

### **SPRING NEWSLETTER 2021**

### **Atlas Update**

It's been a long winter, but at last spring has sprung here in Newfoundland and we're excited to welcome you to Year 2 of Atlas data collection!

Over the last few months, we've passed a number of major milestones. We now have more than 100 volunteers registered for the Atlas, and observations of more than 150 species have been submitted. This spring also saw the most successful Nocturnal Owl Survey to date in NL, with roughly 60 volunteers surveying more than 50 routes (for more details, see page 4!).

As public health restrictions begin to ease, we're excited to see what this summer will bring for the Atlas. We hope some of you will undertake surveys in some of our more remote squares. (Atlassers interested in remote trips should see page 8 for travel support options.) We also look forward to welcoming birders from other Canadian provinces in July!

Make sure to check the coverage map often this summer to watch the data roll in—and happy birding to you all!

## **Species in Focus: Horned Lark**



Horned Lark. Breeding evidence: CF *Photo: Vernon Buckle* 

Ted Floyd, author of *How to Know the Birds*, described Horned Larks as the "most common bird you've never heard of." They are among the first species to return to Newfoundland each spring, arriving in mid-March and beginning the business of setting up territories, establishing pairs, and excavating depressions in the dirt to build their nests.

While Horned Larks are likely familiar to those that spend time on the windswept barrens of Newfoundland's coast, many people fail to notice these small brown birds, and they were reported in only 9 Atlas squares in 2020. But though their drab bodies may blend into their surroundings, their ornate facial markings are easily recognizable, as is their silvery, bell-like song. So this summer, make sure to keep your eye out for these beautiful birds of the open country, and let's add to the Atlas map for Horned Larks!

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## Progress To Date: Checklists: 1,786 Registered volunteers: 110 Squares with data: 297 Records: 13,016 Breeding species: 152 Hours of atlassing: 1,710 Point counts: 293

#### Current as of 4 June, 2021



#### A publication of





Wilson's Snipe nest in SW Newfoundland. Breeding evidence: NE Photo: Jenna McDermott



American Bittern calling. Breeding evidence: S Photo: Randolph White



Cedar Waxwing nestlings. Breeding evidence: NY Photo: Sarah Butt

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Early morning point counts on Pinchgut Lake, June 2020. Photo: Jenna McDermott

# **IMPORTANT DATES**

- June 30, 2021: Remote travel support application due
  - May 28—August 15: Peak atlassing season
    - June 7—July 7: Point count season

## The Newfoundland Breeding Mammal Atlas?

The first time you look at an Atlas checklist, you may be surprised to find red squirrels listed along with the bird species. These noisy creatures aren't birds, you may say! However, red squirrels are a little understood part of Newfoundland's ecosystem which may be significantly impacting bird populations.

Until 50 years ago, there were no squirrels in Newfoundland. But in the early 1960s, they were introduced on the Northern Peninsula and quickly spread across the island, eventually ending up in virtually all areas with appropriate habitat. However, they tend to stick to lower elevations: in the Long Range Mountains on the west coast of Newfoundland, squirrels are abundant at elevations below 500 m, but largely absent above.



Red squirrel in Gros Morne National Park. Photo: Jenna McDermott

Red squirrels eat primarily seeds from coniferous trees, and their populations fluctuate wildly with the availability of cone crops. In good cone years, they can become 4 times as plentiful. However, squirrels are opportunistic foragers and will also happily gobble down bird eggs and nestlings when they find them. As predators, they can have a big effect on bird populations, although the size of that effect is likely to fluctuate as the abundance of squirrels fluctuates. There is also a possibility that squirrels may affect species in other ways – because they may compete with birds for coniferous seeds as a food source.

Red squirrels are of interest in Newfoundland because the birds here haven't evolved with them and there are few other land-based mammalian predators native to the island. The lack of mammal predators means birds haven't developed any behavioural defences against their predation. This is of particular concern because some of Newfoundland's birds, such as Gray-cheeked Thrush and Red Crossbill, are distinct subspecies. Research (some of which has been carried out by our very own Atlas Assistant Coordinator, Jenna McDermott!) suggests that the huge population decline and disappearance of Gray-cheeked Thrush from most low elevation areas on the island could be due in large part to red squirrels.

The Atlas offers an opportunity to assess the distribution of squirrels in Newfoundland, which will provide a strong base to assess any future bird population or range changes that could be due to squirrels. In this way, we are not only providing comprehensive data on our beloved birds, but also on a potential cause of major bird population change. So regardless of their lack of feathers, when you hear a squirrel calling nearby or see one running across the forest floor, make sure to add it to your Atlas checklist!



Newfoundland Gray-cheeked Thrush. Breeding evidence: H Photo: Darroch Whitaker



Boreal Owl. Photo: Jared Clarke



Survey team preparing for an exciting night of listening for owls. Photo: Jenna McDermott



Northern Saw-whet Owl. Photo: Brendan Kelly

## **NL's Owl Survey Takes Flight**

The <u>Nocturnal Owl Survey</u> (NOS) is one of Birds Canada's most popular citizen science surveys. Every spring, hundreds of volunteers across the country spend one evening between April 1<sup>st</sup> and May 15<sup>th</sup> surveying a pre-determined route of 10 stops for owls.

