020). The 11 points where it was detected during the survey reflect this range of habitats, including woodland/wet shrub edge, and forest edges and openings (Figure 1). The Chipping Sparrow does occur within human modified habitats (Middleton 2020), and large populations near human habitation were noted within West Virginia during the first West Virginia Breeding Bird Atlas project (First Atlas) (Buckelew and Hall 1994). The Second Atlas of Breeding Birds in West Virginia (Second Atlas) (Bailey and Rucker 2021) also showed a significant residential habitat occupancy component.

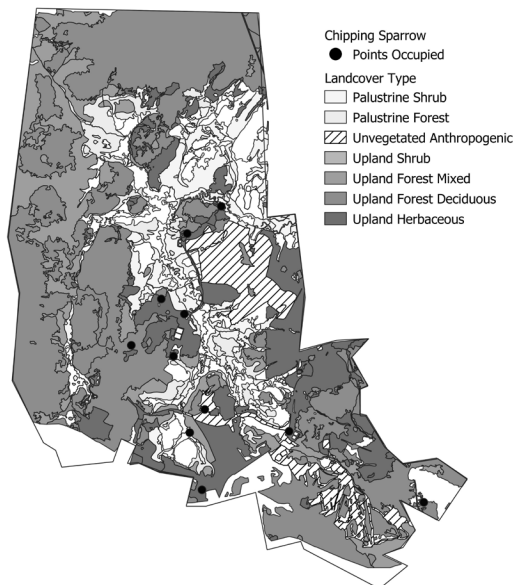


Figure 1: Chipping Sparrow occurrence and habitat associations.

## Clay-colored Sparrow

The Clay-colored Sparrow was detected at a single point during the 2001 pilot study within a hawthorn savanna on the Park. A single bird was detected at the same point the following year. This was the first summer record for West Virginia (Northeimer and Keatley 2001). Subsequent to the initial discovery in 2001, the Second Atlas recorded confirmation of breeding (bird carrying nesting material) within the Canaan Valley National Wildlife Refuge in 2011. The Clay-colored Sparrow is listed by the Division of Natural Resources as a species of greatest conservation need.

## Field Sparrow

The Field Sparrow was detected at 19 points during the survey within a variety of habitats including open woodland, herbaceous/forest edge, shrubby fields, and riparian shrublands (Figure 2). The Second Atlas showed a preference for young forest, shrub, and agricultural fields. Both the First and Second Atlases recorded the Field Sparrow breeding in all parts of West Virginia.

The fate of the Field Sparrow is uncertain, although threats do exist. The principal acknowledged threat is a widespread reduction in the quality of early successional habitats due to forest maturation, intense agricultural practices, and expanding development (Bailey and Rucker 2021). Burhans and Thompson (2006) found that an increase in housing density or the characteristics of the urban landscape had a negative effect on the Field Sparrow. All detections on the park occurred away from developed areas even though suitable habitat may have been present. The Field Sparrow is listed by the Division of Natural Resources as a species of greatest conservation need.

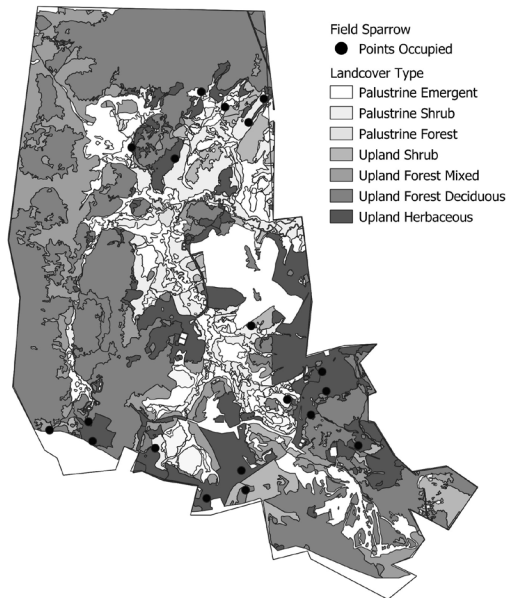


Figure 2: Field Sparrow occurrence and habitat associations.

## Dark-eyed Junco

The Dark-eyed Junco was detected at 48 points during the survey (Figure 3), occurring mainly within forest habitat (65 percent). It also inhabited forest edge, woodland, and shrub. Ehrlich et al. (1988) includes coniferous and deciduous forest, forest edge, open woodland, and bogs as breeding habitat. Hall (1983) found numbers highest in edge habitat but also stated that it occurs in good numbers in more mature forest. Buckelew and Hall (1994) found it mainly inhabiting open brushy areas, forest edge, and clearings. The Second Atlas recorded close to 50 percent of detections in deciduous forest often in the higher elevations, with abundance increasing as forest cover increased. The balance occurred in more open areas.

Rives (1898) noted that the Carolina Junco (*Junco hyemalis carolinensis*) was one of the most numerous species encountered during a visit to the Canaan Valley area in 1898. He further noted the Snow Bird [Junco] showed a lack of fidelity to forest habitat alone, being as abundant in logged areas as in the forest. Perhaps as long as preferred foraging habitat is maintained in each of these situations, the Junco will exploit them. Holmes and Robinson (1988) found that the Dark-eyed Junco, a ground level gleaner, forages by picking prey from the litter surface and low foliage.

Although the Dark-eyed Junco has declined in numbers within North America as a whole, its population more than doubled between the Atlas midpoints in West Virginia (Bailey and Rucker 2021). Matthews et al. (2004) relates potential future declines to the loss of striped maple but notes that a stronghold may remain at the higher elevations in the Appalachians.

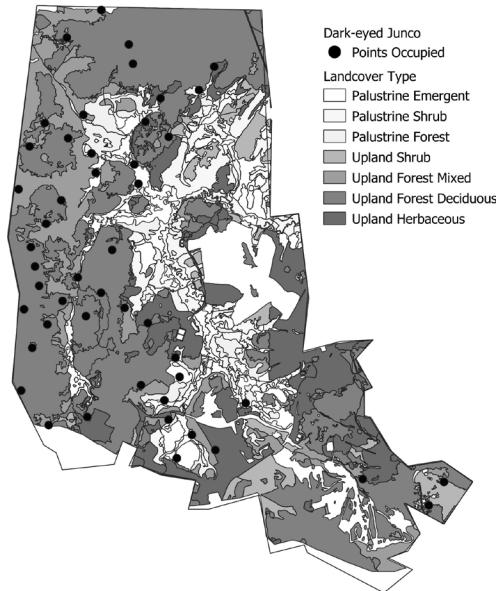


Figure 3: Dark-eyed Junco occurrence and habitat associations.

## Vesper Sparrow

Three Vesper Sparrows were detected at a single point during the 2003 survey period within an upland herbaceous field bordered by hardwood forest. The Vesper Sparrow has undergone a 65 percent population decrease in West Virginia over the last several decades (Bailey and Rucker 2021). The Vesper Sparrow is listed by the Division of Natural Resources as a species of greatest conservation need.

## Savannah Sparrow

The Savannah Sparrow occurred in open grasslands, marshes, and farmlands throughout its range within West Virginia during the First Atlas and was noted as especially common in recovered strip mines (Buckelew and Hall 1994). Both Hall (1983) and Buckelew and Hall (1994) found the Savannah Sparrow along the axis of the Allegheny Mountains and the intermountain valleys and also in the Northern Panhandle and southern highlands. The Second Atlas reflected this same distribution pattern. Brooks (1933) found the Savannah Sparrow in nine counties within West Virginia including Tucker. He observed probable breeding in Canaan Valley, with two birds exhibiting alarm, and he later observed a young bird.

The Savannah Sparrow was detected at 15 points during the survey, occurring in shrubby fields with moderate to dense ground cover composed of grasses, sedges, rushes, and forbs (Figure 4). A third of the points were within palustrine habitats containing St. John's Wort (*Hypericum* sp.), Meadowsweet (*Spiraea alba*), and Speckled Alder (*Alnus rugosa*). The Savannah Sparrow favors dense ground cover and moist microhabitats (Wiens 1969) and grassy meadows and bogs with sedges (Wheelwright and Rising 2020).

