

BOOK REVIEWS

BIRDS OF ERIE COUNTY, PENNSYLVANIA, INCLUDING PRESQUE ISLE

Jean Stull, James A. Stull & Gerald M. McWilliams

Allegheny Press, 1985, 173 pp. plus 2 maps, \$8.00.

More and more excellent county bird books are being published and this one is certainly no exception.

Erie County is home to Presque Isle State Park, which is probably the best birding spot in Pennsylvania on a consistent basis. The only time it may even be considered bad is a hot summer day in June. Other hot summer days can be rewarding with the return of shorebirds and the birds that show up at that time must be given some sort of credit as well for fighting people pressure.

The authors have many years of documented bird sightings. They have braved the people, the heat, and the excruciating cold to provide us with a feeling for this unique Pennsylvania hotspot.

The species' accounts are accompanied by individual bar graphs indicating abundance during the calendar year. The accounts are concise but not to the point of lacking any relevant data. Two maps show all of the locations described in the text. One is of Erie County and the other of Presque Isle State Park. Three hotspots are described in detail: Siegel Marsh, Union City Dam, and Presque Isle State Park. One other area briefly noted is the Erie Public Dock, where we have spent many cold, fruitless hours searching through hundreds of thousands of gulls for one Thayer's Gull.

The authors have a fondness for Presque Isle that is warmly expressed as they stress the problems that continue to threaten the habitat during the nesting season and during the late summer/early fall migrant period. When one considers more than five million visitors per year it is incumbent upon all state and local officials that they heed the subtle warnings expressed in this book in order that this fragile environment be preserved.

The "Introduction" and "Birding Throughout the Year" sections give one the necessary overview to this special corner of Pennsylvania.

Jean Stull has done her typical, impressive job of illustrating many of the species. Her many hours of birding and banding are captured in the dozens of drawings that add to the pleasure of reading about Erie County.

We strongly recommend this fine book. Pennsylvania birders should be particularly pleased with it when planning trips necessary to finding 300+ species in the state. Neighboring state birders should also consider its information for indication of possible sightings in their areas. The book would be of special value as a guide to anyone interested in writing an informative county book.

We always look forward to going to Presque Isle and believe that any birder would find it exciting and worthwhile, especially after having absorbed the wealth of information contained in this publication.

SPECIES OF SPECIAL CONCERN IN PENNSYLVANIA

Hugh H. Genoways and Fred J. Brenner, editors

Carnegie Museum of Natural History

Special Publication No. 11, Pittsburgh, 1985. \$30.00.

It is too soon to know whether any lasting benefit to Pennsylvania's endangered, threatened, and vulnerable plants and wildlife will come from this publication, but it's a sure thing that they would be much worse off without it. The great value of this handsome volume is the attention it calls to the tenuous future of numerous breeding species of plants, invertebrates, fish, amphibians and reptiles, birds and mammals known to be in harm's way or already extirpated from the state. This 430-page document authoritatively testifies to their status in the Commonwealth. If human activities or "development" threatens any of these annotated species, this statement is now necessarily a principal source of input in any environmental alteration decisions that might affect the species' future in the state.

After a descriptive introduction to Pennsylvania's habitats, physiographic features, and drainage patterns, the six categories from endangered to extinct are defined as per the Federal Endangered Species Act (1973). Then, in turn, each group is explored.

"Birds," edited and introduced by Frank B. Gill, Curator of Ornithology at the Academy of Natural Sciences, Philadelphia, lists four species as Endangered, six as Threatened, twelve as Vulnerable, seven as Undetermined, nine Extirpated and one Extinct in the state. Twelve distinguished field birders and ornithologists in Pennsylvania are named as the Committee that compiled the list.

Each bird account is highlighted by maps showing the known breeding range in North America and Pennsylvania. Some accounts are enlivened by photographs from A.D. Cruickshank's contributions to the VIREO collection.

In his Introduction to the chapter on birds, Gill notes that the species list belongs to three main categories—raptors, freshwater marsh dwellers, and birds of agricultural uplands. He also notes that the list "must be considered a dynamic, not a static, working document." He laments the skimpy knowledge we now have of the breeding ranges and status of many of Pennsylvania's birds, a lack the Breeding Bird Atlas Project will help dispel.

The species accounts, written by Frank and Barbara Haas and John A. Ginaven, are brief and to the point. The key paragraphs in each account deal with the status classification and recommendations. In many cases the recommendations are repetitive, perhaps necessarily so, and few steps other than further study are suggested. This hesitancy probably reflects the fact that many of these species share similar habitats, that these habitats are in jeopardy and that much more needs to be known about their breeding ranges in the state.

The species accounts end with Selected References which rely on a relatively narrow range of standard state and general ornithological texts. Original sources are rarely cited.