The NOS is essential for our understanding of the distribution and population health of owl species across Canada. Monitoring owls is no easy task, because most species are secretive and primarily nocturnal. Surveys like the NOS allow us to keep track of what's going on with these species, and the data collected will be an important part of the Atlas.

The NOS has been running for more than 20 years in some provinces, but has only expanded to NL recently. In 2018, MUN graduate student Travis Heckford partnered with Birds Canada to set up 35 survey routes. The survey started small, but was gathering momentum...until the COVID-19 pandemic hit in spring 2020 and Birds Canada put all citizen science surveys on hold. As one of the programs with the earliest spring start date, the Owl Survey was cancelled entirely in 2020.

When we began planning the 2021 survey, we found that many volunteers had moved on or left the province. In early March 2021, we had only 6 volunteers signed up to cover 5 routes. So it was with some panic we put out a call for anyone interested in helping survey for owls this spring.

The NL birding community rose to the challenge magnificently. Within just a few weeks, 34 of the 35 routes established in 2018 were spoken for. And before too long, I started hearing from would-be volunteers living in places with no routes nearby – so we decided it was time to break new ground and set up more routes in new places.

In total, we now have 57 survey routes established across the province, including 4 in Labrador. And in 2 months, the number of volunteers skyrocketed from the initial 6 to almost 60!

This success is partly because the survey is ideal for beginning birders. Only 6 species of owls breed in NL, and of those, there are only 3 volunteers are likely to encounter during a nocturnal survey.

But beyond that is the fact that owls are a universal source of fascination: mysterious predators of the night,



Map of owl survey routes. Red markers indicate routes surveyed this spring.

occasionally heard, rarely seen. The Nocturnal Owl Survey provides a window into a world we don't often get to experience.

# **Region Highlight**



### **Region 3: Baie Verte-Buchans**

With plenty of coastal communities, hiking trails, and woods roads to explore and atlas in, this region could be the unexpected highlight of your atlassing summer! Consider taking a trip to a place you've never been before, or even signing up for a square there!

#### Some numbers:

- 205 total squares (134 priority squares)
- 38.4 hours spent atlassing in 2020
- 15 point counts completed
- 11 participants registered

### Regional Coordinator: Atlas Office

If you would like to be a regional coordinator for Region 3, get in touch with the Atlas Office (nlatlas@birdscanada.org)!



Pine Grosbeak in La Scie. Breeding Evidence: H Photo: Catherine Dale

### Catherine Dale: Atlas Coordinator

Catherine moved to St. John's in 2019 to coordinate the Breeding Bird Atlas. She first became interested



in birds as a student, when she worked on a project studying Tree Swallows in eastern Ontario. Since then, she's made it her mission to do bird fieldwork in as many amazing places as possible, including Sable Island and the Okanagan Valley. She is very excited by the opportunity to explore some of the far-flung corners of Newfoundland for the Atlas. Catherine is fascinated by animal behaviour, and particularly enjoys the breeding evidence aspect of atlassing.

*Favourite Newfoundland bird?* Black Guillemot— who can resist the potbelly and bright red feet?

Jenna McDermott: Assistant Atlas Coordinator



Jenna is the Assistant Coordinator for the Atlas and is very excited to be a part of the first Breeding Bird Atlas in Newfoundland. Her love of birds began in Ontario during an opportunity working with Wood Thrush. A series of field contracts eventually led her to a graduate

program in Newfoundland, studying Gray-cheeked Thrush. She is always excited to explore new, remote areas of the island, and to observe and learn more about bird behaviour as the Atlas progresses. Jenna hasn't spent much time in Region 3, but really hopes to get out atlassing there this summer!

Favourite Newfoundland bird? Boreal Chickadee

# **Region Highlight**



### Region 4: Bay d'Espoir

Region 4 is a large area with very little road access, but plenty of amazing habitat and uninterrupted forest tracts for birds. Sounds like the perfect place for adventurous atlassers to find hidden treasures! This region currently has very low coverage, so any chance you get, pop on over to

Region 4!

### Some numbers:

- 192 total squares (86 priority squares)
- 3.6 hours spent atlassing in 2020
- 9 point counts completed
- 4 participants registered



Hermitage, in Region 4. *Photo: Doug Clarke* 



### Doug Clarke: Regional Coordinator

Doug Clark is an early career high school social studies teacher with a lifelong passion for birding. His parents were both avid birders in Ontario and instilled in him a love of nature from childhood. Doug still remembers ardently studying field guides in the back of the car on family road trips. He spent his first two years post-graduation - two of the best of his life - in the Hermitage area on the South coast. The past two years, most of his birding has been done in the beautiful Port au Choix region, but he still looks back fondly on his time birding the valley between Hermitage and Sandyville, as well as the Pass Island road on Seal Cove. One of the great things about teaching is that it gives him a chance to explore some of the less traveled regions of the province, and he always finds it rewarding getting to know the birds and wildlife in any place he finds himself.