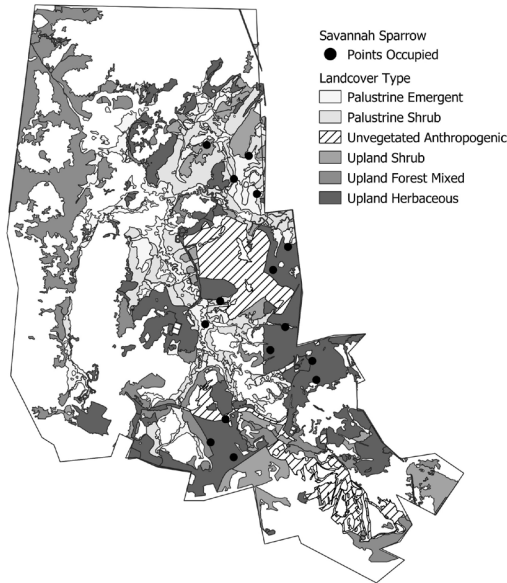


Figure 4: Savannah Sparrow occurrence and habitat associations.

## Song Sparrow

The Song Sparrow was detected at 52 points during the survey (Figure 5) primarily in shrubby fields but also in forest and woodland. These habitat components were also reflected in the distribution of Song Sparrows during the Second Atlas. Occurring throughout the state, the Song Sparrow was the fourth most widespread species during the First Atlas. Bailey and Rucker (2021) note that although the Song Sparrow historically favored shrubby wet meadows and wetlands, it has recently adapted to fence rows, old fields, and gardens. Detections during the survey were evenly split between drier habitats and those with a wetland component (25 out of 52 points).

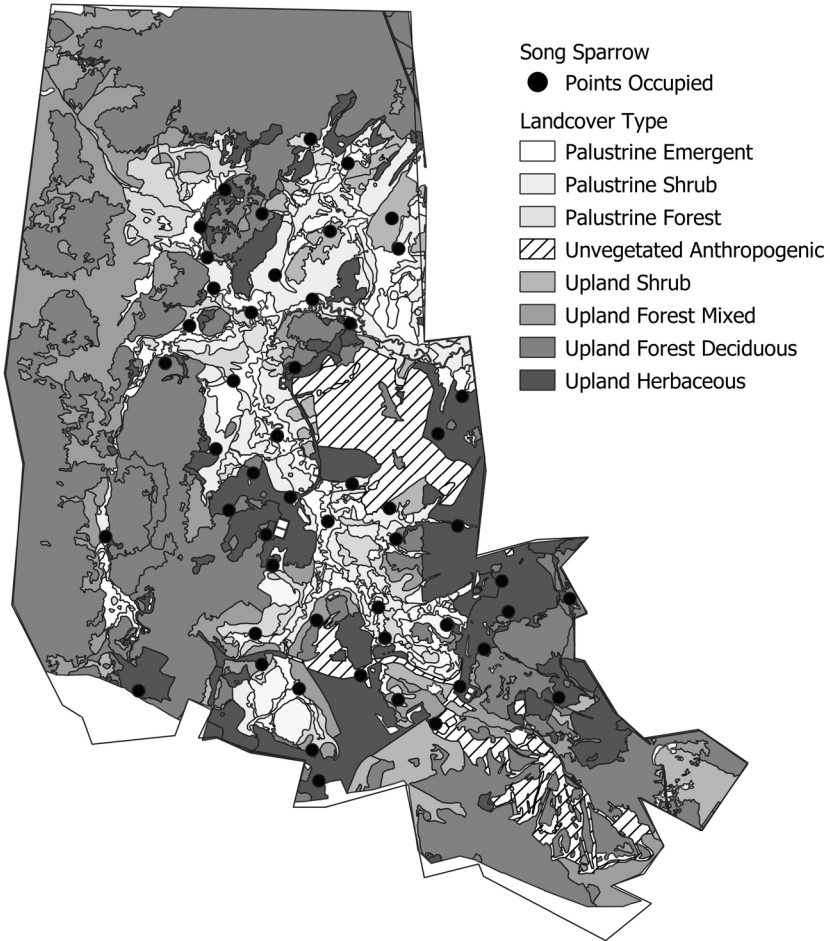


Figure 5: Song Sparrow occurrence and habitat associations.



## Swamp Sparrow

The Swamp Sparrow was detected at 35 points during the survey (Figure 6). It was the fourth most numerous species recorded during the survey. Figure 7 provides detailed floristic and cover density characteristics for all 35 occupied points. Individual species and cover density values represent the number of points where that element occurred out of the total number of points considered. Both canopy and understory densities were low or absent, with shrub cover densities evenly distributed from sparse through dense.

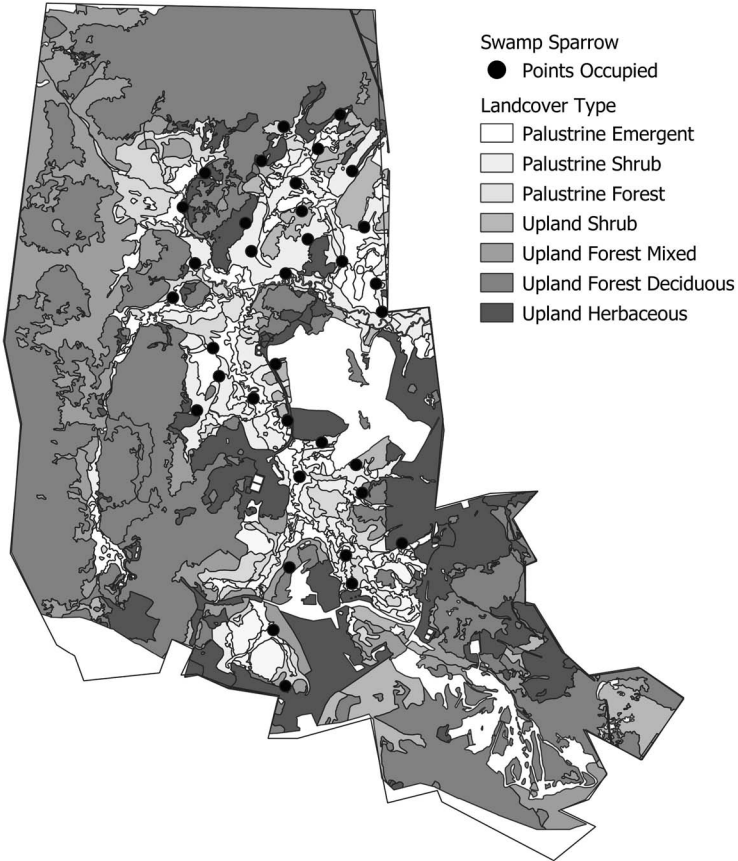
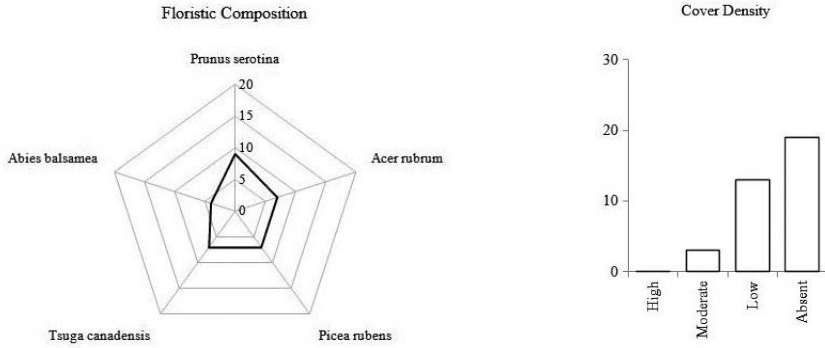


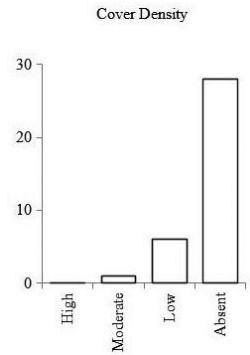
Figure 6: Swamp Sparrow occurrence and habitat associations.

## Canopy



## Understory

Insufficient Floristic Species Distribution Data  
Due to Low Density of Understory Cover



## Shrub

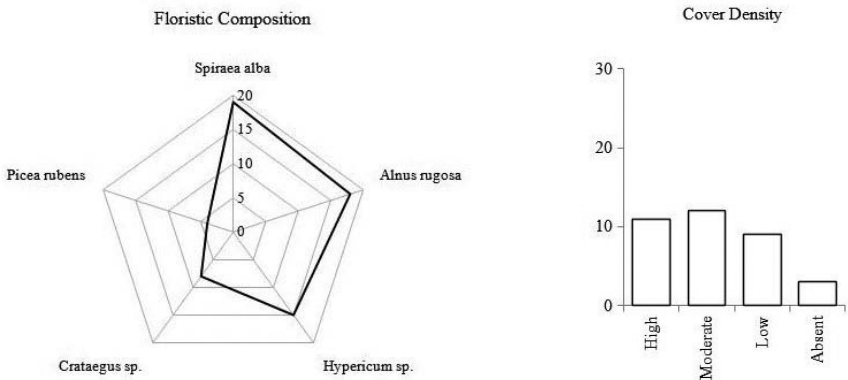


Figure 7: Swamp Sparrow habitat floristic and vegetative cover characteristics.

