

## localnews

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## LIVING

## Singing praises of the count

Pre-dawn start required, but playing role in crucial bird inventory is worth it

Driving north to Lasswade in the pre-dawn darkness, the roadside conifers seemed to shimmer with a silver frosting of new growth. Mist hung low in the hollows and a beautiful last quarter moon shone down from above. We were in a hurry, however, and didn't want to miss our scheduled start time of 4:54 a.m.



Drew Monkman

OUR CHANGING SEASONS

Stepping out into the cool, balsam poplar-scented air, the steady, hammering call of mink frogs competed with the birds for my attention. The first bird song to register in my still half-asleep brain was the staccato, sewing machine-like call of the swamp sparrow. It was followed in rapid succession by the "witchity-witchity-witchity-witch" of the common yellowthroat and the "ee-o-lay" of the wood thrush. A common snipe flew overhead, too, its presence betrayed by the noise of the air rushing through its tail feathers.

Since 1994, I've been setting aside a Sunday morning in mid-June each year to take part in the annual Breeding Bird Survey (BBS). Begun in 1966, the BBS is one of the oldest surveys of breeding birds in North America.

**You might wonder why anyone in their right mind would want to get up at 3 a.m. for the experience of standing in the pre-dawn twilight swatting mosquitoes and straining to tell how many different bird species are calling."**

It is conducted primarily by volunteers who work alone or with an assistant. Participants drive along a pre-determined roadside route each year at the height of the breeding season. In our area, this is usually the first two weeks of June. The starting point and direction of the route is selected by the Canadian Wildlife Service so as to sample a range of different habitats. The routes are 40 km long and consist of 50 three-minute stops, each 0.8 km apart. At each stop, the total number of bird species seen or heard is recorded. Starting time is 30 minutes before sunrise.

Each participant runs his or her individual route for as many consecutive years as possible, in order to maintain consistency of reporting. Currently, about 100 BBS routes are done each year in Ontario, while about 3,000 are run across North America as a whole. Some of the routes are close to towns and cities, while others are more out-of-the-way. My BBS route runs along County Road 46 between Lasswade and Havelock. When I get out of the car at each stop, I quickly position myself beside the open window on the passenger's side, start the three minute timer on my watch, and then proceed to yell out the names and approximate numbers of the bird species I hear. "Four red-eyed vireos, an ovenbird, two indigo buntings. No, make that just one bunting. A loon flying over. Add a couple of veeries..." Jim Cashmore, who assists me each year, records the species on special forms.

Not that the process is error free. With up to 10 different species calling at some of the stops, and often many indi-



KARL EGRESSY photos



The tree swallow (top) with its royal blue cap and shoulder feathers is one of the more colourful birds noted by Drew Monkman during his annual early morning contribution to the North American Breeding Bird Survey. Others include (top to bottom) the veery, ovenbird and red-eyed vireo, which was the most abundant species.

viduals of the same species, knowing exactly how many birds I'm hearing isn't easy. It's especially difficult to gauge numbers of some of the more abundant species like the red-eyed vireo, a bird that's present at almost every stop on my route. Hearing the birds can also be made difficult by the noise of passing traffic, overzealous frogs, and at one stop this year, a full-blown chorus of coyotes.

The northern part of the Lasswade-Havelock route runs through Canadian Shield country and is characterized by mixed woodlands, granite rock cuts, and numerous swamps and marshes. As you head south and eventually come off the Shield, this gives way to limestone rock cuts, abandoned farm fields, and mostly deciduous trees. The mix of bird species changes accordingly.

Grassland species like bobolink and eastern meadowlark begin to make an appearance and warbling vireo replace red-eyed vireo at some of the stops. The habitat along the route has not changed a great deal in 15 years, with the exception of a few new houses. The mix of species has stayed pretty much the same, as well, although some voices seem less common. These include the veery, tree swallow, and American bittern. This year we recorded 68 species, which is about average. The most common birds, in order of abundance, were the red-eyed vireo (93), red-winged blackbird (57), American crow (37), ovenbird (26), and veery (24).

You might wonder why anyone in their right mind would want to get up at 3 a.m. for the experience of standing in the pre-dawn twilight swatting

mosquitoes and straining to tell how many different bird species are calling. There are probably many reasons. As hunters and fishermen will tell you, it's simply an exhilarating experience to be outside at this time of day and to be able to enjoy the beautiful sunrises and fresh, early-morning air. The predictability of what you see and hear is also part of the attraction. In a world of change and uncertainty, it's both reassuring and comforting to hear the same bird species singing every spring. There is also the exciting possibility that when you get out of the car, you might record a species that is new for the route or one that has been absent for many years.

On the more social side, there's the appeal of being out with a good friend and looking forward to the hearty breakfast that awaits you at the end of

the route. However, there's the challenge of trying to maintain some semblance of a conversation, despite three minute pauses every 0.8 km!

It is also gratifying to be able to contribute to an international bird conservation effort like the BBS in which volunteer "citizen scientists" can make a real difference. Many of us therefore continue to do these routes because of the constant forces working against birds and their habitat. Each wetland that is drained, hedge row that is removed, shrubby field that is bulldozed, and woodlot that is opened up to allow for development brings frustration, sadness, and stress.

A BBS route is more than just birds, however. On my particular itinerary, turtles are a common sight. This year, we must have seen at least 10 snapping turtles on the shoulder of the road as they prepared to lay eggs. A Blanding's turtle, easily identifiable with its solid yellow throat, was an especially nice sighting, too. Unfortunately, we also saw many nests where foraging foxes or raccoons had left only egg shell fragments littering the gravel.

Frogs are a constant presence, as well. In addition to the hammering call of mink frogs mentioned above, the "boinking" sound of green frogs and the deep, resonant "jug-o-rum" of bullfrogs are a large part of the soundscape. The wildflower display is always a highlight, too, and mostly because it's the same every year - wetlands bordered with blue flag lilies, roadside ditches and grassy areas alive with ox-eye daisy, yellow hawkweed and, in a few spots, even wood lilies.

The data from the BBS routes are used to determine long-term population trends in North America's breeding birds. They often indicate bird species that are in decline and require conservation action. The BBS divides Canada into 14 Bird Conservation Areas. Peterborough County sits astride two of these regions, the Boreal-Hardwood Transition region and the Lower Great Lakes - St. Lawrence Plain region. BBS data for these two regions show that aerial foragers - birds that feed on the wing - have declined significantly. These include species such as barn swallow, tree swallow, northern rough-winged swallow, whip-poor-will, and common nighthawk. Aerial foragers are actually declining throughout North America although the reasons for this are largely unknown. On the other hand, data indicate significant increases in species such as wild turkey, mourning dove, turkey vulture, common raven, downy woodpecker, hairy woodpecker, and pileated woodpecker.

It's interesting to note that red-winged blackbird and European starling were the most abundant of the 187 species reported on BBS routes in Ontario last year. However, the most widespread species were American crow, American robin and red-eyed vireo. They were found on every route in the province.

The Breeding Bird Survey needs your help. However, to participate, you must be able to quickly and accurately identify birds by sight and sound. You also need to be committed to surveying your route at least for several consecutive years. Go to <http://www.bsc-eoc.org/bbsont.html> for more information.

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