

**BIRDS OF ROCKLAND COUNTY, NY
AND
THE HUDSON HIGHLANDS
1844 - 1976**

(With 1983 Addenda)

by

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INTRODUCTION

Studies of the avifauna of Rockland County and the bordering Hudson Highlands date back at least a century and a quarter from this writing (1976). Notes on species status in the region can be found in the works of De Kay and Mearns in the 19th Century, in Chapman's studies at the turn of the century, in Eaton's state bird book in 1910-14, in Griscom's 1923 "Birds of the New York City Region," and in Cruickshank's 1942 "Birds Around New York City." Each of these studies reflects the accelerating growth of knowledge about the birdlife of the state and the metropolitan area, thanks partly to the growth in number of active and knowledgeable birders and to improved communication among them. Thus an infinitely more thorough evaluation of species status is that of John Bull, first in the 1964 "Birds of the New York Area" and then in the landmark "Birds of New York State" in 1974. Still, the accumulation of local notes, as in other phases of the "information explosion", in the sciences, contains a wealth of detail that may not fit into these monumental studies but should perhaps be preserved on a regional basis.

I daresay more information on birds in Rockland County has been amassed in the past 25 or 30 years than in all of the region's previous history, which dates back to the Dutch settlement of Tappan in 1640. Especially since World War II, there have been incomparably more observers—and more mobile observers. Sheer ease of transportation is obviously a major factor in ensuring thorough coverage of any area. The typical modern birder doubtless covers more miles in one day afield, than De Kay or Mearns could cover in a month. And the spreading interest in nature, especially birds, has produced many more observers of acceptable competence than ever existed before.

When you consider that the bird students of the 19th Century and early 20th Century had neither wide-ranging and flexible transportation, high-powered binoculars and telescopes, nor bird guides arranged to be helpful in spotting diagnostic field marks, it is obvious that their coverage of any region must have been spotty. Local records of that era refer to an extremely limited number of observers and collectors: John G. Bell of Sparkill; H. C. De Rham, who I believe was a resident of Garrison, across the Hudson

from West Point; and L. W. Brownell of Nyack, who supplied the Rockland County report for Eaton's "Birds of New York."

When I began birding as a teenager in the late 1920s, I knew of only two or three active birders in all of Rockland County, not including Park Naturalist William H. Carr at Bear Mountain, who was already keeping records for the Bear Mountain-Harriman sections of the Palisades Interstate Park. Others were also making studies in the Park during the 1920s and 1930s, including P. M. Silloway, Daniel B. Beard, Kenneth M. Lewis, H. A. Hochbaum, and John C. Orth, who later succeeded Carr as park naturalist and also served as assistant superintendent of the Park until his recent retirement. Through the 1930s and 1940s, many Linnaean Society members devoted some of their field time to Rockland County and the Highlands, including Joseph J. Hickey, Ernst Mayr, John and Richard Kuerzi, Richard Herbert, Lester Walsh, George Komoroski, Howard Van Deuzen, and John Matuszewski.

In 1947, the Rockland Audubon Society was founded by a nucleus of half a dozen active birders. Within ten years, the society could boast at least 15 active and competent birders, and their number peaked at around 25 highly capable observers in the late 1960s. In 1976, the society has about 550 members, but their interests are not so narrowly focused on local birds. Over the years, many of the active birders were able to give the region the midweek coverage that is so important to an accurate picture, especially of birds' arrival and departure dates. And collectively they represented literally a global background of experience, birding on every continent, including Antarctica, as well as on the oceans and in the high Arctic. One can only imagine what De Kay, Mearns, and Eaton would have thought of birdwatching on such a scale.

This post-World War II upsurge of interest in local bird study happened to coincide with a drastic change in Rockland County, demographically and ecologically. Rapid housing development after the war swiftly turned the county from rural to suburban, with dramatic effect on birdlife.

In Colonial days, Rockland County went through the same transformation as all other areas in the East: clearing of forests for farms, lumbering for fuel and construction material, the building of roads and the growth of villages. But, locally, the face of the land was also changed by special circumstances. In the Highlands, where the roughness of the terrain and the thinness and acidity of the soil is discouraged farming except, on a small scale, the forests served primarily as a source of ship masts and timbers of hickory, oak, maple, chestnut, and pine for shipbuilding and house construction. And the discovery of iron ore in the Highlands before the Revolution led to intensive woodcutting and charcoal burning, especially of native chestnuts, to fuel the iron furnaces. To this day, old mining and woodcutting roads remain in Bear Mountain-Harriman Park as convenient access to good birding areas. The consumption of wood in the 18th and 19th Centuries was enormous. In 1846 alone, at the height of the brick-making industry in the Haverstraw-Grassy Point area, the brickyards consumed 10,800 cords of wood. No wonder then that few trees or climax growth remain, even in Bear Mountain-Harriman Park, whose second-growth woodland, covering some 42,000 acres, is the only substantial forest left in our region.

