

# TTPBRS newsletter

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The American Redstart (*Setophaga ruticilla*) was chosen as the signature bird for the summer issue of the newsletter due to the unexpected numbers that were found during our breeding bird work in Claireville Conservation Area this past summer!

## Latest News

### Spring Migration

Spring and summer 2006 was a truly formative period for TTPBRS. We wrapped up another very productive season of spring migration monitoring, during which we completed 64 days of coverage, banded 2,570 birds and recorded 179 species. Through our educational programming, a total of 787 people were given talks and demonstrations at TTPBRS!

### Breeding Birds

The Monitoring Avian Productivity and Survivorship (MAPS) program was launched for the first time ever in the Greater Toronto Area! The first season for this long-term assessment of breeding birds was very successful (see page 5).

The Great Lakes Marsh Monitoring Program was in full swing as nine marsh sites in the Durham region were surveyed. Numbers of birds and variety of species was higher than in 2005 and included a sighting of four Least Bitterns, a species at risk in Canada's wetlands!

Tommy Thompson Park Bird Research Station staff and volunteers also completed year two of the Breeding Birds of Tommy Thompson Park Project. Point count surveys and extensive nest searching were executed between June and July. In the end over 230 nests were found and monitored which will add to our growing database on breeding birds at Tommy Thompson Park.

### TTPBRS joins CMMN!

After three years of counting and banding at Tommy Thompson Park, our application to become a member station of the Canadian Migration Monitoring Network (CMMN) was accepted! We currently have provisional member status with the CMMN, which entitles us to a higher share of Baillie Birdathon proceeds. We now have two years to work towards full membership to the network.

### Baillie Birdathon Results

Speaking of the Baillie Birdathon, our fundraising drive in spring 2006 was a resounding success as 15 participants raised over \$10,000 for the operation of TTPBRS! In just our first year we raised the third highest amount out of all migration stations across Canada! Thanks go to Bushnell, Mountain Equipment Co-op, Bass Pro Shops and of course, to all of the participants and sponsors!

### Fall Migration

Fall migration monitoring is well underway at Tommy Thompson Park and we are finding record high numbers of many species this year. Visit the TTPBRS website for daily updates on the fall monitoring!

<http://tppbrs.blogspot.com>

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# Spring Migration Summary

By Dan Derbyshire



During spring 2006, 2,570 birds were banded, 470 recaptured and an additional 54 birds were released unbanded. A total of 179 species were recorded for the season, which is the highest spring

species total recorded from all years. Five species and forms were banded at TTPBRS for the first time, which include Hooded Warbler, Dunlin, Least Sandpiper, Brewster's Warbler and "Yellow" Palm Warbler. With these additions the TTPBRS species banded list now stands at 108.

While a record high number of birds were banded in spring 2006, the season as a whole was typical for most species. White-throated Sparrow was again the most abundant species found in the nets while Myrtle Warbler, Magnolia Warbler, Swainson's Thrush, and Hermit Thrush again appeared in the top 10 species banded list. An incredible 25 Cape May Warblers were banded this spring, which is much higher than previous years. A full report on spring 2006 has been completed and includes an interesting assessment of temporal patterns of migrant abundance at TTPBRS (report available in PDF format by request).

## Unusual Sightings

There were a total of six additions to the official TTPBRS checklist. These new species bring the checklist to a total of 223 species.

**Sandhill Crane-** (2<sup>nd</sup> TTPBRS record) A single flyover on April 9

**Forster's Tern-** (1<sup>st</sup> TTPBRS record) Four sightings of what is likely the same individual between April 18 and May 7

**Red-throated Loon-** (2<sup>nd</sup> TTPBRS record) A single bird observed from the north beach

**"Yellow" Palm Warbler-** (2<sup>nd</sup> TTPBRS record) First banding record of this subspecies on April 24

**Clay-colored Sparrow-** (1<sup>st</sup> TTPBRS record) A remarkable season for this species with three sightings from May 4-12

