

WatchList Focus: Rusty Blackbird (*Euphagus carolinus*)

By Michael Burger, Ph.D.

WHEN THE NEW Audubon WatchList was released in the fall of 2002, it contained a few surprises, such as the relatively little known Rusty Blackbird (*Euphagus carolinus*). North American bird species are placed on the WatchList because of declining continental populations, restricted ranges, and/or significant threats on the breeding or non-breeding grounds.

Rusty Blackbirds made the list primarily due to Breeding Bird Survey data that suggest their population may have declined at about 10% per year since the inception of the survey in 1966.

“Recent studies and a new way of looking at a range of vulnerability factors puts this species squarely on our radar screen as one in serious decline,” said Ken Rosenberg, chair of

the Partners In Flight science committee, who worked with Audubon during the creation of the WatchList. And that is the whole purpose of the WatchList.

Rusty Blackbirds breed from Alaska eastward to Newfoundland in eastern Canada. Almost the entire breeding distribution is north of the contiguous United States, except for parts of northern Maine, New Hampshire, and Vermont and the Adirondacks in New York. The relatively few studies of breeding biology suggest that the species utilizes bogs, muskeg swamps, and streams for nesting sites. Beaver ponds and flows may be especially important habitats for this species. During the breeding season, males are black with a blue-green or greenish gloss. Females are brownish gray. Both sexes have distinctive yellow eyes.

Most North American birders are familiar with the Rusty Blackbird only during migration and winter. At these times, they can be found in flocks of up to about a thousand birds either

alone or with other blackbird species. They winter in the eastern U.S. from Iowa, through the southern Great Lakes, to southern New England south to Texas, the Gulf Coast, and Florida. Outside of the breeding season, males exhibit rusty brown edges on their upper body and head feathers and females are more buffy with a conspicuous buffy line above the eye.

Despite the significantly declining population suggested by BBS data, little is known about what factors might be causing such a trend. Habitat degradation has been suggested as a possible cause, including extensive clearcutting that may allow competitors like Common Grackles and Red-winged Blackbirds to invade Rusty Blackbird breeding habitats. Persecution of large, mixed-species flocks of blackbirds in winter may also be contributing to declines in Rusty Blackbird populations. One thing that is sure is that this is a species to watch. For more information, visit www.audubon.org/bird/watchlist.



Rusty Blackbird, *Euphagus carolinus*.

Audubon New York's Forest Stewardship Outreach Program

By Mitschka Hartley, Ph.D.

AUDUBON NEW YORK has begun to develop educational materials that provide landowners, foresters, and loggers with specific information on how sustainable forest management affects non-game wildlife. This outreach is the last step in our three-phase Forest Stewardship Program, which started in 1999, when Audubon staff began three years of field research on forestry and wildlife. Phase two involved data analysis by Audubon staff, which ended last summer when Audubon scientists completed a 51-page technical report summarizing all aspects of the research.

Audubon New York's outreach materials are being developed in cooperation with experts from Cornell Cooperative Extension and many others groups with which we have been collaborating for several years, including the New York Department of Environmental Conservation, SUNY-ESF, New York Forest Owners' Association, Empire State Forest Products Association, Paul Smith's College, the Institute for Consulting Foresters, Northeast Loggers Association, and the Cornell Laboratory of Ornithology.

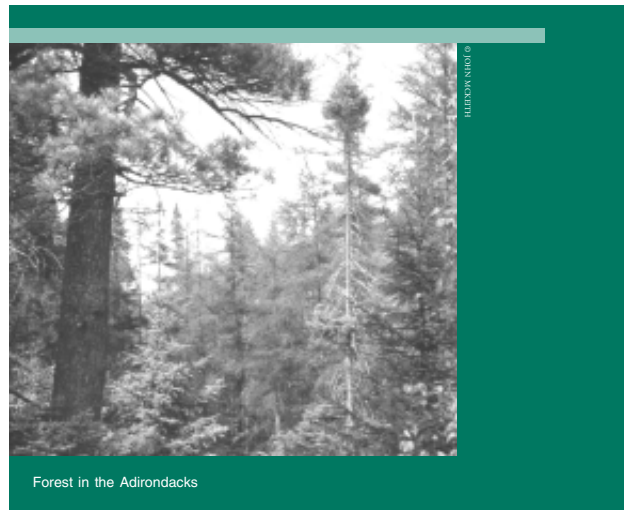
These partners share the belief that sustainable forest management is vital to New York's citizens and the environment. As the dominant habitat in the state, forests are home to most of New York's wildlife species, and are more extensive in New York today than at any time in the last century. However, our forestlands are increasingly vulnerable to human development. Even in rural areas, new houses and roads contribute to “sprawl,” which fragments forested landscapes into smaller and smaller parcels. Because some wildlife (e.g., certain raptors) require large forest tracts for their survival, even low-density developments can alter wildlife populations. Sprawl increases wildlife mortality through more animal collisions with automobiles, windows, and cellular towers, and greater predation of wildlife by domestic cats or dogs, and native predators that favor settled areas (e.g., crows and raccoons).

Sustainable forestry provides many economic benefits to society, one of which is that it gives some landowners an economic alternative to selling or developing their forestland. Large areas dominated by forests generally have healthy wildlife populations, even if part of the area is logged. Many plant and animal species are adapted to forest conditions resulting from disturbances such as wind storms, fires, or insect outbreaks; these species do especially well in managed forests. While some wildlife species definitely prefer mature, unharvested forests, Audubon research and other published studies have shown that most native animals remain relatively common even after forests are partially logged. Most species remain within a forest tract if part of it is uncut, while other species reoccupy cleared areas as they regrow. This makes sense when you consider that about 75% of today's forests were once cleared for farmland.

Mismanagement is also a threat to our forests. Inappropriate forest practices cause erosion, lower water quality, reduced forest health, and degrade wildlife habitats. Practices such as “high-grading,” cutting down only the largest and

most valuable trees, are widespread according to recent studies at Penn State and SUNY-ESF. Such practices disregard the future tree quality, species composition, or regeneration at a site—details which are the hallmark of proper forest management. Most private landowners do not even use professional foresters in the management of their forestland. Over the long-term, such mismanagement not only reduces a forest's economic value, it also makes it less valuable as wildlife habitat.

The main goal of Audubon's Forest Stewardship Program is to give landowners more information on how forestry practices affect different wildlife species. Another goal is to help landowners interact with professional foresters and loggers, to encourage forest stewardship and management that reflect the landowner's core values and long-term interests. Our curriculum demonstrates the benefits of proper management, the pitfalls of poor forest practices, and emphasizes the use of professionals trained in all aspects of forestry, including wildlife habitat considerations and long-term forest productivity. Currently, our outreach is being “pilot-tested” on selected audiences. Interested landowners, foresters, and loggers can look for our full-day or shorter workshops to be offered in 2004.



Forest in the Adirondacks