### Song and Swamp Sparrow Habitat Comparison

The Song and Swamp sparrows had overlapping territories, sometimes occurring together at the same point during counts. The Song Sparrow was the sole occupant at 30 of the 65 points occupied by one or both of the two sparrows. The Swamp Sparrow was the sole occupant of 13 points. Their occurrence overlapped at 22 sample points, occurring together 28 times at shared points over both years (Figure 8). All 35 points occupied by the Swamp Sparrow had a wetland component of either emergent vegetation or wet shrub, or both. Greenburg (1988) identifies water as the universal factor in the habitat selected by breeding Swamp Sparrows.

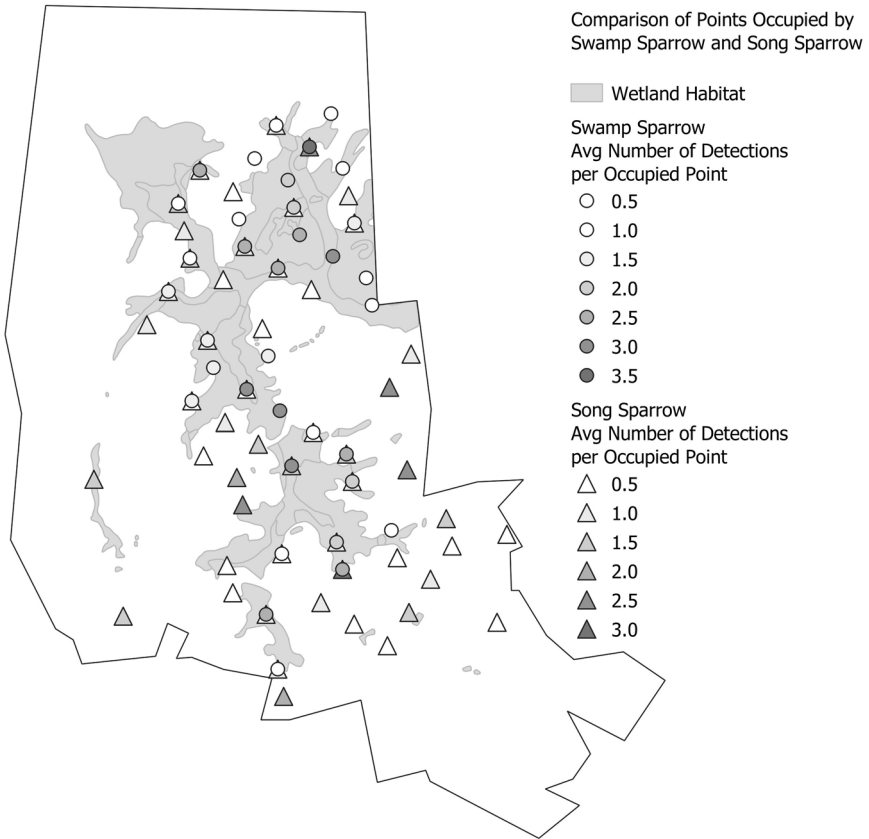


Figure 8: Combined points occupied by Swamp and Song Sparrows.

## Eastern Towhee

The Eastern Towhee was detected at 27 points during the survey. It occurred in a variety of habitats including wet shrub, shrubby field, edge, woodland, and forest (Figure 9). The Second Atlas shows a similar distribution with highest occurrence in deciduous forest, young forest, disturbed land, and shrub. Both Hall (1983) and Buckelew and Hall (1994) note a statewide distribution in similar habitats at all elevations.

Loss of early-successional habitats could threaten the numbers of this species in the state. Matthews et al. (2004) predicts an abundance decrease in the Eastern United States due to loss of Yellow Poplar (*Liriodendron tulipifera*) and changes in annual precipitation and seasonality, both related to climate change.

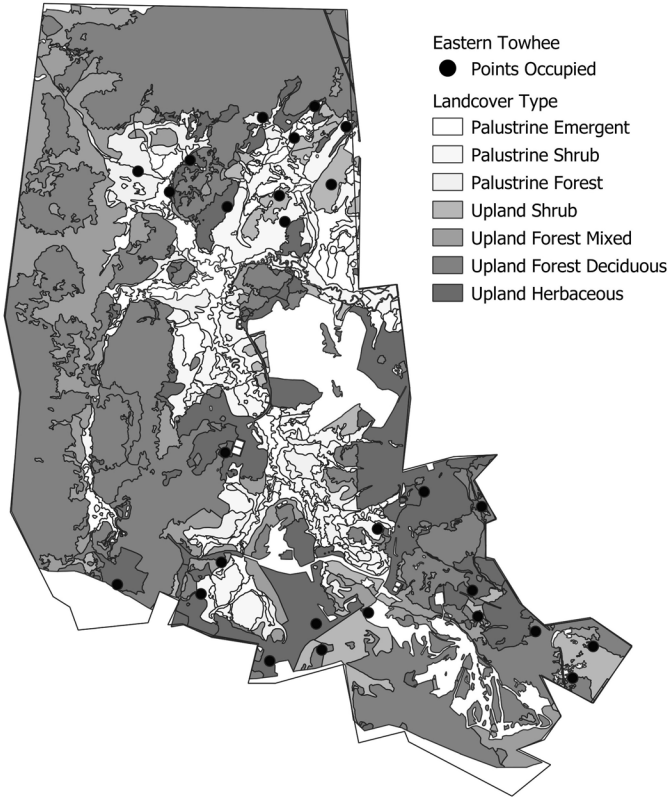


Figure 9: Eastern Towhee occurrence and habitat associations.

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# Canaan Valley Resort State Park Species Accounts: Selected Species

John Northeimer and Marjorie Keatley

Species accounts are based on the 2002 and 2003 breeding bird surveys outlined in *Determining Breeding Bird Occurrence and Distribution Using Fixed-Radius Independent Double-Observer Point Counts, Canaan Valley Resort State Park, West Virginia* by Northeimer and Keatley (2022).

Selected species: Yellow-bellied Sapsucker (*Sphyrapicus varius*), Alder Flycatcher (*Empidonax alnorum*), and Brown Creeper (*Certhia americana*). Vegetation classification and mapping followed descriptions from Cowardin and Golet (1979) and Fortney (1997).

## Yellow-bellied Sapsucker

The Yellow-bellied Sapsucker was detected at eight points during the survey (Figure 1). All eight points had dense canopies with pole size diameters greater than 11 inches at breast height. Sugar Maple (*Acer saccharum*) or Red Maple (*Acer rubrum*) was the dominant tree species within the canopy at every point, with Yellow Birch (*Betula alleghaniensis*) occurring within four. The points had a moderately dense understory and a low to moderate shrub density. American Beech (*Fagus grandifolia*) was the dominant tree species in the shrub layer at all eight points.

Tozer et al. (2011) suggests that mature maple forests present high quality breeding habitat for the Yellow-bellied Sapsucker. Savignac and Machtans (2006) also record an affinity for older, mature forests for breeding. Maples are among the group of trees used for obtaining sap in the diet (Winkler et al. 1995).

The Yellow-bellied Sapsucker was not confirmed as breeding in the state during the first West Virginia Breeding Bird Atlas project (First Atlas) (Buckelew and Hall 1994). However, the Second Atlas of Breeding Birds in West Virginia (Second Atlas) (Bailey and Rucker 2021) confirmed breeding in three counties (Tucker, Randolph, and Pocahontas) with a dramatic increase in priority block occupations (Bailey and Rucker 2021).