**Hooded Warbler-** (3<sup>rd</sup> TTPBRS record) First banding record of the species was of a male on May 9

**Brewster's Warbler-** (1<sup>st</sup> TTPBRS record) A single male banded on May 9

**Blue-winged Warbler-** First of three records this spring was a banded female on May 9

**Virginia Rail-** (1<sup>st</sup> TTPBRS record) A single individual observed throughout the morning of May 10 near net 9

**Grasshopper Sparrow-** (1<sup>st</sup> TTPBRS record) Long overdue, the first of this species was observed and heard on the north shore on May 16

**Lesser Black-backed Gull-** (1<sup>st</sup> TTPBRS record) A single individual observed on the east point on May 18

**Northern Mockingbird-** (2<sup>nd</sup> TTPBRS record) Unusual at TTPBRS, this individual was recorded during a windy census on May 21

**Olive-sided Flycatcher-** A single individual on May 22 was our first spring record of this species

**American Bittern-** Single individual on May 27

**Green Heron-** (2<sup>nd</sup> TTPBRS record) A single bird observed at the tip on May 28

## Volunteers

A total of 25 volunteers contributed 1,682 hours to the spring migration monitoring program at TTPBRS! Thanks are due to all of our volunteers for their help this past spring!

Name	Hours	Name	Hours
Andrew Jano	196	Tom Flinn	46.3
Larry Menard	182	Chris Dunn	45.5
Don Johnston	168	Dave Langford	44.5
Ian Sturdee	148	Steve Gillis	40
Seabrooke Leckie	139	Chris Sawa	31.5
Bert Vanderzon	111	Kerry McGuire	20.5
Teresa Carlin	79.5	Paolo Viola	17
Rick Miller	70.5	John Maybury	13
Pierre Robillard	68	Mitch Meredith	11
Julia Marko	60.5	Melissa Rose	7
Attila Fust	60	Andrew McDonald	7
Norma Vanderzon	57.5	Lori Nichols	3
Jan McDonald	56	total	1682

## Education and Events



Banding demonstrations and interpretive talks were given to 787 people at TTPBRS in spring 2006, which is a significant jump from 389 in spring 2005. This figure includes park visitors, students and

special groups. The Winged Migration program for schools was in full swing this season as groups of 20-30 students from Grades 4-7 participated in the program on a daily basis from mid-April to mid-May. The program is delivered through the Investigating the Living City Spaces program of Toronto and Region Conservation.

A complete list of birds banded in 2006 compared to previous years is found on page three.

Spring Migration Summary Cont.