While the "basis of status classification" is explained for each species, nowhere do the authors present a discussion of the theoretical basis of their choices. Hence, we are left to assume that the list represents the consensus of the Committee. So, for example, the Committee classified the Least and American Bittern as "Threatened," but decided the rare Pennsylvania breeding Yellow-crowned Night-Heron was not worthy of inclusion in any category. It also was surprising to see no mention made of the Least Tern, a species that nested at Tincum in 1950 and 1962.

There may have been good reasons for leaving these and various other birds off the list, but, because there is no satisfactory explanation of the principles by which the Committee made its decisions, the absence of such highly vulnerable birds as this Night-Heron and the extirpated Least Tern, among others, leaves the reader at a loss.

We wonder, also, at the nearly entire absence of any birds, with the exception of raptors, frequently referred to as Canadian and Alleghenian zone breeders. Pennsylvania has a rich tradition of breeding high altitude and northern tier species such as the Yellow-bellied Flycatcher, Swainson's Thrush, Winter Wren, and even Olive-sided Flycatcher. Why these rare breeding birds were left off the list, likewise, remains unexplained. Either these birds are in better condition than generally thought or have been overlooked.

Perhaps it would have been prudent to include these birds as "Status Undetermined" so that they would get a degree of protection. Later adjustments could be made, if necessary, after data from the Breeding Bird Atlas or specific studies clarifies their status.

Dr. Gill remarks that "many of these species can only be identified by experienced observers." This statement should not be taken to discourage any observer from making careful notes of these species when breeding is suspected. Most field birders, those most likely to take an interest in this list, would have little difficulty recognizing the characteristic field marks, calls, songs and so forth, especially in breeding season. In this regard, all suspected nesting observations should be sent to Atlas coordinators. (*Cassinia* will publish noteworthy records as long as no danger to nesting can result. All data on these - see list following - and other species observers think worthy of placement on any future list, with supporting data, should be sent to the editor for transmittal to the Committee.)

Whatever shortcomings the current list may have, the value and significance of the report far outweigh its apparent omissions. As Gill remarked, the list is "dynamic." Hopefully, it will be amended. Nevertheless, the Committee and authors are to be congratulated for making this pathbreaking contribution to Pennsylvania ornithology and conservation. Highly recommended.

— E.D.F.

PENNSYLVANIA'S BIRD 'SPECIES OF SPECIAL CONCERN'

ENDANGERED

- Bald Eagle (*Haliaeetus leucocephalus*)
- King Rail (*Rallus elegans*)
- Short-eared Owl (*Asio flammeus*)
- Bewick's Wren (*Thryomanes bewickii*)

THREATENED

- Least Bittern (*Ixobrychus exilis*)
- American Bittern (*Botaurus lentiginosus*)
- Upland Sandpiper (*Bartramia longicauda*)
- Black Tern (*Chlidonias niger*)
- Sedge Wren (*Cistothorus platensis*)
- Henslow's Sparrow (*Ammodramus henslowii*)

VULNERABLE

- Great Blue Heron (*Ardea herodias*)
- Cooper's Hawk (*Accipiter cooperii*)
- Red-shouldered Hawk (*Buteo lineatus*)
- Northern Harrier (*Circus cyaneus*)
- Northern Bobwhite (*Colinus virginianus*)
- Barn Owl (*Tyto alba*)
- Red-headed Woodpecker (*Melanerpes erythrocephalus*)
- Purple Martin (*Progne subis*)
- Marsh Wren (*Cistothorus palustris*)
- Eastern Bluebird (*Sialia sialis*)
- Grasshopper Sparrow (*Ammodramus savannarum*)
- Vesper Sparrow (*Pooecetes gramineus*)

STATUS UNDETERMINED

- Northern Goshawk (*Accipiter gentilis*)
- Sharp-shinned Hawk (*Accipiter striatus*)
- Long-eared Owl (*Asio otus*)
- Whip-poor-will (*Caprimulgus vociferus*)
- Yellow-bellied Sapsucker (*Sphyrapicus varius*)
- Least Flycatcher (*Empidonax minimus*)
- Bobolink (*Dolichonyx oryzivorus*)

EXTIRPATED

- Osprey (*Pandion haliaetus*)
- Peregrine Falcon (*Falco peregrinus*)
- Greater Prairie Chicken (*Tympanuchus cupido*)
- Piping Plover (*Charadrius melodus*)
- Common Tern (*Sterna hirundo*)
- Loggerhead Shrike (*Lanius ludovicianus*)
- Dickcissel (*Spiza americana*)
- Bachman's Sparrow (*Aimophila aestivalis*)
- Lark Sparrow (*Chondestes grammacus*)

EXTINCT

- Passenger Pigeon (*Ectopistes migratorius*)

THE STATUS AND DISTRIBUTION OF NEW JERSEY'S BIRDS

Charles F. Leck

Rutgers University Press, New Brunswick, New Jersey, 1984.

214 pp., one map, two tables. \$25.00.