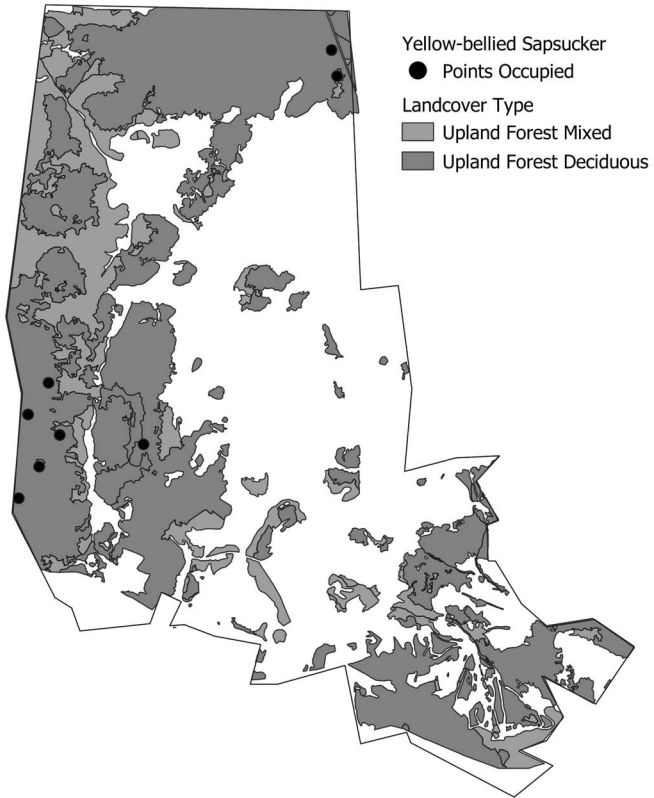


Figure 1: Yellow-bellied Sapsucker occurrence and habitat associations.



## Alder Flycatcher

The Alder Flycatcher was the most numerous of the flycatcher species detected during the survey, occurring at 31 points (Figure 2). It also had the highest number of detections statewide during the First and Second Atlases in the Canaan Valley area. The majority of detections occurred within wet shrublands or shrublands bordering herbaceous wetland. Twenty-seven points had a palustrine component. Meadowsweet (*Spiraea alba*), St. John's Wort (*Hypericum* spp.), and Speckled Alder (*Alnus rugosa*) were the dominant species within the shrub layer. Hall (1983) states that the Alder Flycatcher was a common summer resident in mountain bogs and flooded areas, nesting in low alder bushes in these wet locations. Figure 3 provides detailed floristic and cover density characteristics for the shrub layer at all 31 occupied points. Individual species and cover density values represent the number of points where that element occurred out of the total number of points considered.

Hall (1983) listed it as fairly common in appropriate habitat. Bailey and Rucker (2021) note a 247 percent increase in statewide occurrence during the Second Atlas, with most observations coming from the Allegheny Mountains. The Alder Flycatcher is obligated to breeding in shrub swamps and may experience pressure from the Willow Flycatcher competing for nesting habitat (Buckelew and Hall 1994). Climate change may also impact the breeding habitat of this species. The Alder Flycatcher is listed by the Division of Natural Resources as a species of greatest conservation need.

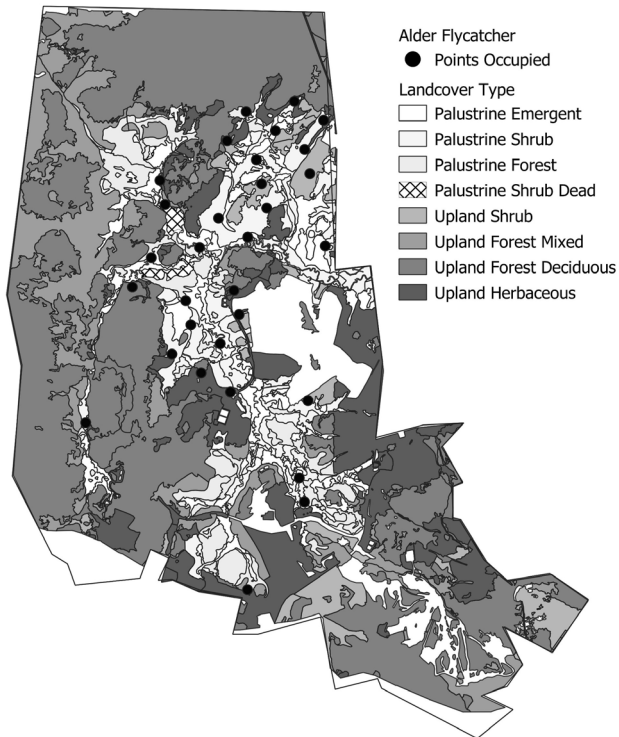


Figure 2: Alder Flycatcher occurrence and habitat associations.

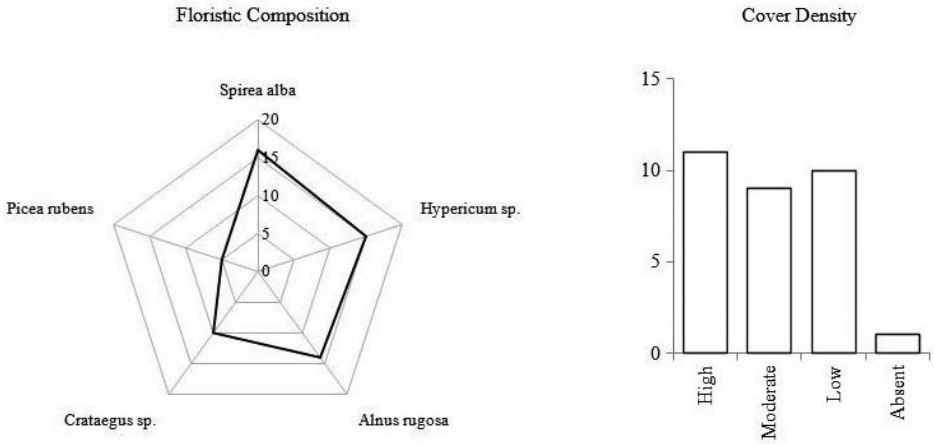


Figure 3: Shrub layer floristics and cover densities for the Alder Flycatcher.

### Brown Creeper

The Brown Creeper was detected at 13 points during the survey (Figure 4), primarily within mature, hardwood forests composed of Maples (*Acer* spp.), Black Cherry (*Prunus serotina*), and American Beech with a dense to moderate canopy, a moderate to sparse understory, and a sparse to moderate shrub layer (Figure 5). Breeding was confirmed during the First Atlas in Tucker County but not during the Second Atlas, although multiple possible and probable observations did occur within the county.

The maturing forests of the Allegheny Mountains may provide a refuge for the Brown Creeper in the future, although no clear change in occupancy between atlas periods can be made (Bailey and Rucker 2021). Climate change may result in a retraction in range to the north due to the loss of certain tree species used for foraging (Matthews et al. 2004).

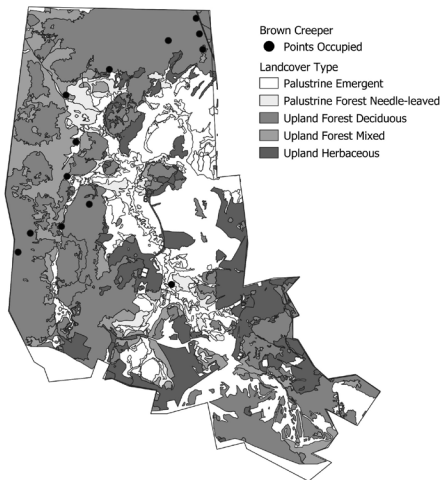


Figure 4: Brown Creeper occurrence and habitat associations.  
Figure 5: Typical habitat at occupied points for the Brown Creeper.

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## Continuing Owl Studies...from Eastern Screech-Owls to Northern Saw-whet Owls

by Bill Beatty

In 1972 when I began working as Interpretive Naturalist for Oglebay Institute's Brooks Nature Center, the center had close ties to the Brooks Bird Club. Both were named to honor A.B. Brooks, Interpretive Naturalist at the center from 1929 to 1942. At that time, all the full-time staff and many volunteers at the nature center were Brooks Bird Club members. The Brooks Nature Center was so closely aligned with the BBC, they almost seemed to be one organization, but working separately.

As part of my job at the nature center I was required to get a federal bird banding permit. Today, the most difficult part of obtaining a permit is finding a current master bird bander who will agree to train you and vouch for your skills. Fortunately for me, in 1972 there were four active banders, all BBC members, living in Ohio County and another in Brooke County about 10 miles away. We soon became friends. Two of them banded at the nature center so my training happened quickly. I regularly helped them by taking birds from the mist nets, which today is referred to as "net tending." So, thanks to the Brooks Bird Club's presence in West Virginia's northern panhandle, the first part of obtaining a master bird bander permit was fairly easy for me. The second requirement was harder. I would be required to plan and carry out research that is beneficial to the advancement of our knowledge about birds. I was in a quandary about what research would be acceptable. It was suggested that I choose a species of bird that few people have researched, which I did. My research proposal to study the breeding biology and territory size of the Eastern Screech-Owl (EASO) was accepted and in 1973 I received my federal master bird banding permit.