Species	2006	2005	2004	Species	2006	2005	2004
American Goldfinch	44	43	54	<b>Least Sandpiper</b>	2		
American Redstart	47	48	50	Lincoln's Sparrow	47	40	27
American Robin	31	21	22	Magnolia Warbler	78	104	164
American Tree Sparrow	16	14	13	Mourning Warbler	15	13	13
American Woodcock	2	6	2	Myrtle Warbler	165	145	210
Baltimore Oriole	17	13	12	Nashville Warbler	34	49	55
Bay-breasted Warbler	3	4	8	Northern Cardinal	5	4	2
Black-and-White Warbler	13	21	19	Northern Parula	2		2
Blackburnian Warbler	8	9	13	Northern Rough-wing. Swallow	2		2
Black-capped Chickadee	5	5	3	Northern Waterthrush	5	23	14
Blackpoll Warbler	18	11	29	Orange-crowned Warbler	3	2	5
Black-throated Blue Warbler	14	22	33	Ovenbird	27	49	28
Black-throat. Green Warbler	15	9	36	Philadelphia Vireo	2	3	14
Blue Jay	3	1	4	Pine Warbler	1		3
Blue-gray Gnatcatcher	1	1	1	Purple Finch		1	1
Blue-headed Vireo	2	4	4	Red-breasted Nuthatch	3		1
Blue-winged Warbler	3	3	4	Red-eyed Vireo	14	3	60
<b>Brewster's Warbler</b>	1			Red-winged Blackbird	91	51	50
Brown Creeper	85	84	23	Rose-breasted Grosbeak	10	13	4
Brown Thrasher	1	15	26	Ruby-crowned Kinglet	103	59	61
Brown-headed Cowbird	25	13	20	Rusty Blackbird		3	1
Canada Warbler	9	15	25	Savannah Sparrow	2	2	
Cape May Warbler	25	2	1	Scarlet Tanager	1	3	6
Cedar Waxwing	4		1	Slate-colored Junco	54	67	47
Chestnut-sided Warbler	23	41	47	Song Sparrow	65	78	65
Chipping Sparrow	1	5	5	Spotted Sandpiper			1
Common Grackle	13	23	6	Swainson's Thrush	158	175	99
Common Yellowthroat	41	80	68	Swamp Sparrow	68	48	70
Downy Woodpecker	4	1		Tennessee Warbler	1	2	2
<b>Dunlin</b>	4			Trail's Flycatcher	54	43	115
Eastern Kingbird	3	2	2	Tree Swallow	15	14	3
Eastern Phoebe	11	10	5	Veery	36	47	30
Eastern Towhee	4	3	3	Warbling Vireo	4	9	9
Eastern White-crown. Sparrow	29	24	22	Western Palm Warbler	24	28	53
Eastern Wood-Pewee	5	4	5	White-breasted Nuthatch			2
European Starling	5	1	5	White-throated Sparrow	363	206	264
Field Sparrow	6	12	3	Wilson's Warbler	26	37	46
Fox Sparrow	22	21	10	Winter Wren	18	20	20
Golden-crowned Kinglet	116	281	27	Wood Thrush	9	17	5
Golden-winged Warbler		1	4	<b>Yellow Palm Warbler</b>	1		
Gray Catbird	68	43	51	Yellow Warbler	56	65	82
Gray-cheeked Thrush	50	42	27	Yellow-bellied Flycatcher	29	22	35
Great Crested Flycatcher	2	3	3	Yellow-bellied Sapsucker		3	1
Hairy Woodpecker	1		1	Yellow-billed Cuckoo	1		1
Hermit Thrush	127	94	65	Yellow-shafted Flicker	4	9	6
<b>Hooded Warbler</b>	1			<b>Total Banded</b>	2576	2547	2519
House Wren	7	8	6	<b>Species</b>	88	81	87
Indigo Bunting	2	1	3	*Species in bold indicate new banding records for TTPBRS			
Least Flycatcher	41	26	69				

# Volunteering at TTPBRS

By Ian Sturdee



My four years of volunteering at the TTPBRS have been exciting and rewarding! My introduction in April 2003 was an orientation session for volunteers. The leaders talked about the operation of TTPBRS including bird safety and ethics, net round procedures, extraction of birds from nets, and scheduling. Most of it was pretty clear, but I also heard unfamiliar words such as census, moults, and alternate plumage. The never-ending learning journey had begun!

I was “new” to birds even though my interest in the subject went back 50 years. There was the initial excitement of holding a bird for the first time and then releasing it. Then, I learned the other bird grips. The next stage was simple extractions and learning how to put the bird in a bag. Then came more complex extractions, a process of learning that continues to this day. By 2005 I began to teach bird extraction to others. I found that the younger volunteers learn more quickly, but it is not a disadvantage to be “old” because younger people are on career paths and tend to move on while older ones may learn more slowly but stay longer.

I tried banding and was hopeless! Banders tell me that examining birds in the hand greatly improves their ability to identify birds in the field. However, non-banders like me can learn some of this by closely observing birds when they are removed from the mist nets and when they are banded. I now see many differences in the field that previously were a mystery.

It was at TTPBRS that I truly started to learn bird identification. I can remember seeing a Warbling Vireo outside the banding lab and having no clue what it was. When it was identified for me, I still had trouble identifying this common bird. With time I started to recognize them, and now the Warbling Vireo is an “easy” identification. There is a huge advantage to being in the company of expert birders.