Quarrying, too, has had a deep effect on the region's ecology—ultimately for the good. In the low-lying areas along the Hudson shore, sandstone was extensively quarried from 1800 to 1840, supplying the material for many of Manhattan's brownstone houses, for the forts on Governor's Island, for the old Capitol in Albany, and for the north wall of the present New York City Hall, as well as for local houses. This operation left no scars on the land; the holes were soon filled and built upon. But the quarrying of traprock, the material of the Palisades and the river wall northward through Rockland County, was another story. Starting as early as 1804, when it produced stone for the seawall of Governor's Island and for many Manhattan piers, traprock quarrying boomed in the era of railroad building and, later, highway building. Rockland's traprock quarries provided the riprap for the New York Central Railroad's "water level" route between Yonkers and a point near Albany and for the railroad's West Shore division on the west bank of the Hudson. More recently, they supplied the rock fill for the West Side Highway in Manhattan. But traprock

quarrying is conspicuous and defacing, and it represented a highly visible attack on the beauty of the Palisades and the river mountains to the north. The founding of a rock-crushing plant at Hook Mountain, Upper Nyack, was directly responsible for the Palisades Interstate Park's acquisition of the whole mountain shortly after 1900. Similarly, a quarrying operation barely started at Tallman Mountain, Piermont, triggered the Park's acquisition of that area some 40 years ago. The threat of quarry expansion at scenic High Tor, Haverstraw, resulted in the Park's acquisition of that mountain area, too, after World War II. Thus, quarrying led to the preservation of at least three ecologically and scenically valuable areas on the Hudson River's shores.

Meanwhile, the suburbanization of Rockland County was accelerating. With the coming of the railroads a century ago, the county began gaining new residents through its proximity to New York City, hence its attractiveness as a "bedroom" community for commuters. But until after World War II, its growth was steady and unspectacular. From a population of 19,000 in 1850, Rockland grew to 38,000 in 1900 and 74,000 in 1940. Then the 1950 census of 89,000 already showed the beginnings of the postwar tract development boom. The 1960 population was 136,000; in 1970, it was 240,000; a preliminary census in 1975 estimated 253,000.

Farming was the most obvious victim of this growth, and when land began to be valued and taxed as potential development property—at \$10,000 to \$30,000 an acre instead of the prewar \$100 or so—it quickly became uneconomical to farm. Attrition of farming had begun before World War II, with the 1,000 farms on the 1920 census dropping to 355 in 1940. But the postwar home-building boom was the quick finishing touch. In 1976, only one of the dozen prewar dairy farms remains, and only two of the dozen orchards. As farmland was converted to tract housing, Rockland County has lost most of its resident field birds such as woodcock, grasshopper sparrow, and meadowlark.

The need to serve a mushrooming population, not only locally but in the whole metropolitan area, has cost Rockland County some of its choicest bird habitats. Even the Palisades Interstate Park's flooding of Lake Welch just before the war to create a recreational lake had

its direct penalty: the loss of the region's only known breeding colony of half a dozen pairs of short-billed marsh wrens. And since the war, the Hackensack Water Company has flooded two three-mile stretches or the Hackensack Creek swamps to create drinking-water reservoirs: one north of West Nyack and the other straddling the New Jersey border west of Orangeburg. Both swamps had been marvelously secluded environments, traversable only by canoe or paddled boat; they were a nesting place for blue-winged teal, least bittern, Virginia rail, and long-billed marsh wren, as well as commoner birds. Only one portion of the Hackensack swamp remains between the two reservoirs; is less choice than the other segments, and water company patrolmen discourage access.

On the Hudson shore north of Haverstraw, a huge steam-powered electric generating plant stands where marsh birds and the willow flycatcher formerly nested. And the construction of the Tappan Zee Bridge to carry the New York Thruway across the river, mostly on a causeway supported by closely spaced piers, has markedly increased the silting along the Grand View and Piermont shores, to the extent that diving ducks no longer winter there in the same numbers as in the 1930s and 1940s. At the same time, the effect of the bridge piers in slowing the Hudson's flow and thus depositing sediment is perhaps compensating by steadily building up a shorebird environment of mudflats on the south side of Piermont Pier.

Indeed, it would be difficult to prove that the suburbanization of Rockland County has had a totally malign effect on birdlife. It may be, for example, that the planting of shrubbery around suburban homes provides attractions for birds that open land may lack, and the prevalence of bird feeders at these homes may account for the increasing number of half-hardy birds that linger through the winter. Yet the suspicion remains that some breeding species suffer from the suburbanite's love of cats and garden sprays.

The number of species on the Rockland County-Hudson Highlands bird list has grown both through expanded observation by greater numbers of birders and in real terms through the extension of ranges and the accumulation of casual or accidental occurrences. At the end of 1948, the species list numbered 237, at the end

of 1955, it was 272; today it stands at 309, based on the A.O.U. checklist as of 1948 for purposes of comparison (although the species histories that follow are arranged according to the 1973 A.O.U. checklist).