I began studying Eastern Screech-Owls and sometimes rehabilitating injured screech-owls and Great Horned Owls (a separate federal rehabilitation permit is required). I spent many nights outdoors researching populations of EASOs (see [https://www.brooksbirdclub.org/uploads/5/2/8/3/52832773/2002\\_redstart\\_vol\\_69-3.pdf](https://www.brooksbirdclub.org/uploads/5/2/8/3/52832773/2002_redstart_vol_69-3.pdf)). On rare occasions, I would hear Barred or Barn owls calling, but on most nights I only heard a few Great Horned Owls and many Eastern Screech-Owls. In the 28 years I studied EASOs, those four species were the only kinds of owls I ever encountered. However, I do remember conversations with BBC friends about other kinds of owls they had encountered near where I worked and lived in Ohio County. Pat Temple mentioned a Long-eared Owl she had seen in the West Liberty State College arboretum when she went to see a Brewster's Warbler I found in 1974. Betty Vossler told me of a Northern Saw-whet Owl (NSWO) she had seen in a thick tangle of wild grape vines. Betty mentioned, "They're the cutest things, but they're just not usually found around here." That was the first time anyone had mentioned anything to me about Northern Saw-whet Owls.

The next time I heard a NSWO mentioned was at the banquet of the 1978 West Virginia Wildflower Pilgrimage. John Finley came to me and said, "Come with me." We went outside to the overlook behind the Blackwater Falls State Park Lodge. John said, "Listen." Soon I heard a very un-bird-like sound I wasn't familiar with. It was a NSWO, the first I had ever heard in the wild.

Many years later I became more familiar with the song of the NSWO. One night in the BBC cabin at the West Virginia Wildflower Pilgrimage, Cindy Slater came in from the porch and told us all to come outside, which we did. Not too far away a NSWO was calling. This became a tradition for several years – Cindy listening for a NSWO and then calling us outside to hear it.

Not too long after becoming familiar with the NSWO song, Jan and I had our first face-to-face NSWO experience. We were volunteering at the Allegheny Front Migration Observatory on Dolly Sods in September 2014. Fred and Carol McCullough knew that NSWOs breed in that high mountain wilderness area. They wanted to try to trap a Northern Saw-whet Owl at the Red Creek Campground where we were camping. After dark they played the audio lure softly so as not to disturb other nearby campers. Jan and I had never seen a NSWO up close and personal, so before going to bed we stopped by Fred and Carol's campsite to see how they were doing. They weren't having any success. We had just gone to bed, when we heard a knock on our camper door. It was Fred and Carol with 2 NSWOs in-hand! Betty had been right – they are amazingly cute. And the birds seemed perfectly relaxed being handled by Fred and Carol.

With all the owl experiences I had over the years, when we heard about Project OwlNet, a continent-wide project that focuses on learning more about the elusive Northern Saw-whet Owls, Jan and I decided to look into trapping and banding NSWOs. Through Project OwlNet I found the protocols of the study and we began planning our research. On November 20, 2015 we trapped and banded our first NSWO.

With each new species of bird I've researched there is a learning curve. There is always more to learn and questions that don't yet have definitive answers. For NSWOs, one question is where these migratory owls spend their non-breeding season. Recaptures of banded birds from Project OwlNet have shown that at least some of them migrate to somewhere in the southern US during the winter. We wondered if there might be other ways, in addition to the fall migration banding project, to get information about their wintering areas.

In 2020 we banded 40 NSWOs, one at the Red Creek Campground on Dolly Sods, and 39 here on our property in Brooke County, West Virginia. On October 31 we trapped and banded a particular hatch-year female NSWO. This same owl was recaptured again on November 3, 14, and 24. In past years we had the experience of recapturing one of our recently banded NSWOs for a second time, just a few nights later. However, this hatch-year female had stayed in the area for at least 24 days and had been trapped 4 times. We thought that seemed like a long time to stay here without continuing its migration. We wondered if perhaps the owl was going to over-winter in this area and not go any farther south. Fall migration banding season ended shortly after our fourth encounter with this bird so, as with most banding, the bander rarely knows what happens to an individual bird after it is released.

In 2022, as usual, we didn't catch a NSWO every time we set up the mist-nets and turned on the audio lure. But we were fascinated to notice that almost every night when no owls were in the nets, there was a NSWO perched high up in a nearby Norway Spruce, just watching and listening from a short distance away. This was an interesting and puzzling behavior. Was it the same owl each time, or a different one? The owl never seemed to be at all bothered by our lights shining on it, or by our actions to take photographs of it. We began to think that it probably was the same owl each time and wondered if perhaps this

owl would spend the winter in our area. We thought again about coming up with a way to determine if we do have NSWOs over-wintering in Brooke County.

In the 2022 migration banding season, we trapped and banded our last NSWO on December 1, and the next day I stored the nets and poles until the next NSWO fall migration banding season – October 2023. However, I left the audio caller out because we had decided that it might help us see if any NSWOs were over-wintering locally.

We waited a month to let any late NSWOs finish migrating through. On January 3 through 6, I put out just the caller and played the NSWO call from 7 to 11 pm each night. At 9 pm and 11 pm I used a bright headlamp to scan the Norway Spruces above the caller to see if I could spot any owls. I checked each spruce carefully from different points of view, but there were no owls. On January 8 at 11 pm I found a NSWO high in a spruce tree watching and listening.



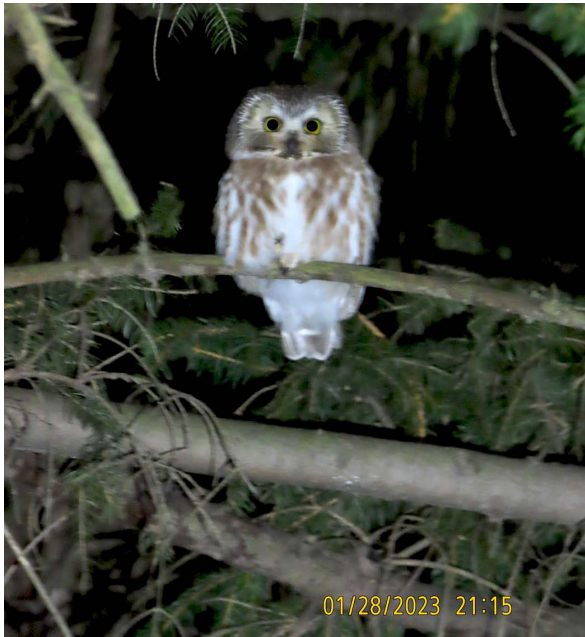
Northern Saw-whet Owl – January 8, 2023 (Photo © Bill Beatty)

This could have been a very late migrant. I was concerned that playing the call every night might encourage an owl to stay around here and not continue its normal migration. Since we did not want to change an owl's migration, but were looking for an owl that had already chosen to stay here all winter, we did not put out the caller again for several weeks. On January 28, I played the call again. At 9 pm there was a NSWO in a spruce near the caller, maybe the same one, but possibly a different one. Without capture and banding, there was no way to know if it was the same owl as three weeks before.



Northern Saw-whet Owl – January 8, 2023 (Photo © Bill Beatty)

Most of the time, NSWOs that we have called in with the audio lure aren't very skittish. They are very tolerant of our fumbling around with cameras, tripods and flashes. They sit still and watch. On this night I suggested that Jan set her camera to show the date stamp on the photo.



Northern Saw-whet Owl – January 28, 2023 (Photo © Jan Runyan) with date/time stamp

On February 5, 6, 8, and 11, I played the call with no success. During the fall NSW migration banding time, most banding stations play the audio-lure quite loudly. For this over-wintering research I decided to play the call on a lower setting. During our fall NSW trapping and banding, our FOXPRO Inferno Wildlife Caller is set between 18 and 21 (the loudest setting). On the winter nights when we were calling to attract over-wintering NSWs, the loudness was at 12 to 14.

On February 12, I started the audio lure shortly after dark. When I went to the mailbox around 7 pm, I checked the trees and there was a NSW.



Northern Saw-whet Owl – February 12, 2023 (Photo © Bill Beatty)



Northern Saw-whet Owl – February 12, 2023 (Photo © Jan Runyan) with date/time stamp



I waited a week and played the caller on February 19 and 20. There were no NSWOW sightings, but on the 19<sup>th</sup> an Eastern Screech-owl was attracted. I saw it briefly, but, as usual with EASOs, it flew soon after I saw it. On February 21 at 11pm there was a NSWOW perched in a spruce tree near the caller.



