

MONROE COUNTY SUMMER BIRD COUNT - 2001

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INTRODUCTION

Monroe County is located in southwestern Alabama. Although the county lies just north of two well-birded coastal counties (Baldwin and Mobile) and is only about a one-hour drive from the Montgomery metropolitan area, little is known about its birdlife. The objective of this study was to collect breeding season data on the birds of Monroe County.

STUDY AREA AND METHODS

Physiographically, Monroe County (Fig. 1) is in the Lower Coastal Plain of Alabama (Lacefield 2000). Four level IV ecoregions (Southern Pine Plains and Hills, Buhrstone/Lime Hills, Southern Hilly Gulf Coastal Plain, and Southeastern Flood Plains and Low Terraces) are located within its borders. The county is also considered part of the Inland Coastal Plain bird recording region (Jackson 2001). Predominant habitats within the county include mixed forests, pine plantations, croplands, pastures, and forested wetlands (Griffith et al. 2001). Elevations rise to about 443 ft (135 m).

To conduct the count, 18 Breeding Bird Atlas (BBA) blocks were surveyed thoroughly and an additional 28 were visited in June 2001. The BBA blocks were approximately 25 km² in area. This survey method was employed so that the results of the count could be used for the Alabama BBA project that officially began in 2002. Observers typically surveyed from pre-dawn or dawn until late morning (ca. 1100 hrs). A total of 118 hrs of daytime surveying was conducted for diurnal species and 6.4 hrs were spent surveying for nocturnal species. All individuals were identified and counted. In addition, any indication of breeding was noted.

The breeding designation codes used in this study are the same as those currently being used by the Alabama BBA project (Rick West pers. comm.). "Confirmed breeding" was designated if a species was observed carrying nest material or food, constructing a nest, performing a distraction display, or incubating. Further, the discovery of a nest with eggs or young, a used nest, or

dependent short-tailed young also confirmed breeding. “Probable breeding” for a species was indicated when at least seven singing males were noted on the same date in the same block, or by birds recorded on five Breeding Bird Survey route or miniroute stops within safe dates (i.e., when migrants are extremely unlikely to occur). This designation also was used for the detection of a pair in suitable habitat, for individuals showing territorial behavior at the same spot in at least weekly intervals, for individuals showing courtship behaviors or agitated behaviors that are associated with nest disturbance, and for species of wrens and woodpeckers that were nest building. “Possible breeding” was noted if a species was found in suitable habitat within the safe dates. An “observed” breeding status was used for species that were seen or male song heard in suitable habitat outside of safe dates. This designation was also used for independent juveniles, for species not in suitable habitat, and for soaring vultures and colonial species away from their colony.

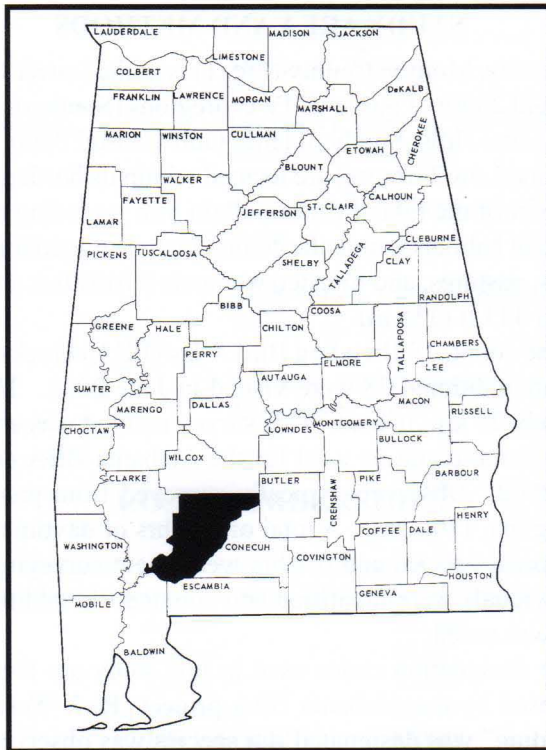


FIGURE 1. County map of Alabama showing location of Monroe County (darkened).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The count.— One hundred one species and 10,765 individuals were recorded during 125.2 hrs of surveying (Table 1) for a total of 86 individuals per party hour. The most frequently encountered species (i.e., > 300 individuals) found on the count were Cattle Egret, Mourning Dove, White-eyed Vireo, American Crow, Purple Martin, Carolina Wren, Northern Mockingbird, Yellow-breasted Chat, Northern Cardinal, and Indigo Bunting (Table 1). The most widely distributed species (i.e., discovered in >25 blocks) were White-eyed Vireo, Eastern Towhee, Northern Cardinal, and Indigo Bunting (Table 1). Fifty-three species were considered confirmed breeders, 13 were probable breeders, 26 were possible breeders, and 12 were noted as only observed species (Table 1). Three additional species (Bald Eagle, Cooper's Hawk, and Chipping Sparrow) were not recorded during the official count time period (i.e., before 1100 hrs), but are included on the total count list of 104 species.

TABLE 1. Monroe County Summer Bird Count Totals, June 2001.