Identification of species by sight is very rewarding, but my real “buzz” is coming from identification of songs and calls. Often, over 80% of the birds that I list are birds I have heard and not seen. For example, my Eastern Wood-Pewee identifications (many) have been almost all by song.

I have only been to a few Saw-whet Owl banding evenings in the fall, but still remember holding my first Saw-whet, it was unbelievably soft....and a big surprise!

Last year we started nest searching and this year the program was in full swing, covering all of Tommy Thompson Park. It is rewarding and can be frustrating at the same time because some species nests are very difficult to find. I have learned a lot about what behaviour to look for during nest searching.

For me volunteering has given me the opportunity to learn a great deal and contribute to the collection of data for science. I really enjoy the work and appreciate the opportunity to be a volunteer.



*Editor's note: Ian is a long-term volunteer, having been with us since the beginning. He has contributed over 1,000 hours to TTPBRS programs and is legendary for his jovial nature!*



# Monitoring Avian Productivity and Survivorship

By Dan Derbyshire

Monitoring bird populations is the critical first step in ensuring diverse and stable avian communities. The Breeding Bird Survey and Migration Monitoring Programs provide us with long-term population trends.



Knowing which species are in decline is important because it focuses our attention on species in jeopardy.

However, these programs cannot tell us why populations are changing. A great example is the Wood Thrush (*Hylocichla mustelina*), a species that has been in a mysterious decline since the 1960s (1.7% per year). This species breeds over a wide range, from Nova Scotia to the Midwest and south to Texas in the west and Florida in the east. The species spends its winters in Mexico and Central America. Just imagine the breadth of ecological contexts and conditions that could be responsible for the decline.

The Monitoring Avian Productivity and Survivorship (MAPS) program was launched by the Institute for Bird Populations in the 1990s as a means of measuring vital rates of breeding birds at the landscape level. Vital rates refer to nesting success (total young reared) and adult survivorship (longevity, site fidelity). Gathering this data from different locations across the continent can pinpoint exactly where vital rates are low and therefore enable conservationists to attribute population change to



specific problems. The real strength of the MAPS program is that over 500 different stations are now operating on a long-term basis across the continent. Each

station will likely have different habitat types, structures and contexts.

Toronto and Region Conservation entered into the MAPS network in summer 2006 with the establishment of a station at Claireville Conservation Area in Brampton, Ontario. Despite extensive coverage in the United

States, the new station at Claireville is one of only five currently operating in Ontario!

The MAPS program involves capturing and banding birds using mist nets on seven evenly distributed dates between June and early August. Surveys and habitat structure assessments are also key components of this program.

The station at Claireville was set-up on a few afternoons in early June. Set-up was a challenge as we found a lot of thorny brush, steep terrain and meandering streams. We were very excited when opening the nets for the first time at 5:40 a.m on June 12. We had no idea what to expect and were astonished to find six American Redstarts on the first net check! These redstarts were showing clear signs that they were nesting. By day's end a total of 50 birds were banded which included Eastern Wood-Pewee, Blue Jay, Common Grackle, Hairy Woodpecker, Rose-breasted Grosbeak, and Wood Thrush! Speaking of Wood Thrushes, a total of 10 individuals were captured during the summer, including some young birds that most likely hatched and fledged at the site! When the last net round was completed on July 30, a total of 288 birds had been banded and 45 recaptured.

The first year of MAPS in Toronto was a great success. The station will fill a key gap in the continental MAPS network and will improve our understanding of breeding birds and habitat conditions on a local level. Through our summer with the redstarts and Wood Thrushes, it really hit home how valuable the work is and how grateful we are to our supporters for making it happen. Looking forward with great anticipation to next June when our banded Wood Thrushes begin singing and claiming territories at Claireville!



# Identification Quiz

By Tom Flinn



This small, generally brown bird with a conical bill is relatively easy to quickly place as a member of Family *Emberizidae*. The Emberizids are a large family that includes the towhees, longspurs, sparrows and *emberiza* buntings.