Northern Saw-whet Owl – February 21, 2023 (Photo © Bill Beatty)



Northern Saw-whet Owl – February 21, 2023 (Photo © Jan Runyan) with date/time stamp

I waited a week and on March 1, just one week after the last owl, I successfully attracted a NSWO to the spruce trees at 9pm. The photos show different backgrounds since the owl did fly to different locations as we watched, but it didn't fly away. As well as being tolerant of our presence, the NSWOs are usually quite patient. After our photography, we were the ones who would give up the "staring contest" with an owl and would go inside... while it still sat there and watched us go.



Northern Saw-whet Owl March 1, 2023 (Photo © Bill Beatty)



Northern Saw-whet Owl on a different branch– March 1, 2023 (Photo © Jan Runyan) with time/date stamp



Watching a Northern Saw-whet Owl – March 1, 2023 (Photo © Jan Runyan)  
with time/date stamp

My owl research has always been a progression. From time to time something new is discovered and a new piece is added to the puzzle. Our new puzzle piece this winter shows that NSWOs appear to overwinter here in Brooke County, West Virginia, where our elevation is 1,250 feet, and, by extension, probably also in other lower elevation counties of West Virginia. Owl researchers have always known that Northern Saw-whet Owls are definitely more secretive than most other species of owls in West Virginia. They are not often seen or heard like other owls which nest and winter in our region. But this winter of 2023 also showed Jan and me that NSWOs are surprisingly easy to attract with an audio lure. And, unexpectedly, the NSWOs were not shy when we shined our headlamps on them. They would watch as we talked to each other, set up tripods and cameras, and took photos and videos.

The March 1 owl surprised us even more. It was only about 10 feet high in a spruce and we took a few photos. Then it flew very high into a different, nearby spruce, which seemed like atypical behavior to us. However, about a minute later it flew closer to us, and then closer, and closer again until it was nearer than when it had started. Then it began whispering a regular, faint squeak at the audio lure, or maybe at us. What was it trying to tell us (another question to try to answer)?

March 1, 2023, was the last time we used the caller for the winter. Since the NSWO northward spring migration would soon begin, any owls we might see after that time could be early migrants rather than individuals over-wintering in this area.

If Betty Vossler were here today I would definitely agree with her that NSWOs are very cute. I would also explain to her that NSWOs really are in the northern panhandle of West Virginia, at least in the winter, and they are very quiet and secretive, but not shy. So if you happen to find one, like she did, you can expect to spend some time watching each other.

# American Ornithological Society Taxonomic Changes for 2023

Casey Rucker

The Committee on Classification and Nomenclature of the American Ornithological Society (AOS) published the sixty-fourth supplement to the AOS Check-list on July 6, and made the article publicly available immediately (Chesser et al. 2023). Among the notable changes extralimital to West Virginia was the re-lumping of Cordilleran and Pacific-slope flycatchers to once again be Western Flycatchers (*Empidonax difficilis*).

As has recently been the case, no species was added to or deleted from the West Virginia bird list. There is only one change affecting birds seen in our state: the splitting of Northern Goshawk into North American and Eurasian species. Our newly renamed American Goshawk's scientific name is *Accipiter atricapillus*.

Wil Hershberger, Secretary of the West Virginia Bird Records Committee, maintains our state list, which is available online at links located at the bottom of the page on <https://www.brooksbirdclub.org/west-virginia-bird-records-committee.html>.

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## e-Bird Notes Winter 2022-2023

Mike Slaven

The winter season of 2022-2023 was in some ways, an average year for West Virginia birders. A lack of ice-over in the Great Lakes generally results in fewer reports of species of ducks, grebes, gulls, and other species that fly south in winter to find open water in which to feed. This past winter was a disappointment for gull and duck enthusiasts. Other species were noted by observers in close to normal numbers, and typical resident species made up the bulk of the lists on eBird. The number of checklists showed somewhat fewer species than the previous year. There was however, a major sighting that sparked a great deal of interest and caused many birders to take to the road to see this rarity.

The most exciting find of the season was found by Frederick Atwood. He located a Townsend's Solitaire in Grant County on January 15. This bird was reported on 38 eBird lists from January 16 to 18 and was seen until February by many other observers. This was the first reported state record of this plain but attractive thrush. The bird is a relatively common sight within its range in the western United States, but this particular thrush was 1500+ miles out of its normal territory when it arrived in West Virginia. This begs the question of why it ended up in the state. Adding to this puzzle is that a

week after it was last seen in West Virginia, a Townsend's Solitaire appeared at the state park in Martha's Vineyard, where it remained for nearly a month. Were the Townsend's Solitaires particularly prone to vagrancy in the early part of 2023? It seems not especially so. Martha's Vineyard has reported the species sporadically since 1981. West Virginia and its borders only had one report in 2023—from West Virginia.

There is a consensus among birders that the Townsend's Solitaire is especially likely to wander, but the *why* and *how* are still not clear. Storms, food shortages, population pressures, climate change, and even shifts in Earth's magnetic field have all been postulated as reasons for avian vagrancy, but still the questions about why birds stray outside normal ranges are often unanswered. The question of how the Townsend's Solitaire arrived in Grant County is similarly enigmatic. It could have strayed to the north and followed a path to the Great Lakes and then south, or it might have come across the plains to finally arrive in the Appalachian Mountains, or even less likely, followed a southern path. A search of eBird for a pattern of vagrancy produces no real discernible pattern for this wanderlust that affects a few Solitaires each year.

Another topic I wanted to address in this winter 2022–2023 report was the great success of two events that give great data on winter residents and overwintering birds over many years. These are the Audubon Christmas Bird Counts, held in December to early January, and the Great Backyard Bird Count from February.

I will start with the Great Backyard Bird Count, which has been held for over twenty years under the auspices of the Cornell Lab of Ornithology. This is a very basic attempt to encourage new birders to participate in an organized count of avian species and abundance, but also serves to get backyard birders and experts together. It is a learning event for newbies, as well as a chance for birders to connect with new potential recruits to the experience of birds. The project is essentially based on fifteen-minute counts at a site over the four days of the count. In the past, it was always a hard time for reviewers, with misidentifications being frequent. This past year, the situation is very much different than it was two decades ago. The revolution in birding identification afforded by the Merlin app seems to have made a great deal of difference in accuracy of reports. West Virginia had a good record during the February 2023 count.

The various Audubon Christmas Counts were very successful in the state in 2022–2023. In West Virginia four counts tallied over 400 miles of effort. Inwood again led with 537.75 miles of circle coverage, followed by Morgantown (486), then Athens-Princeton and Wheeling with 402 and 401 miles, respectively. Average miles covered statewide this season was 287 miles.<sup>1</sup> These figures show a great level of dedication and commitment. There are a few tips that come from eBird on ideas for how to best get that valuable collected data to the scientists and researchers—and also to you as an eBirder, since Cornell's eBird data can now be searched by users. Here is a list, edited down by me, from eBird on tips for participants and compilers that I found very informative.

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1 The 121st Christmas Bird Count in West Virginia, <https://www.audubon.org/news/the-121st-christmas-bird-count-west-virginia>.

## eBird Essentials for Christmas Bird Counts

If anyone in your CBC party or team is new to eBird, we highly recommend they take the free [eBird Essentials course](#) before the CBC begins. This free, self-paced course offers step-by-step walkthroughs and helpful tips so everyone is ready to use eBird on the day of the CBC.

### eBird Mobile

Nominate someone from your CBC party (or team) to be the official recorder during the day, and have them use [eBird Mobile](#) to keep a list of counts of species for each stop during your CBC. Doing one checklist for each stop or location provides the most valuable information, and is vastly preferable to keeping a single list for the entire day, as the distance covered in a CBC sector typically exceeds [eBird's best practices](#) (ideally, the distance traveled on a single checklist should be 5 mi / 8 km or less).<sup>2</sup>

### Follow Best Practices

Tips for making your CBC eBirding as helpful as possible (This list has been edited for brevity by Michael Slaven.)

**Only submit lists of birds observed by *your* CBC party.**

**Keep multiple lists throughout the day:** ideally one for each stop, road.

**Use eBird Mobile tracks.** Submitting checklists from eBird Mobile with tracks enabled provides the best scientific information for eBird.

**Include only one-way distance in your traveling counts.** Always include the full time spent for each checklist.

**Document unusual observations:** if any of your reports are flagged as an unusually high count or rare species, take detailed field notes and, if ideally, photos or audio recordings.

**Be sure to provide your total party miles and party hours (for both owling and diurnal efforts) to your compiler or sector leader.**

**If you are submitting a checklist from your feeder during a CBC,** remember to only tally the high number of each species seen or heard at once, and do include the full time spent watching the feeder.

**Account for the same individual birds on multiple lists when sharing your final tally:** if the same individual birds are reported on more than one eBird checklist, communicate these exceptions to your compiler to avoid double-counting in the final tally.<sup>3</sup>

As always, I encourage all of you to keep looking up and making time to enjoy the natural world and the birds of our region.

