
FEATHERS & FIR

The Occasional Newsletter of Mountain Birdwatch

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1. NEW FORMAT FOR FEATHERS & FIR

This issue of Feathers & Fir introduces a new email format intended to accelerate communication, generate dialogue, and promote informative web-browsing on subjects related to Mountain Birdwatch. If you have received past issues, you will recognize some of the original features, including In The Lookout, Dr. Wallace's Dissertation, and In the Scope. You may also notice a new feature, Mountain Chat (aka *Icteria Montana*). I hope that Mountain Chat will launch discussions that will interest volunteers and strengthen Mountain Birdwatch.

From now on, full-length articles and annual survey results will appear in Field Notes, a new publication of the VINS Conservation Biology Department. Mountain Birdwatch volunteers will receive a copy of Field Notes in the mail twice each year. The first will be mailed shortly and is already posted at <http://www.vinsweb.org/cbd/news.html>. Field Notes looks at northeastern wildlife through the lens of VINS research and monitoring projects. It also highlights emerging conservation issues, such as the bird flu.

If you feel nostalgic for the old Feathers & Fir, you can view back issues at <http://www.vinsweb.org/cbd/mbwpubs.html>

2. MOUNTAIN CHAT: DISTANCE SAMPLING

Have you ever heard a bird right before your count, only to find it go silent during the survey period? Have you ever failed to identify a distant bird because of the blaring volume of a nearby Winter Wren? Or have you ever been frustrated by the hush of the forest at point 5? If so, you might have wondered how missing birds influences trend results. Until recently, monitoring programs have dodged this issue, assuming that the number of birds detected represents a constant proportion of actual numbers. This is a false assumption, since detectability changes with the weather, time of day, time of year, and structure of the habitat.

Thanks to recent advances in statistical procedures, there is now a better way. It is now possible to calculate the probability of detecting a given species and adjust counts

accordingly. This requires that observers estimate the distance to each bird and place it in a distance category. Currently, Mountain Birdwatchers who survey all species carry out a form of “distance sampling” when they place birds within or beyond 50 m. Unfortunately, more categories are needed to adjust counts accurately.

Adding distance categories to the 5-species and all-species surveys would require a bit more effort and concentration from observers, but the payoff could be significant. It would increase confidence in our trend results and allow us to estimate density. Estimates of actual density, rather than relative abundance, would enable comparisons among species and boost efforts to describe key habitat features. Finally, a switch to distance sampling could increase Mountain Birdwatch’s credibility in the scientific and policy arenas.

Errors are to be expected in distance sampling, but can be reduced by a little practice in the mountains, or in your neighborhood. First, measure your stride to find out how many steps make 10 m. Approach a vocalizing bird until you are near, then walk away slowly, counting steps and pausing to listen as you go. Learn what a bird sounds like within 10 m of you, between 10 and 25 m, between 25 and 50 m, and beyond 50 m. Repeat this exercise in open woods and in dense woods. Are you ready to take the plunge? Please use the listserv to share your thoughts on the feasibility of this approach on Mountain Birdwatch routes.

Do you think noting distances upon first detection would cause you to overlook birds in a 10-min count?

Would 5-species observers find it helpful to use a field card that depicts the survey station at the center of concentric distance bands? (All-species observers can expect to receive one to help them keep track of the birds).

Do you feel that the 0-10 m, 10-25 m, 25-50 m, and > 50 m categories are reasonable?

Email your thoughts to MountainBirdwatch@yahoogroups.com

3. A NEW RECORD IN ROUTE COVERAGE

Mountain Birdwatchers completed surveys on 121 mountains last June, setting a new record for effort. Even more impressive, nearly half of the observers entered their data online, sparing VINS the cost of about three days of data entry. If it seems like it took you three days to enter your data, fear not. We are currently redesigning the interface in response to helpful feedback from users. Email dlambert@vinsweb.org if you’d like to evaluate the next generation before its release.

If you still have data sheets lying around somewhere, please make a copy for your records and send them in – whether or not you’ve entered the data online. Thanks!

4. IS YOUR ROUTE UP FOR GRABS?

We set a record in route coverage in 2005, but have over 70 routes with no confirmed monitor for 2006 (www.vinsweb.org/cbd/survey_routes.html). This, too, is a record.

If your route appears on this list, it means one of the following:

- I have not heard from you in a while and need you to confirm continued participation.
- You’ve been in touch, but have not indicated your availability for 2006.
- You have asked for assistance covering your route.

- You have asked for reassignment in 2006.
If you fall into the first or second category, please email me directly (not through the listserv) at dlambert@vinsweb.org.

Please talk up Mountain Birdwatch to your friends, birding club, hiking group, pen pals, dentist, etc. One of the easiest ways to support the project is to mail the web address to a friend. That's www.vinsweb.org/cbd/mtn_birdwatch.html.

5. THE LOOKOUT: KENNEDY AND MCKIBBEN CLASH OVER WINDPOWER

The recent growth of wind power has generated healthy debate in the conservation community. For opposing perspectives on the issue, see recent opinion pieces by Robert F. Kennedy, Jr. and Bill McKibben.

An Ill Wind off Cape Cod
By Robert F. Kennedy, Jr.
<http://www.climatecrisiscoalition.org/NYT-12-16-05.html>

No More Mr. Nice Guy: Climate Change is Pushing this Easy-Going Enviro Over the Edge
By Bill McKibben
www.grist.org/comments/soapbox/2006/01/12/mckibben/

6. DR. WALLACE'S DISSERTATION

George Wallace studied Bicknell's Thrush on Mount Mansfield in the northern Green Mountains in the 1930s. His dissertation, *Bicknell's Thrush, Its Taxonomy, Distribution, and Life History*, was completed in 1936 at the University of Michigan. It served as the definitive reference for the species for over 60 years. In this passage, he uses the old nomenclature for Swainson's Thrush.

Though I once liked the wild and fascinating refrain of the veery and Bicknell's best, in subsequent years, with ample opportunity to listen to hermits, Bicknell's and olive-backs singing simultaneously day after day, have come to the conclusion that nothing I have heard can quite equal the serenely exalted music of the gifted hermit, and that even the olive-back puts more pure melody in his song than does Bicknell's thrush. And yet in the song of the latter there is a mysterious fascination, perhaps not actually associated with musical qualities, that none of the others, except the veery possess. It is in perfect keeping with the wilderness solitudes which they inhabit.

7. IN THE SCOPE: TOWNSEND'S SOLITAIRE

For a change of pace, here's a bird of the western mountains.

http://www.birds.cornell.edu/programs/AllAboutBirds/BirdGuide/Townsend's_Solitaire_dtl.html

8. FEATURED WEB SITES

Let me know if you have a web site that you'd like to share in the next issue of Feathers and Fir.

Links to each state's new Wildlife Action Plan.

http://www.teaming.com/cwcs_states.htm

A new wind turbine technology that claims greater efficiency and no bird kills.

<http://opensourceenergy.org/txtlstvw.aspx?LstID=99b82ae5-287f-4bb4-868d-2a44417a564b>

Before and after aerial photos of the Mountaineer windfarm in West Virginia.

http://www.magicalliance.org/Maps/WindFarms/mountaineer_wind_power_site.htm
