

Refining New York's Network of Important Bird Areas: An Update on the Second Round

By Jillian Liner

IN THE FALL of 2003, Audubon New York began revisiting the network of Important Bird Areas (IBAs) in New York State by initiating a second round of identifying sites as IBAs. When the IBA program began in New York in 1997, it was decided that the process of identifying sites would be revisited every five years. Revisiting the process provides an opportunity to identify new sites, re-assess the status of existing sites, and build upon advancements in bird conservation.

The second round of identifying IBAs has involved soliciting grassroots nominations and performing a spatial analysis of bird habitat using a Geographic Information Systems (GIS). To guide the spatial analysis, Audubon New York hired a GIS Analyst, Jamie Halperin, and formed a GIS committee, which is comprised of Technical Committee members who have GIS expertise. The spatial analysis focused on identifying sites for one of the three IBA criteria—the responsibility species assemblage criterion, formerly known as the habitat criterion.

The habitat criterion was revised slightly during the second round to better align New York's IBA program with the global and national IBA programs and bird conservation efforts. The criterion now looks to identify large sites containing relatively intact habitats that support species for which New York has a high conservation responsibility. These responsibility species have high regional responsibility based on the Partners in Flight (PIF) species assessment process; they often are species with a large proportion of their populations found within the Bird Conservation Regions that make up New York. Because these species tend to be fairly common, we were not looking to identify every site where a

responsibility species breeds as an IBA. Rather, we took a reserve design approach and sought the largest, most intact sites supporting the greatest number of responsibility species as IBAs.

The spatial analysis involved a spatial modeling paradigm that targeted both bird habitat and distribution. The model was based on bird distribution and land cover data from the New York Gap Analysis Program. Spatial indices were developed at the landscape scale to rank species assemblage potential within large blocks of land unfragmented by major roads. Patches of habitat within high-ranking blocks were then assessed to identify potential IBAs. Quality of habitat patches was ranked according to fragmentation and distance to lands under conservation status. Sites identified as potential IBAs through this analysis were ground-truthed via field visits and the 2000 Breeding Bird Atlas data (when appropriate).

The grassroots nomination process resulted in the nomination of 25 sites and the spatial analysis resulted in the identification of an additional 54 potential IBAs. This fall, the IBA Technical Committee began the evaluation of these 79 sites and the existing 127 IBAs by reviewing the sites proposed under the responsibility species assemblage criterion. The review process will continue this winter with sites proposed under the other two IBA criteria, the threatened species criterion and the congregatory species criterion. The revised list of New York IBAs is expected to be announced in fall 2004.

More than Luck? Cornell Students Soar to Finish in the Seventh Annual Muckrace

By Jillian Liner

BIRDWATCHERS gathered in upstate New York to translate their skills and determination into conservation dollars by participating in the seventh annual Montezuma Muckrace. Sponsored by Audubon New York and Friends of the Montezuma Wetlands Complex, the 24-hour fall birding competition raises money and awareness for bird conservation at the Montezuma Wetlands Complex.

"The continued success of the Muckrace demonstrates both that the Montezuma area is an excellent place for birds and that the birding community wholeheartedly embraces efforts for bird conservation," said Jeff Wells, a participant and founder of the Montezuma Muckrace.

Twenty teams with 3-4 members each participated in lucky number seven. They enjoyed sunny, breezy 70-degree fall weather as they scouted and scanned for waterfowl, shorebirds, wading birds, and songbirds from 9:00pm on Friday, September 5th through 9:00pm Saturday, September 6.

Because numerous migrants are heading south for the winter during the fall, there was always the chance of seeing an uncommon species during fall birding events. However, this year's record breaking 180 total species did not include any unusual birds like in previous years. "No real unusual birds, but lots of good birds" recalled Kevin McGowan, the MC for the event. The high number of bird species could be attributed to a combination of things including the event taking place slightly earlier this year, a good night migration, and clear weather.

Crex crex, sponsored by Cornell Birding Club, won this year's event with a record-breaking 139 species. Second place was given to long-time competitors, the Gallinagos, sponsored

Cerulean Warbler, American Black Duck, Short-billed Dowitcher, and Red-headed Woodpecker."

The youth team, the Trogons, were back once again for their fifth and final

won in the forest". This year's two top teams observed a flock of wood warblers with 12 different species.

The Montezuma Wetlands Complex has been designated an Important Bird Area by Audubon New York and state-owned portions have been recognized as one of New York's Bird Conservation Areas. The complex supports over a million waterfowl each year, thousands of migratory shorebirds, and state-listed species such as Cerulean Warblers, Black Tern, and Bald Eagles.

It is through the help of numerous sponsors who provide prizes, food, and team entry fees, that this year's Muckrace raised \$2,155 for bird conservation. Wells predicts, "In a few more years you'll see well over 100 participants raising \$10-20,000 annually for bird conservation and a winning score of 150 or more."

In addition to team sponsors, The Bird House in Auburn, Byrne Dairy, Wild Birds Unlimited in Ithaca, Cedar Craft Wild Bird Center in Auburn, Graphic Connections, Nucor Steel Auburn, Marsh Creek Avian Haven, Cornell Lab of Ornithology, Eastman Kodak, Friends of the Montezuma Wetlands Complex, Audubon New York, and the Montezuma Winery made contributions to this year's event.

Next year's Montezuma Muckrace is scheduled for the weekend of September 11th, 2004. To learn more about how to donate or participate in the event contact Jillian Liner jlimer@audubon.org at Audubon New York or Bill Grow waxwing@baldcom.net at Friends of the Montezuma Muckrace.



Team Crex Crex, from Cornell University, this year's winners of the Montezuma Muckrace.

by Larry and Sara Hymes, whose 137 species also broke the previous team total record. Third place went to a first time team, the Corncrakes, also sponsored by Cornell Birding Club.

Gallinagos team member Wells commented, "Not only was I lucky enough to be on a team that found 137 species but that number included many of the birds of highest conservation concern in the U.S. like the

year. The Trogons placed seventh overall and are sure to add serious competition to next year's non-youth teams.

Although the Montezuma Wetland Complex has vast areas of wetlands, it also provides grassland, shrub, and forest habitats to numerous species. "The Muckrace gets you out in all the habitats", McGowan commented, "Everyone goes up to see the waterbirds but the Muckrace is really