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2 Christmas Bird Counts - Ebird". *Ebird.Org*. <https://ebird.org/news/ebirding-on-christmas-bird-counts#participants>.

3 Ibid.

**Field Notes**  
**Winter Season**  
**December 1, 2022 – February 28, 2023**

Casey Rucker

It was the second-warmest winter on record in West Virginia with temperatures 7.4 degrees warmer than average, according to the Northeast Regional Climate Center at Cornell University. December was much drier than average, January was slightly drier and February was slightly damper.

These notes were gathered from (a) the West Virginia Birds Listserv, sponsored by the National Audubon Society, (b) Christmas Bird Count (CBC) results, and (c) field notes submitted to the editor by email and regular mail. The full content of the notes submitted by the contributors of the WV Listserv may be viewed by visiting the archives at the following web site: <http://list.audubon.org/archives/wv-bird.html>, and the results of the Christmas Bird Counts may be found at <http://netapp.audubon.org/CBCObservation/CurrentYear/ResultsByCount.aspx>.

On January 15, Frederick Atwood discovered a **Townsend's Solitaire** on Thorn Run Road, Grant County, and dozens of birders flocked to the site through February 14, the last date the bird was seen. When accepted it will be the first state record for the species. Overall, bird diversity was down compared to previous winter, with 135 species reported from 34 of West Virginia's 55 counties.

**Geese, Swans, and Ducks** – Sightings of **geese** were once again relatively sparse in West Virginia this winter. **Snow Geese** appeared in Jackson (TB), Mason (GR, MG, JK, DP), and Wood (TB) Counties; **Ross's Geese** inspired reports from Mason (MG, JK) and Wood (TB, JB) Counties. **Greater White-fronted Geese** were reported in Greenbrier (JO), Mason (MG, JK) and Wood (TB) Counties, while reports of **Cackling Geese** came from Cabell (GR, DP, CBC), Fayette (CBC), Monongalia (CBC), and Wood (TB, CBC) Counties. Reports of **Canada Geese** were as usual widespread throughout the state. **Tundra Swans** were observed in only Jefferson (CBC, WS), Mason (MG, JK), and Monongalia (CBC) Counties.

**Waterfowl** numbers were a bit down this winter. The following species made appearances in at least ten West Virginia counties: **Gadwalls, Mallards, Ring-necked Ducks**, and **Hooded** and **Common mergansers**, while birders in six to nine counties found **Wood Ducks, American Black Ducks, Northern Pintails, Green-winged Teal, Lesser Scaup, Buffleheads**, and **Ruddy Ducks**. The following birds inspired reports from the counties listed: **Blue-winged Teal** in Summers (CBC); **Northern Shovelers** in Hardy (CBC) and Pendleton (CBC); **American Wigeons** in Hardy (CBC), Mason (MG, JK), Pleasants (TB), Pocahontas (CBC), and Wetzel (WJ); **Canvasbacks** in Kanawha (CBC), Mason (MG, JK), Pleasants (TB), and Wetzel (WJ); **Redheads** in Jackson (TB), Mason (MG, JK), Pendleton (CBC), and Wetzel (WJ); **Greater Scaup** in Mason (GR, MG, JK, DP) and Wood (CBC); **Surf Scoters** in Barbour (CMu) and Greenbrier (JO); **White-winged Scoters** in Cabell (CBC); **Common Goldeneyes** in Greenbrier (JO) and Wetzel (WJ); and **Red-breasted Mergansers** in Pleasants (TB), Wetzel (WJ), and Wood (TB).

**Turkeys, Grouse, and Pheasants – Wild Turkey** sightings were widespread, including many on the tallies of Christmas Bird Counts. **Ruffed Grouse** reports came from Christmas Bird Counts in Pendleton and Tucker Counties. **Ring-necked Pheasants** were observed in the Morgantown, Monongalia County, and Pocahontas County Christmas Bird Counts.

**Grebes – Pied-billed Grebes** were reported widely throughout the state, while reports of **Horned Grebes** came only from Wayne (GR) and Wetzel (WJ) Counties. Paul McKay found a **Red-necked Grebe** at Pike Island Dam, Ohio County, on December 16, two days after the bird was discovered in the Wheeling Christmas Bird Count.

**Pigeons and Doves – Rock Pigeons and Mourning Doves** continue to reside throughout the state, as reported primarily in Christmas Bird Counts. **Eurasian Collared-Dove** reports came from Monroe County (JJP), as usual, but also from Greenbrier County, where Jack O’Connell reported a new colony near Fairlea on January 17.

**Rails and Coots – Virginia Rails** were found in Christmas Bird Counts in Berkeley, Hardy, Monongalia, and Pocahontas Counties. **American Coots** inspired reports in Greenbrier (JO), Kanawha (CBC), Mercer (CBC), Ohio (PM), and Wetzel (WJ) Counties this winter.

**Cranes – Sandhill Cranes** were observed widely this winter, with reports from Fayette (CBC), Greenbrier (HCh), Jefferson (WS), Mason (DP), and Wood (TB) Counties.

**Plovers** – Reports of **Killdeer** were up this winter, with records from ten counties.

**Sandpipers – American Woodcock** were observed during February in Cabell (DP), Monongalia (SO), and Summers (JJP) Counties. **Wilson’s Snipe** were widespread this season, with reports from Greenbrier (CBC), Hardy (CBC), Mason (GR, MG, JK, DP), Monongalia (CBC), Pendleton (CBC), Pocahontas (CBC), Raleigh (CBC), and Wayne (GR) Counties.

**Gulls** – It was a sparse season for winter **gulls** in West Virginia once again. Birders reported **Bonaparte’s Gulls** only in Monongalia County (CBC), and **Ring-billed Gulls** in seven West Virginia counties. **Herring Gulls** appeared in reports from Mason (GR, JK, MG, DP), Monongalia (CBC), and Wetzel (WJ) Counties.

**Loons** – On January 8, Wilma Jarrell spotted a **Red-throated Loon** above Hannibal Dam, Wetzel County. Reports of **Common Loons** came from Greenbrier (JO), Monongalia (CBC), Raleigh (CBC), and Summers (JJP) Counties.

**Cormorants** – There were reports of **Double-crested Cormorants** from only three counties this winter.

**Herons – Great Blue Herons** appeared throughout the state this winter. A **Great Egret** was an unusual find for the Huntington Christmas Bird Count in Cabell County on December 18.

**Vultures** – Reports of **Black** and **Turkey vultures** came from fifteen and sixteen counties, respectively.

**Eagles and Hawks – Golden Eagles** inspired reports from Hardy (CBC), Lewis (GR), Mercer (CBC), Pendleton (CBC), and Pocahontas (CBC) Counties. **Northern Harriers, Sharp-shinned** and **Cooper’s hawks, Bald Eagles, and Red-shouldered** and **Red-tailed hawks** appeared widely throughout West Virginia during the winter season. Bruni Haydl reported the return of nesting **Bald Eagles** in her neighbor’s sycamore tree, after gunshots drove them to abandon their nest last year. Forty-six participants in the 18<sup>th</sup> Winter Eagle Survey on January 7 found a record 79



**Bald Eagles** in Greenbrier, Monroe, Raleigh, and Summers Counties, as reported by James Phillips. **Rough-legged Hawks** were once again scarce during this warm winter, inspiring reports only from Mason County (DP, GR, MG, JK).

**Owls** – **Barn Owls** were reported in Hardy (CBC) and Pocahontas (CBC) Counties. Reports of **Eastern Screech-Owls** and of **Great Horned Owls** came from only four and seven counties respectively. Birders in seven counties reported **Barred Owls**. Randy Bodkins had the pleasure of hearing a **Long-eared Owl** calling outside his home in Norton, Randolph County, on February 15. **Short-eared Owls** appeared in Mason County (DP) and Monongalia County (CBC). The **Northern Saw-whet Owl** found during the Morgantown Christmas Bird Count, Monongalia County, on December 17, was the only one reported this season.

**Kingfishers** – West Virginia birders in seventeen counties reported **Belted Kingfishers**.

**Woodpeckers** – **Red-headed Woodpeckers** made appearances in five counties, and **Red-bellied Woodpeckers**, **Yellow-bellied Sapsuckers**, **Downy** and **Hairy woodpeckers**, **Northern Flickers**, and **Pileated Woodpeckers** were all subjects of widespread reports in West Virginia over the winter.