Strictly speaking, only two of the historic studies previously mentioned apply directly to Rockland County and the Hudson Highlands: Mearn's 1878-82 report and Brownell's notes up to 1908, incorporated in Eaton's state book as the Rockland County local list. However, for the sake of a perspective of more than 30 years, I have included extralimital status reports, freely interpreted for local relevance. These include De Kay's statewide study in 1844 as summarized in Eaton, the substance of "Birds of Sing Sing, New York" by Dr. A.K. Fisher of the U. S. Biological Survey as summarized in Chapman's "Handbook" (1898), findings from Chapman's "Handbook" itself and from his "An Annotated List of the Birds Known to Breed Within Fifty Miles of New York City" (1894) and "Birds of the Vicinity of New York City" (1906). I have also drawn upon Griscom's 1923 book on the New York area and Jack Kuerzi's 1927 Linnaean paper on Bronx County birds, as well as, for a still later era, Cruickshank's 1942 book.

Current status reports as of 1976 adopt the terms of occurrence and abundance that John Bull laid down in his "Birds of New York State." These are:

REPORTED ANNUALLY	
Very Abundant	over 1,000 per day (often in large flocks) <i>per locality</i>
Abundant	200 to 1,000 per day <i>per locality</i>
Very Common	50 to 200 per day <i>per locality</i>
Common	20 to 50 per day <i>per locality</i>
Fairly Common	7 to 20 per day <i>per locality</i>
Uncommon	1 to 6 per day <i>per locality</i>
Rare	1 to 6 per season
NOT REPORTED ANNUALLY	
Very Rare	over 6 records but very infrequent occurrence
Casual	2 to 6 records
Accidental	only 1 record

The trouble in applying these criteria comes in interpreting "per locality," and it does not help much when Bull writes that the term means "precisely that." It is synonymous with "neighborhood," just "what one can see from a given stationary point? Is it a unit of habitat, such as a single marsh or wooded hillside, a

lake or a riverfront? Is Rockland County a single locality or a million of them? With the reasoning that a locality is the area that a birder might cover in a day or a half-day afield, I have treated our region as a locality, with a separate rating in some instances for the Highlands and Bear Mountain-Harriman Park. It seems to me that any other treatment would favor gregarious or colonial birds over widely scattered but more numerous species. The robin, for example, would never match in numbers the tree or barn swallow in summer, and the house sparrow would appear far scarcer than the ring-necked duck.

Moreover, treatment of the entire area as a locality is essential in calibrating a birder's typical daily list with Bull's occurrence criteria. For example, the robin is undeniably a common to very common breeder, yet a mid-May list of a single party covering much of Rockland County barely puts it into that category, and on any less wide-ranging list it might rank as "uncommon" to "fairly common." On the day this is written, a cool, overcast day in July, a one-mile walk through South Nyack happened to net just a single robin—"uncommon" by Bull's standards. Of course, a birder's typical list in mid-May undoubtedly underestimates the number of robins; with the plethora of migrants at that season, the robins, wood thrushes, and blue jays are not counted as precisely as, say, the gnatcatchers, Nashville warblers, and scarlet tanagers. Even so, a careful census of robins in a village, a square mile, or a township would not be likely to produce enough birds on a given day to meet the criterion for "common to very common." And, in the final analysis, occurrence ratings should serve as an index to what a birder may expect in a given area, whatever its size.

Treating Rockland County and the adjacent Highlands as a unit, or in some cases two units, also seems to answer Bull's stated objections to correlating abundance with Christmas, waterfowl, hawk, and "Big Day" counts. Bull writes: ". . . the amount of area covered on these various counts is too variable and is virtually useless for locality maxima, although suitable enough to indicate trends." The area covered on both of the local Christmas Counts is the one thing that has remained constant over the years, and the manpower devoted to covering it has also been approximately the same from year to

year (except that Rockland Audubon Society's first pilot-project count in 1947 was 50% undermanned). The single-party May "Big Day" counts over a dozen or more years covered substantially the same routes each year, and the collective "Big Day" counts that Rockland Audubon Society ran for a few years were made by seven or eight parties covering the Christmas Count territory.

Place names have been updated to 1976 (artificial lakes in the Park and Rockland County have eliminated certain older features). And to spare the reader a search back through the list to find an observer's full name, I have used full names in each species treatment rather than only in the first listing in which a name appears.

I have been able to learn nothing about L. W. Brownell except that he apparently lived in Nyack or vicinity and was the only Rockland County observer who responded to a query sent out by the State Museum in 1900 as a step toward accumulating data for Eaton's work. Although Griscom's 1923 book specifically disclaims Rockland County coverage, he often cites useful observations for the lower Hudson Valley. Both Fisher and Kuerzi cover areas contiguous with Rockland County; Ossining (formerly Sing Sing) is across the Hudson from Rockland Lake Landing, and Kuerzi's area limits extend to Tarrytown, across the Hudson from Nyack.

If any regional study such as this one is to have value to future generations of bird observers, it must be in its historical perspective, in the broad "demographic" changes in birdlife. I hope that this admittedly amateur compilation serves that purpose.

1983 ADDENDA -- 'BIRDS OF ROCKLAND COUNTY' REVISITED

May, 1976 was my cutoff date for bird data in the expanded "Birds of Rockland County, etc." Since then we have added new occurrence dates, new records that modify the status of various rarer species, and even some new species not recorded prior to 1976. In the interest of updating the previous manuscript, here are some of the changes.

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