*Favourite Newfoundland bird?* Owls and warblers, but if you spend enough time with them, even the most drab birds have something to commend them.

### Alvan Buckley: Regional Coordinator

Since becoming a birder in 2009, Alvan has volunteered and worked with several organizations, including two Arctic trips with the Canadian Wildlife Service and three years of guiding at Point Pelee National Park. He is passionate about his home province of Newfoundland and Labrador and excited to see the results of the province's first atlas. Alvan loves the adventure and sense of discovery with endless remote and undiscovered areas across the province, particularly Region 4.

*Favourite Newfoundland bird*? Rock Ptarmigan, and he is excited to find some in Region 4!



## **Quiz: Test your Breeding Evidence Knowledge!**



American Crow. Photo: Darrian Washinger

### Question 1: An American Crow is observed carrying food in its bill in May. Which breeding evidence code should you use?

A) X: Species observed in its breeding season (no breeding evidence)
B) H: Species observed in its breeding season in suitable nesting habitat
C) D: Courtship or display, including courtship feeding or copulation
D) CF: Adult carrying food for young

Question 2: A pair of Yellow Warblers is occupying a territory which straddles the boundary between 2 squares, and the male is observed singing on both sides of the boundary. In which square do you report them?

A) In both squares

- B) In the square where they spend the most time
- C) In neither because you aren't sure where they have their nest



Yellow Warbler Photo: Laura Tranguilla



Question 3: A Rose-breasted Grosbeak is observed on the Northern Peninsula in June, in suitable breeding habitat but far outside its normal breeding range. Which breeding evidence code should you use?

A) X: Species observed in its breeding season (no breeding evidence)
B) H: Species observed in its breeding season in suitable nesting habitat
C) S: Singing male(s) present or breeding calls heard
D) V: Visiting probable nest site

Rose –breasted Grosbeak Photo: Jared Clarke

Question 4: A Purple Sandpiper is seen on a coastal beach in apparently suitable breeding habitat in early July—during the breeding season but well outside of its usual breeding range. Which breeding evidence code should you use?

- A) X: Species observed in its breeding season (no breeding evidence)
- B) H: Species observed in its breeding season in suitable nesting habitat
- C) A: Agitated behaviour or anxiety calls of an adult
- D) DD: Distraction display



Purple Sandpiper. Photo: Jared Clarke

To brush up on your Breeding Evidence codes, check out the <u>Atlas Quiz</u> on our website! See page 8 for quiz answers.

## Announcements

#### Important Dates

Point counts run from **June 7 to July 7**. If you can identify birds by song, we encourage you to do point counts, as they give us valuable abundance data. If you are still learning but want to try point counts, contact your Regional Coordinators, as they may be able to loan you a hand-held recorder.

### Atlassing with eBird

You can now import eBird checklists to the Atlas through the NatureCounts portal—but **PLEASE remember to include breeding evidence in your checklist**. Breeding evidence is integral to the quality of data in the Atlas. You may use the breeding codes and definitions in eBird (which differ slightly from Atlas codes), as they will be automatically assigned the correct Atlas code when the data is imported. We recommend submitting eBird checklists to the Atlas regularly, so the information is fresh in your mind. Please also be patient; this is a new function and there are bound to be some glitches through the season!

### **Test Your Breeding Evidence Knowledge: Answers**

**Question 1: B.** American Crows may carry their food long distances before consuming it.

**Question 2: B.** When birds breed near the boundary between 2 squares, it doesn't really matter which square you report them in. If you suspect the location of the nest, report them in that square. Otherwise, you can report them in the square where you first saw them or where they appear to spend more time. You should not report them in both squares.

**Question 3: A.** Vagrant species can sometimes be observed far outside their normal breeding range in what appears to be suitable breeding habitat. Use code X unless you have stronger evidence that the species is breeding.

**Question 4: A.** Code as X, unless there is stronger evidence of breeding (such as nest building). Shorebirds can be found well south of their breeding range during the breeding season (e.g., late spring migrants, failed breeders).

### Travel support for remote atlassing

Now accepting applications! If you are planning an atlassing trip to a remote square, <u>apply for</u> <u>funding</u> through the Atlas, provided by the Baillie Fund. See website for more information, and contact the Atlas Office with any questions (nlatlas@birdscanada.org). Applications must be submitted by June 30<sup>th</sup>, 2021.

### Calling all story-tellers and photographers!

Do you have an atlassing adventure, amazing sighting, or fantastic photo you'd like to share? We'd love to hear or see it! **Send pictures and stories to the Atlas Office** (nlatlas@birdscanada.org).



Have refundable bottles and cans? Donate them to the Atlas at any Green Depot in NL! Account name: Newfoundland Breeding Bird Atlas Account #: 4841217 www.greendepotnl.ca