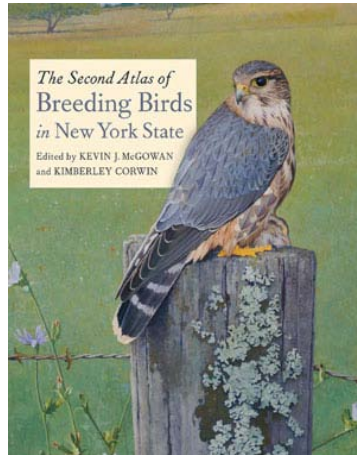


CHAUTAUQUA WATERSHED NOTES
From the Chautauqua Watershed Conservancy
Sunday, October 4, 2009

Mapping The Birds of New York State
By Tina Nelson



The Roger Tory Peterson Institute is currently hosting an outstanding exhibition about the New York State Atlas of Breeding Birds in New York State, a project that demonstrates the importance of the conservation mission of the Chautauqua Watershed Conservancy.

The Roger Tory Peterson Institute is now hosting an exhibition titled "Mapping the Birds of New York State." This exhibit, on loan from the New York State Museum in Albany, is not only for avid birders but also for anyone concerned with our environment and that should include everyone. The exhibit showcases the results of two breeding bird surveys done in New York State. The first survey was conducted from 1980 to 1985 and the second occurred from 2000 to 2005. The surveys were "labors of love" involving over 1,200 volunteers whose only reward was their contribution to the scientific understanding of New York State breeding birds and their environment. Their information was compiled into two atlases and presented in a series of maps that depict the distribution of each bird species found breeding in New York State. Many of those maps are on display in the exhibit. What do they show us? By comparing the distribution of breeding birds over a 20-year period biologists can determine what changes have occurred and seek the causes of those changes.

Not all birds we see in New York State breed here. Some are just passing through. Some of those that do nest here have large breeding ranges, such as the ubiquitous American Robin. Other species are very picky about habitat, such as the rare Piping Plover, which only nests on coastal beaches with sparse vegetation. As one might expect, a change in a breeding bird's distribution often, though not always, indicates a change in the landscape. For example since the early 1900's New York State's economy has shifted away from agriculture, notably dairy farming, and more towards manufacturing, technology and service. People abandoned the farms and moved to the cities and suburbs. The abandoned pastureland grew into forests and expanding cities turned many rural areas into urban and suburban areas. The effect on bird distribution was a noticeable decline in grassland species such as Bobolinks and Eastern Meadowlarks. At the same time some forest-nesting species such as the Yellow-bellied Sapsucker and Pileated Woodpecker, increased.

Some species' distributions increased because they developed a tolerance for people while others declined due to their intolerance of human neighbors. Among the more interesting species to respond positively to these historic landscape changes were the Common Raven and Merlin.

The raven, 20 years ago, was pretty much restricted to woodlands of the Adirondack wilderness. It has since found other suitable woodlands across the state and become more tolerant of having human neighbors. The Merlin, a small falcon, which nests in areas with some trees and water nearby, but previously nested further north, discovered suitable habitat in New York State both in the forests of the Adirondacks and in urban areas as well.

Other factors enter in as well. The Eastern Bluebird, our state bird, was struggling to maintain its population in New York with loss of natural nest cavities (such as wooden fence posts) and competition for available nest sites with invasive species such as European Starlings and House Sparrows. Humans came to the bluebird's rescue. The popularity of bluebird societies, bluebird nest box trails and backyard nest boxes prompted a surge in our bluebird population over the last twenty years. On the other hand, the Loggerhead Shrike, a predatory songbird of farmlands, apparently no longer breeds in New York State. Biologists suspect not only habitat loss but also pesticides and collisions with cars were the causes this disappearance.

“Mapping the Birds of New York State” points up the crucial missions of both the Roger Tory Peterson Institute and the Chautauqua Watershed Conservancy. The exhibit stimulates an interest in our environment and our wildlife neighbors, particularly the birds. This interest can then translate into concern and caring for the environment and its inhabitants. We hope many of you will come to enjoy this exhibit, at RTPI through January 2010, and take away a renewed understanding and interest in conserving the bird habitats of the Chautauqua Watershed.

The Chautauqua Watershed Conservancy is a local, private not-for-profit organization supported primarily by membership donations and grants from private foundations. Its mission is to preserve and enhance the water quality, scenic beauty and ecological health of the lakes, streams and watersheds of the Chautauqua region. It is the only local-based not-for-profit organization actively conserving important habitats, scenic sites and watershed lands in the county. It takes a preventive approach to address lake algae and plant problems. For a list of upcoming events go to <http://www.chautauquawatershed.org/> or call 716-664-2166.