In order to more quickly establish the identity of this species we will reveal that this picture was taken in Ontario in August and that this would not be considered a rare species. Also not considered are species that only breed in western North America or in the tropics. The small size, lack of bold streaking on the underparts and lack of bold white markings eliminates the towhees, longspurs, juncos and the Snow Bunting.

What we are left with is that our quiz bird has a name that ends in sparrow and is not rare. So why does it not easily fit into the sparrows we know in Ontario? The answer has to do with the fact that the picture was taken in August. We have to consider that the quiz bird may be in juvenile plumage. This opens up a whole new can of worms akin to Peterson's "confusing fall warblers." However, as with warblers, fall sparrows can almost always be identified if we are given opportunity to discover enough field marks.

Taking note of the field marks of this bird, we will see that we can quickly eliminate most of the sparrows found in Ontario. Let us start with the *Spizella* sparrows. American Tree Sparrow and Field Sparrow exhibit two white wing bars in all plumages. The Chipping Sparrow also exhibits one or two wing bars in all plumages which are generally white in adult plumages and range from white to buff in first basic and juvenile. In all plumages the Clay-coloured Sparrow shows a strong auricular (cheek) patch. Also, the above *Spizella* sparrows have streaking in the underparts in juvenile plumage only. The bird in question also has streaked underparts but has an all dark bill, a feature not shared by juvenile *Spizellas*.

Let us now turn to the *Ammodramus* sparrows. Nelson's Sharp-tailed Sparrow has an orange supercilium in all plumages. Le Conte's Sparrow always has a distinctly streaked nape. Henslow's Sparrow has a large pale bill in all ages. Grasshopper Sparrows have pale bills, and streaking in the nape.

All plumages of Fox Sparrow and Savannah Sparrow are more heavily streaked on the breast than our quiz bird. The Vesper Sparrow has a white eye ring and white edges on the outer rectrices in all plumages.

Now turning to the *Zonotrichia* sparrows. Harris's Sparrow, White-throated Sparrow, and White-crowned Sparrow show two white or buffy wing bars in all plumages.



This means that our quiz bird must be one of the *Melospiza* sparrows, which are Lincoln's Sparrow, Song Sparrow and Swamp Sparrow. Lincoln's Sparrow shows a gray nape like the quiz bird, but it is streaked. The crown ranges from brown or rusty brown in adult to brown or grayish brown in juvenile but not the black of our quiz bird. The base colour of the streaked flanks is buff rather than the brown of our quiz bird. In all plumages the Song Sparrow has strong moustachial and malar stripes. The sub-moustachial stripe is white or whitish. The head streaking on eastern birds is brown and not black. Streaking on the back is brown and dark brown rather than the black and buff of our quiz bird. We are left with Swamp Sparrow. While the juveniles of the *Melospiza* sparrows can be difficult to separate our quiz bird shows

enough distinctive features that we are able to show that it is a Swamp Sparrow in transition from juvenile to 1<sup>st</sup> basic plumage. The combination of the dark bill, lack of wing bars or other white markings, brownish flanks, and gray unstreaked nape eliminate all other sparrow species.

Please note that some of the above eliminations had to be simplified because space would not allow a description of all the races of some species or of all the variations within particular plumages. Still, you can see how being able to pick up a few key field marks can quickly lead to the elimination of many species. One word of caution is that if you are interested in identifying sparrows in fall you will need to look beyond general field guides into some of the fine books that deal with sparrows in depth (e.g. those by Rising and Beadle).

# Nest Searching

By Andrew Jano



I've been birding at Tommy Thompson Park since 1980 or so, and occasionally -- mainly in the winter -- have noticed the odd nest here and there, without paying much attention to them.

But this summer, in my second year working as a volunteer for the TTPBRS, I signed up to participate in the second year of the Breeding Birds of Tommy Thompson Park Project, doing nest searching and monitoring. Fellow volunteers had already started documenting nests found within the banding study area during the banding season, but I started only after the nets closed in early June.

