

## Atlas Work Reveals Trends, Surprises

Bob Montgomery birded southern Illinois throughout his childhood and into his college years and rarely saw a Rose-breasted Grosbeak there. But now, according to information gleaned from the six-year long Illinois Breeding Bird Atlas, Rose-breasted Grosbeaks appear to be extending their range southward, said Montgomery. He is a senior staff biologist at the Max McGraw Wildlife Foundation in Dundee.

The confirmed breeding of the Rose-breasted Grosbeak in counties such as Union in extreme southern Illinois is a pleasant surprise for Montgomery, who has been compiling the data since the atlas' inception.

Although such data can't reflect population trends, it can pinpoint some distribution changes in birds, he said. "There's certainly some range expansion occurring with the Rose-breasted Grosbeak as well as the Blue Grosbeak," said Montgomery. The Blue Grosbeak has been confirmed nesting in northern Illinois within the past few years and was not found there years ago, he said.

Montgomery noticed another trend - the apparent increase in frequency of reporting of nesting grassland species such as the Northern Harrier, Upland Sandpiper, Eastern and Western Meadowlarks, Savannah Sparrow, and possibly Grasshopper Sparrow. Montgomery speculates this tendency resulted from a statewide conservation reserve program which requires highly erodible farm fields to be left fallow or converted into grasslands. "This created habitat for the grassland species and habitat is a key to successful nesting," he said.

Researchers should be careful; though, not to use this data to determine population trends, Montgomery reiterated. For example, scientists think that certain neotropical migrants that breed in Illinois such as wood warblers and vireos, are declining in numbers, he said. The atlas results show that these birds continue to breed in Illinois, but don't show if the number of successful nestings has declined. "We're not recording actual numbers, just the presence or absence of a species," said Montgomery.

Since wetland habitats are declining dramatically throughout Illinois and the U.S., one might expect a breeding atlas to reflect the situation. But Montgomery cautioned that "wetland species are dependent on dynamic habitat. Some years they are present when the conditions are right; other years, they're not."

Apart from noticing possible trends, Montgomery also enjoyed hearing about certain surprises such as the first breeding record of the Golden-crowned Kinglet in Illinois. The bird, typically a northern coniferous forest breeder, successfully nested at Morton Arboretum in northern Illinois. "That's probably due to the fact that there are large tracts of coniferous plantings there," said Montgomery. Volunteer atlasers also recorded the successful nesting of Red Crossbills, which typically nest farther north, he said.

--Sheryl De Vore

*Editor's Note: As Montgomery continues reviewing the data, Meadowlark will feature follow-up reports. We'll also let you know the progress on publication of the atlas data and how you can obtain a copy.*