Species	No. Individuals	No. Blocks	Breeding Status
Pied-billed Grebe	1	1	Possible
Anhinga	6	2	Observed
Great Blue Heron	24	7	Observed
Great Egret	37	9	Observed
Snowy Egret	1	1	Observed
Little Blue Heron	34	11	Observed
Cattle Egret	316	17	Observed
Green Heron	9	7	Possible
Yellow-crowned Night-Heron	1	1	Observed
White Ibis	7	2	Observed
Wood Stork	1	1	Observed
Black Vulture	114	12	Possible
Turkey Vulture	109	22	Possible
Wood Duck	23	4	Confirmed
Mallard	8	1	Possible
Osprey	1	1	Observed
Bald Eagle			Observed
Swallow-tailed Kite	12	4	Probable

TABLE 1. Continued

Species	No. Individuals	No. Blocks	Breeding Status
Mississippi Kite	14	8	Possible
Sharp-shinned Hawk	2	2	Possible
Cooper's Hawk			Possible
Red-shouldered Hawk	3	17	Probable
Broad-winged Hawk	8	4	Possible
Red-tailed Hawk	10	7	Possible
American Kestrel	1	1	Possible
Wild Turkey	9	7	Confirmed
Northern Bobwhite	161	23	Confirmed
Killdeer	18	3	Confirmed
Caspian Tern	5	1	Observed
Rock Dove	30	2	Confirmed
Eurasian Collared-Dove	20	6	Probable
Mourning Dove	346	25	Confirmed
Common Ground-Dove	7	4	Possible
Yellow-billed Cuckoo	124	21	Probable
Eastern Screech-Owl	5	2	Possible
Great Horned Owl	5	3	Possible
Barred Owl	18	7	Possible
Chuck-will's-widow	67	14	Confirmed
Chimney Swift	70	15	Confirmed
Ruby-throated Hummingbird	30	12	Possible
Belted Kingfisher	12	7	Probable
Red-headed Woodpecker	40	18	Confirmed
Red-bellied Woodpecker	220	25	Confirmed
Downy Woodpecker	85	22	Confirmed
Hairy Woodpecker	10	9	Confirmed
Northern Flicker	18	10	Confirmed
Pileated Woodpecker	54	19	Probable
Eastern Wood-Pewee	61	19	Confirmed
Acadian Flycatcher	64	19	Confirmed
Eastern Phoebe	4	2	Confirmed
Great-crested Flycatcher	186	23	Confirmed
Eastern Kingbird	117	20	Confirmed

TABLE 1. Continued

Species	No. Individuals	No. Blocks	Breeding Status
Loggerhead Shrike	15	7	Confirmed
White-eyed Vireo	359	26	Confirmed
Bell's Vireo	2	1	Probable
Yellow-throated Vireo	36	11	Probable
Red-eyed Vireo	229	25	Confirmed
Blue Jay	293	25	Confirmed
American Crow	551	23	Confirmed
Fish Crow	54	13	Confirmed
Purple Martin	395	19	Confirmed
N. Rough-winged Swallow	34	9	Probable
Barn Swallow	185	17	Confirmed
Carolina Chickadee	204	24	Confirmed
Tufted Titmouse	277	25	Confirmed
Brown-headed Nuthatch	52	14	Confirmed
Carolina Wren	376	25	Confirmed
Blue-gray Gnatcatcher	201	22	Confirmed
Eastern Bluebird	117	20	Confirmed
Wood Thrush	156	22	Confirmed
American Robin	1	1	Possible
Gray Catbird	10	6	Probable
Northern Mockingbird	313	21	Confirmed
Brown Thrasher	62	16	Confirmed
European Starling	36	4	Confirmed
Northern Parula	157	23	Confirmed
Yellow-throated Warbler	7	4	Possible
Pine Warbler	261	22	Confirmed
Prairie Warbler	129	20	Confirmed
American Redstart	21	6	Possible
Prothonotary Warbler	47	8	Possible
Worm-eating Warbler	1	1	Possible
Swainson's Warbler	3	2	Possible
Louisiana Waterthrush	7	3	Confirmed
Kentucky Warbler	41	12	Confirmed
Common Yellowthroat	164	22	Probable

TABLE 1. Continued

Species	No. Individuals	No. Blocks	Breeding Status
Hooded Warbler	112	23	Confirmed
Yellow-breasted Chat	620	25	Confirmed
Summer Tanager	163	24	Confirmed
Eastern Towhee	377	26	Probable
Bachman's Sparrow	2	1	Possible
Chipping Sparrow			Possible
Field Sparrow	18	6	Possible
Northern Cardinal	884	27	Confirmed
Blue Grosbeak	146	24	Confirmed
Indigo Bunting	608	26	Confirmed
Painted Bunting	3	1	Possible
Red-winged Blackbird	48	8	Confirmed
Eastern Meadowlark	123	9	Confirmed
Orchard Oriole	146	22	Confirmed
Common Grackle	61	9	Confirmed
Brown-headed Cowbird	70	17	Probable
House Finch	14	5	Confirmed
House Sparrow	6	3	Confirmed

Species Accounts. — Several species were of special interest because of questions concerning their distribution. Below are brief accounts of those species and unexpected species.