At the beginning I was wondering whether I would find any nests. The foliage was fully developed, and nothing was easily visible. But after finding the first few nests -- easy ones -- in the dogwood shrubland, I grew a little more confident and soon found a fair number of them. I was amazed by the number of nests on the spit. On my first day I found the easy and common ones: Red-winged Blackbird and Yellow Warbler nests, but soon the variety had grown too. Logging a total of 64 hours, at the close of the season I had 64 nests of 11 species.



In 2006, seven staff and volunteers took part in the nest searching with impressive results, even though a few of us were new to this game. A total of 223 nests of 33 species were found, quite an improvement over 2005, when 73 nests of 20 species were recorded by three searchers. Details and analysis of this year's nest search will be available in a separate report later this year.

It was a beginner's mistake to rely too much on GPS coordinates to re-find nests or to establish bearings from the flags to the nest. Even a six-to 10-metre error can put you, in the worst case, 12 -20 metres off the true location and your bearing can be off by as much as 70 degrees. Especially in dense, featureless shrubland, it is almost impossible to re-locate a nest by GPS coordinates alone. A detailed description of the site is much more helpful. In my opinion, flagging the nests at the suggested 10 m distance is overly cautious, closer placement with a bearing to the nest established with an old-fashioned compass would save a lot of time.

Birds are supposed to be alarmed when you approach the nest, thus aiding the searcher. This is not true in many cases. Yellow Warblers just slink away quietly;

unlike redwings, which on the other hand raise hell near their nest - and away from it as well. Fortunately nests of both of these species are relatively easy to find by thoroughly searching likely sites.

I was baffled by the low number of grackle nests. Only three nests were found, two of which failed early. Throughout the nesting season grackles -- both adults and fledglings -- were fairly common everywhere at the spit. Where were they coming from?

Good sites to check for Red-winged Blackbird nests are the numerous large clumps of Japanese Knotweed. In one clump I found three nests and a Willow Flycatcher nest, another clump had two nests at the time of the original search; and two more nests, both predated, were found later.

Nest parasitism was evident, 11 of 42 nests had been raided by Brown-headed Cowbirds. The rates of nest failure were appalling, of the nests that could be checked for success or failure, about 48 % failed. Definite success is difficult to establish in many cases, where frequent checking is not desirable.

A surprising number of nests were found on later visits to the already searched area. Some of them were obviously built after the first search, but many were just plainly missed. Equally mystifying were nests that could not be found in spite of good records. To get a better idea of nest numbers, I plan to do a final visit to my study areas after leaf-off.

Hopefully the survey will continue next year. Nest searching is a fascinating aspect of birding, filling the lull between the spring and fall migration.



# Contacting TTPBRS



## TommyThompsonPark

The Tommy Thompson Park Bird Research Station is an initiative of Toronto and Region Conservation (TRCA) and the Conservation Foundation of Greater Toronto (CFGF).

The CFGF is an independently governed charitable organization dedicated to the protection and restoration of the natural environment in the Toronto region. Since inception in 1961, the foundation has raised more than \$25 million for a wide variety of environmental and heritage projects. The CFGF raises funds in support of programs administered by Toronto and Region Conservation. Toronto and Region Conservation has nearly 50 years of experience in the planning and implementation of environmental protection and enhancement programs, as well as public stewardship and outdoor education.

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### Frequent Flyer Miles!



One of "our" resident Yellow Warblers was originally banded on May 20, 2003 as an adult male and has since been recaptured twenty-one times. This bird has travelled back and forth between Toronto and Latin America at least ten times which is roughly equal to a distance of 30,000 kilometres! Each day during migration a warbler will typically consume 1.2 - 1.7 times its body weight in insects. The Yellow Warbler ranges in weight from 8-13 grams, which means that for a migration lasting 25 days, roughly 500 grams of insects are consumed by each individual warbler!



TTPBRS banded bird number 20,000 on May 30, 2006. The milestone banding was of a Gray-cheeked Thrush!