Despite serious drawbacks, Charles Leck's new summary of New Jersey's birds can be of some value to birders and individuals who want a brief glimpse of the state's birds. The book's most outstanding virtue is that it updates a long overdue review of the Garden State's avifauna. The last overall synopsis was in 1955. Thus, Leck's book, coming as it does some 30 years later, is a welcome event.

In those 30 years a number of new birds were added to the state list and a number of new breeding species were discovered. Leck provides details on these and status reports on the previously listed birds in the state.

However, the author chooses to delete a number of important elements that, had they been included, would have made this book one of enduring value and usefulness. Additionally, certain inaccuracies and offbeat opinions tend to undermine the credibility of major portions of the book.

Leck eliminates, for example, early and late dates for most species, claiming that such occurrences are due to "aberrant" or "sick" birds, a statement for which he presents no evidence. Early arrival and departure dates, when provided, are important when even the most casual birder tries to determine whether a questionable identification is actually possible. Moreover, and more importantly, such information is useful for long range abundance, migration and environmental studies. It seems to this reviewer that whether early or late, casual or regular, sick or well, a state's avifauna and its seasonal occurrence should be reported as it is with no arbitrary deletions.

Another regrettable decision, presumably to save space and cost, was Leck's elimination of nearly all references to observers or sources. In his Introduction, the author tells us what sources he used, a list of magazines, journals and books consulted, and he includes a surprisingly extensive and useful Bibliography. But these cannot compensate for the absence of citations and the potentially more complete documentation available in the original accounts.

Leck seems to be impressed with "how many of our New Jersey bird species were described by two notable persons - Linnaeus, the father of binomial nomenclature... and Audubon, the father of American Ornithology." (pp. 2-3) The author is certainly entitled to his opinion, but it is rather odd for him to ignore Alexander Wilson, who is otherwise universally regarded as the "father." And why he makes a big deal out of a situation that could be claimed by most states east of the Mississippi River, if it were accurate, which it is not, is inexplicable. Had he counted, he would have found that Linnaeus named 197, Gmelin 46, Vieillot 25, Wilson 24 and Audubon 15 of his list of New Jersey's birds.

This is hardly the place to do a species-by-species critique of Leck's work, but a few observations might give the flavor of his treatment. He seems, for example, strangely reluctant to acknowledge the negative impact of Starlings on native birds while giving a fascinating account of their spread throughout the state. He writes that oil "may" have caused "some" mortality to Ruddy Ducks on the Delaware. This curious opinion appears in print here, as far as I know, for the first time. It is especially not shared by those who helplessly watched the deaths of thousands of oiled Ruddies as the frustrated workers tried unsuccessfully to clean and rehabilitate them.

Leck unaccountably includes an apparently unsigned "no comment" note of a Western Flycatcher, a first state record no less, at Brigantine National Wildlife Refuge in 1966. He supports listing this bird with one of the rare citations of a *suspected* Western Flycatcher in 1981. Given the considerable doubts and inadequate documentation, it is surprising he does not list this bird as hypothetical, if it should be listed at all. Certainly, the earlier

report deserves oblivion and not a place in any state, regional, county or refuge list.

The author writes that the "first New Jersey nesting (of the Blue Grosbeak) was near Camden. . ." More precisely, that nesting was the first *recorded* nesting in the state. This lack of careful wording occurs a number of times in the species' accounts. Leck refers to three subspecies of Sharp-tailed Sparrows which occur in New Jersey, a useful fact, but he fails to tell us which ones. His records of birds follow no order whatsoever in many accounts, not by date, number or region. The combined impact of these many small inaccuracies, omissions and disorganization lessens our confidence in the whole.

Nevertheless, the distribution descriptions in the state are well done, but more than a bare county outline map would have been helpful. His tables listing new state birds, 1960-1981, and new breeding birds since 1920 are of interest. His descriptions of the species' preferred habitat are succinct and accurate, but his occasional inclusion of nesting habits is intrusive. He prudently calls repeatedly for care in sight identifications of difficult species. But why he thinks a Rufous-necked Stint can be confused with a Western Sandpiper (unless he has juvenile plumage in mind) is beyond me. His references to subspecies which are distinguishable in the field, when named, are helpful. And his allusions to the species in nearby states, chiefly New York and Pennsylvania, provide interesting reference points. He frequently notes high counts of various species on the model of John Bull's BIRDS OF THE NEW YORK AREA, another helpful and interesting addition, but I doubt if these unscientific estimates can be used, as the author hopes, for conservation studies in the future.

The author recognized the need for an updated report on New Jersey's birds. He is to be commended for providing one. Its major strength lies in providing a quick glimpse of the status and distribution of the state's birds. Its major faults lie in what was omitted and an accumulation of small errors, omissions and inconsistencies. New Jersey then, like Pennsylvania and Delaware in our region, still awaits a truly contemporary and comprehensive account of its bird life. Recommended with reservations.