Pied-billed Grebe — An individual was discovered by one observer. There are summer records of Pied-billed Grebes from most parts of Alabama, but few instances of confirmed breeding (Imhof 1976).

Anhinga — Six were found, one in the Franklin NW block and the others in the Chance quadrangle.

White Ibis — One was in Franklin NW and six were recorded in the Chance quadrangle.

Wood Stork — There are no confirmed records of Wood Stork breeding in either Alabama or Mississippi (Imhof 1976, Turcotte and Watts 1999). From the boat census in the Chance quadrangle, one was seen flying over suitable habitat. Wood Storks are common in south central and southwest Alabama in

July, but reports from early June always bring speculation about possible breeding in the state.

Osprey — A single Osprey was spotted from a boat in the Chance quadrangle. This species is a rare breeder inland (Imhof 1976).

Swallow-tailed Kite — Although this species is known to nest in the Mobile-Tensaw Delta, its range in other areas is poorly known. Outside of the Delta, no Swallow-tailed Kite nesting records have been reported and there are only a few records during its breeding period (i.e., late March to the end of June) (Eric Soehren pers. comm.). We recorded seven from the boat in the Chance quadrangle and at least one in each of the following blocks: Flynn SW and CE (seen after 1100 hrs), Claiborne CE, Franklin NW, Chance CE, and Nadawah CE.

Bald Eagle — Even before Bald Eagles became endangered in the Lower 48 States, there were few inland summer records south of the Tennessee River (Imhof 1976). Nesting now occurs at several sites in Alabama, but the bird seen from a boat in the Chance quadrangle was not near an area where they had been seen before during the summer.

American Kestrel — Imhof (1976) noted kestrels as rare outside cities in summer. Individuals were found in breeding habitat in Natchez NW and Nadawah CE (seen after 1100 hrs).

Common Moorhen — Although none were found during the count period, one was found during exploration at the end of May.

Caspian Tern — This species is known to occur year round and to breed on the Alabama Gulf Coast (Imhof 1976). Records well inland generally are limited to spring and fall migration, primarily along the Alabama and Mobile rivers (Imhof 1976). An observation of a group of five Caspian Terns flying north at a height of approximately 20 meters was surprising. The birds were approximately 85 km (50 mi) from the coast. Since the species feeds both in open seas and in marshes (Cuthbert and Wires 1999), and individuals have been found on pelagic trips 85 km (50 mi) south of land, it is possible this group was on a feeding run. Also, in Mississippi there are inland sight records from March to June 20 (Turcotte and Watts 1999), which indicates that late migration or summer wandering may sometimes occur.

Common Ground-Dove — This species is uncommon and local on the Coastal Plain. We found them in Pine Apple CE, Chrysler CW, Chrysler CE, and Mexia CE.

Eastern Phoebe — This species is rapidly expanding its breeding range in the Southeast, but the most recently published range map does not include Monroe County (Weeks 1994). Breeding was confirmed in Burnt Corn quadrangle where three phoebes were found. Another was in Claiborne CE.

Bell's Vireo — A most remarkable find was a pair in apparently suitable habitat

(i.e., secondary growth with dense understory vegetation) in Claiborne CE. The established breeding range for this species is well to the west (Brown 1993). This species has not been recorded in Alabama between May and the end of August.

American Robin — Although this species breeds locally in towns south of Monroe County, most records are from the Black Belt north (Imhof 1976). One was seen in Claiborne CE.

Gray Catbird — Considered a rare breeder in the Lower Coastal Plain (Imhof 1976), this species proved surprisingly common in Monroe County with birds in Pine Apple CE (1), Natchez CE (3 - probable breeding), Flynn CE (1), Midway CE (2), Natchez NW (1), and Nadawah CE (2).

Worm-eating Warbler — This species is near the southernmost point of its breeding range in Monroe County (Dunn and Garrett 1997, Imhof 1976) and only one was discovered in Natchez CE.

Swainson's Warbler — An uncommon and local species in the Interior Coastal Plain, one was found in Uriah-E CE and two in Chance CE.

Bachman's Sparrow — Although this species is found in suitable habitat in the Lower Coastal Plain (Imhof 1976), only two were located on this count, both in Nadawah CE.

Chipping Sparrow — Although the summer distribution for this species includes northernmost Monroe County (Imhof 1976), only one was found on June 10 in Pine Apple SE.

Field Sparrow — This species breeds as far south as at least the Lower Coastal Plain (Imhof 1976). Records were primarily from the northern portion of the county: Burnt Corn CE (2 individuals), Excel CE (1), Repton NW (4), Midway CE (2), Franklin NW (4), and Nadawah CE (5).

Painted Bunting — The species appears to be expanding in the Inland Coastal Plain as evident by three singing males in the Apple CE block.

Species not found. — Black-and-white Warbler, Dickcissel, Baltimore Oriole, and American Goldfinch have been found in nearby areas during the summer, but were not found in our study.

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