**Falcons** – **American Kestrels** and **Merlins** were well-represented in Christmas Bird Counts and other reports in most parts of the state. Reports of **Peregrine Falcons** came from Jackson (TB), Mason (GR, MG, JK, DP), Monongalia (CBC), Pleasants (TB), Randolph (CR), and Wetzel (WJ) Counties.

**Flycatchers** – Reports of **Eastern Phoebe** came from eleven counties this winter.

**Vireos** – For the sixth year in a row the Morgantown Christmas Bird Count recorded a **White-eyed Vireo**, on December 17 in Monongalia County. The McDowell County Christmas Bird Count also discovered a **White-eyed Vireo**, on December 14.

**Shrikes** – For the second year in a row, a **Northern Shrike** appeared in West Virginia, this one spotted by Cynthia Mullens at Pleasant Creek Wildlife Management Area, Barbour County, on December 16; the bird remained at that location through January 15.

**Jays, Crows, and Ravens** – **Blue Jays**, **American Crows**, and **Common Ravens** appeared in their usual haunts throughout the state.

**Chickadees** and **Titmice** – **Carolina** and **Black-capped chickadees** appeared in reports from their overlapping territories throughout West Virginia. **Tufted Titmice** occupied their usual spots in reports from throughout the state.

**Larks** – Reports of **Horned Larks** came only from Hardy County (CBC) and Pendleton County (CBC).

**Kinglets** – **Ruby-crowned** and **Golden-crowned kinglets** were both familiar sights in most parts of the state this winter.

**Waxwings** – **Cedar Waxwing** sightings were down this winter, coming only from seven counties.

**Nuthatches** – It was an irruption year for **Red-breasted Nuthatches**, which inspired reports in ten counties. **White-breasted Nuthatches** were as usual widely reported throughout the state.

**Creepers** – Birders in fifteen West Virginia counties reported **Brown Creepers**.

**Wrens** – West Virginia birders reported **Winter** and **Carolina wrens** in good numbers statewide.

**Catbirds, Thrashers, and Mockingbirds – Gray Catbirds** were recorded in Christmas Bird Counts in Pocahontas and Raleigh Counties. **Brown Thrashers** were spotted in Greenbrier (JO), McDowell (CBC), Ohio (CBC), and Summer (CBC) Counties. West Virginians reported **Northern Mockingbirds** widely in lower elevations over the winter season.

**Starlings – European Starlings** continued their widespread occupation of habitats throughout our state.

**Thrushes** – The **Townsend’s Solitaire** spotted by Frederick Atwood in Grant County on December 15 is described near the beginning of these notes. **Eastern Bluebirds, Hermit Thrushes, and American Robins** appeared in good numbers in our state this winter, mostly at lower elevations.

**Old World Sparrows** – Thanks to Christmas Bird Counts, we have been assured that the **House Sparrow** continues throughout the state, primarily in urban and farm settings.

**Pipits** – Reports of **American Pipits** came from Jefferson County (CBC), Monongalia County (CBC), and Ohio County (CBC).

**Finches and Allies – Evening Grosbeak** reports were relatively widespread this winter, coming from Kanawha (HG), Monongalia (CBC), Pendleton (CBC), Pocahontas (KB), Ritchie (CB), Summers (JJP), and Tucker (CR, CBC) Counties. **House and Purple finches and American Goldfinches** appeared widely in West Virginia this winter. **Red Crossbills** were found in the Pendleton County and Pipestem Christmas Bird Counts. **Pine Siskins** were seen in Christmas Bird Counts in Jefferson, Pocahontas, and Wood Counties.

**Sparrows, Juncos, and Towhees** – On December 17, both the Parkersburg and the Pipestem Christmas Bird Counts included a **Lincoln’s Sparrow**, in Wood County and Summers County, respectively. **Chipping, Field, Fox, White-crowned, White-throated, Song, and Swamp sparrows**, as well as **Dark-eyed Juncos and Eastern Towhees**, appeared widely. Two **sparrow** species were reported only in Christmas Bird Counts: **American Tree Sparrows** in Ohio, Pendleton and Wood Counties, and **Savannah Sparrows** in Hardy, Jefferson, and Monongalia Counties.

**Blackbirds and Allies** – Reports of **Eastern Meadowlarks, Red-winged Blackbirds, Brown-headed Cowbirds, and Common Grackles** came from most reporting areas in the state. **Rusty Blackbirds** were only observed in Mercer (CBC), Pocahontas (CBC), Ritchie (CB), and Wood (CBC) Counties.

**Warblers** – Warm weather may have induced **Common Yellowthroats** to linger in Morgantown, Monongalia County, and Pocahontas County for their Christmas Bird Counts, both on December 17. The Canaan Christmas Bird Count turned up a surprising **Black-throated Blue Warbler** in Tucker County on December 18. An early **Pine Warbler** visited Cynthia Burkhart’s feeders in Ritchie County on February 27. Birders in lower elevations saw Myrtle-race **Yellow-rumped Warblers** at locations throughout the state.

**Cardinals** – Birders throughout the state reported **Northern Cardinals** in good numbers.

Contributors to the Winter Field Notes: Kitty Bailey (KB), Jon Benedetti (JB), Terry Bronson (TB), Cynthia Burkhart (CB), Heidi Church (HCh), Michael Griffith (MG), Wilma Jarrell (WJ), Janet Keating (JK), Paul McKay (PM), Jack O’Connell (JO), David Patick (DP), James and Judy Phillips (JJP), Gary Rankin (GR), Casey Rucker (CR), and N. Wade Snyder (WS).

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## **REDSTART EDITORIAL POLICY**

Original papers in the field of natural history are published in *The Redstart*. Papers are judged on the basis of their contributions to original data, ideas, or interpretations. Scientific accuracy and clarity are most important, and to this end, an advisory board, selected by the editorial staff, will review submitted papers as needed. Papers should be submitted in Word, by e-mail if possible, to [autoblock@frontiernet.net](mailto:autoblock@frontiernet.net) or on a CD and sent to the editor; otherwise, papers should be typewritten, double-spaced on one side of the paper only, and sent to the editor at P.O. Box 2, Seneca Rocks, WV 26884.

## **BROOKS BIRD CLUB MEMBERSHIP**

The Brooks Bird Club, Inc. is a nonprofit organization whose objective is to encourage the study and conservation of birds and other phases of natural history. Membership includes subscriptions to *The Redstart* and *Mail Bag* and entitles one to all the privileges offered by the Club. Classes of membership are Student, \$20; Individual, \$35; Family, \$40; Sustaining, \$60; Life, \$550; Family Life, \$700. Checks should be written payable to The Brooks Bird Club and mailed to P.O. Box 4077, Wheeling, WV 26003.

## 2023 Calendar of Events The Brooks Bird Club, Inc.

Date	Activity	Place
January	BBC Membership Month	
January	Trip to Killdeer Plains (Contact: Dick Esker)	
February	Write article for The Mail Bag and The Redstart	
Feb. 23-24	Funk/Killbuck Marsh Field Trip (Contact: Dick Esker)	
March 10-12	Early Spring Meeting (Contact: Dick Esker).....	North Bend State Park
March 18	Waterfowl Field Trip (Day Trip) .....	Seneca Lake, OH
April 22	BBC/Three Rivers Bird Club (day trip) .....	Raccoon Creek State Park, PA (Contact Ryan Tomazin)
May 11-14	Wildflower Pilgrimage .....	Blackwater Falls State Park
May 13	International Migratory Bird Day (local chapters)	
June 2-10	Foray – Camp Horseshoe .....	Parsons, WV (Contact: Janice Emrick or Mary Murin)
Aug.-Oct.	Bird Banding – TBD .....	Dolly Sods
Oct. 20-22	BBC Annual Fall Meeting.....	Chief Logan State Park (Contact: Cindy Slater)
Nov. 8-12	Eastern Shore (Contact: Cindy Slater)	
Dec. 14-Jan. 5	Christmas Bird Counts.....	Statewide

### BBC FORAYS

2023 Camp Horseshoe, Tucker County

### SEASONAL FIELD NOTES DUE

Winter: March 15      Spring: June 15      Summer: September 15      Fall: December 15  
MAIL TO: Casey Rucker, P.O. Box 2, Seneca Rocks, WV 26884, autoblock@frontiernet.net

### ARTICLES FOR THE MAIL BAG DUE

February 15      May 15      August 15      November 15  
MAIL TO: Ryan Tomazin, 348 Station St., Apt. 7, Bridgeville, PA 15017, wvwarblers@hotmail.com

<http://brooksbirdclub.org>

The dates for the 2023 BBC programs may be changed if necessary. Changes will be announced on the web page or in The Mail Bag.

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