

## High Elevation Songbirds by Robert Hupper

I began at 11:30 pm to start the hike up the Bigelow Range Trail to the summit of Cranberry Peak. The Bigelow Range Trail is located east of Stratton, Maine and continues on to the Appalachian Trail where to the north you can hike up to Horn's Pond and Avery Peak. To the south, the trail heads past Sugarloaf Mountain and on towards Crocker Mountain. It was an exceptionally humid day for early June and it continued through most of the night. As I started to climb the 3000 foot peak, I started to reflect on the series of events that started this journey.

My wife Dawn purchased a membership to the Maine Appalachian Trail Club (MATC) for a Christmas present. The following Spring I went to their annual meeting to see where I could volunteer to help. You could clear trails, mark boundaries, pack in and pack out, trail maintenance and build privies. After checking the dates with my work schedule, it was apparent they were not compatible. However, the newsletter expressed a need for people to count Mountain Song Birds for the Vermont Institute of Natural Science. I went on-line to check out what peaks were available which were from Maine to New York! I am fortunate enough to live an hour from the Bigelow Preserve and Cranberry Peak was available. I added my name to the volunteer list and waited for the packet of info to arrive.

"Congratulations", it said. We have extended our surveys of the Bigelow Range and you are the first to do Cranberry Peak. VINS was excited to have the whole range covered that year. "All you have to do is find these five x's on the map that cover 1 km and listen for 10 minutes for five different types of birds." Great...how difficult could that be? What! Start at 4AM! Well, that packet of information had everything you needed to know. Dawn said "Your going to do what,...when"? "I'm going to climb Cranberry at night and listen for birds", I replied. "And how many other people are doing this?", she asked. Thankfully I had already visited the Yahoo site where other survey people shared their stories and results from the previous year. "See" I said. "I'm not the only one!"

The walking was easy at first. Once your eyes adjusted to the shadows of the flash light. "Take no chances" she would say. "Right, No chances", I would repeat. So as the trail wound slowly up the west side of Cranberry, I started thinking about "What were the chances. "Trail conditions were good, no clouds in the sky, as quiet as it was I

would scare anything away for miles especially with the leaves as dry as they were. No chances I thought. Well, what about Moose? Ok. My flashlight has a 30 feet beam. A moose can move....what 10 feet a second? Assuming he wants the trail, I have 3 seconds to move out of the way. Ok, there's always a slight chance. A mile into the trip there is a "sign in" box on a huge tree. A good place to stop for a rest, re-hydrate and sign in. It was extremely quiet as I raised up the lid to the box and pulled out a form and a pencil. Crunch, crunch. What was that? It was coming from behind me. I swung the flash light in that direction looking for a animal. Porcupine, raccoon or possibly a fox, the sound was that loud. Nothing. Satisfied that I wasn't in danger I returned to my form. CRUNCH... CRUNCH! This time in front of me and to my left. My heart raced a little faster as the noise sounded close and of a rather large animal. I looked and watched for a period of time, then I saw a large toad wink at me in the underbrush. That's when I reminded myself that as quiet as it was, even mice can sound like elephants in these dry leaves. The rest of the trip up was uneventful, well except for that left hand turn where I thought the blue blazes went across an open ledge into a krummholz.

I hiked to where I thought I needed to be according to the topography of the map and stopped to check the time. 2:30am. Sunrise was at 4:30am. Seeing how I left work at the end of a 3-11 shift, I knew I had a couple of hours to take a nap. Set my cell phone for 4:00am and laid down next to the trail under a canopy of small spruce trees and moss covered ground. At 2:31am the wind started blowing up from the valley. So much for the humid night. I curled up to conserve body heat and thought about those who climbed their peaks the day before and set up tents. A warm sleeping bag would be nice right now.

I woke up at the sound of the alarm and noticed the sun peaking out from the horizon. I checked my thermometer, 40 degrees, no wonder I was shivering. I looked around to get my bearings and thought I was a little lower than I should be. Things look different when there is light. Besides I needed to warm up. 4:05 my cell phone rings. "Hello, Honey". "Yes I'm alright", I was stammered trying not to show how chilly I was. "Everything is fine", "I'm near the top getting ready for my first survey point." "Ok, Love you too." When I reached the first point on the map, it corresponded well with the contours of the peak. Time to put my ears to work.

When you receive your packet of information they send you a tape of the five high elevation song birds and their sound alike. Winter Wren was easy because I recognized their call from the previous summer when a pair nested outside my front door. They have the most wonderful, melodious and long song for a bird its size. The end of their song almost sounds like they are running out of breath. The White throated sparrow I

had heard before on mountains tops. Even while listening to nature programs on TV I would pick out the White throated sparrows song. Then there was the Blackpoll Warbler and Swainson's Thrush and the prize of the them all. The Bickey, the Bicknell's Thrush. Not to be confused with the Hermit Thrush as the tape would say. So after listening to the tape while going to work for two weeks, it almost became second nature.

At the first survey point I counted one Winter Wren. A Blackpoll Warbler also flew over my head and landed so I got a good look at him. Then 325 steps or 250 meters to the next spot. It was amazing, I counted a Bicknell's Thrush, Blackpoll Warbler, Swainson's Thrush and a Winter Wren. 325 steps to the next spot which made me happy because it was between two small knolls, just like the map showed. Here the Winter Wren's were having a convention. 325 more steps down the other side. Jackpot! Two Bickey's just to my left. Wait. And thats a Swainson's. I was relieved, knowing I wouldn't have to come back or play the enticing Bicknell song on a tape recorder to lure them out and sing. At the last survey point I heard the chatter of a red squirrel. We need to count them too. They like the eggs of nesting birds. I left that morning feeling satisfied that my task was accomplished. A new survey route had been established and the five high elevation songs birds were recorded to include some squirrels. Even as I decended from the peak that morning, well off the survey route, I heard the call of a lone Bickey. Thanks, I'll count you too.

For more information on how you can participate in the Mountain Birdwatch, you can contact them on the web at [VINS.org](http://VINS.org) or write to:

Mountain Birdwatch  
 Vermont Institute of Natural Science  
 27023 Church Hill Road  
 Woodstock, VT 05091

#### My Survey Results

2004		2005	
3	Bicknell's Thrush	1	BITH
4	Blackpoll Warbler	4	BLPW
8	Winter Wren	5	WIWR
2	White-throated Sparrow	5	WTSP
2	Swainson's Thrush	0	SWTH
3	Red Squirrel	3	RESQ