



NWT BIRD CHECKLIST SURVEY NEWSLETTER

MARCH 1999

A program coordinated by the Canadian Wildlife Service since 1995

CHECKLIST SURVEY STARTS FIFTH SEASON

The Survey is now gearing up for its fifth successful season! It is hard to imagine that four years have passed by. We received about 300 checklists this year, keeping on par with similar numbers for the last couple of years. We are very pleased with the participation!

In the last year, our database has grown by leaps and bounds. Thanks to the inclusion of some historical data that we described in the last newsletter, we now have **over 3000 checklists, with over 25 000 observations**. That is more than double the numbers we had after the end of the third year! Many of those are from just a few areas, where researchers have been keeping records for long periods of time. We now have data from 1970-71, 1976-78 and 1981 to the present. As far as databases go, we are making good progress. As far as accessible, basic, documented information on arctic birds goes, we are making huge strides!

FACTS ON FILE

Most northerly record:

Barry Troke - 82°24' N, 76°52' W. Barry used to be a park warden in Ellesmere Island National Park Reserve (he's now in Nahanni NPR), so he had an advantage! In 9 hours of looking, he turned up various species including Common Ringed Plover, Long-tailed Jaeger, Oldsquaw, Rock Ptarmigan, Ruddy Turnstone and Snow Bunting. There just aren't very many places further north!

We thought it would be interesting this year to have a look at some of the different checklists we've gotten over the years.

Scattered about the newsletter is a grab-bag of interesting facts we gleaned from the database

Most southerly record:

Usually the term "north of 60" refers to the NWT right? Well, our most southerly record is from 53°27' N, 79°10', from an islet in southeastern James Bay on July 9, 1997. Most folks don't think of the islands in James Bay as part of NWT/Nunavut! Robert Tymstra of Sarnia, Ontario turned in some records he summarized from an avifauna survey of James Bay. He saw an assortment of birds that didn't give away the southerly nature of the tiny islet he surveyed. He recorded Arctic Tern, Black Guillemot, Common Redpoll, Herring Gull, Horned Lark, Mallard, Purple Sandpiper, Spotted Sandpiper, Savannah Sparrow and Whimbrel.

Most Species on One Checklist: 66! This honour goes to Dave Wilderspin of Norman Wells. He went out locally on May 31, 1997 for an entire day to make this impressive list. Judging from the list of species, Dave was able to see many of the birds that normally breed in the area, but also saw some migrants on their way further north, such as some shorebirds. It would almost be easier to make a list of what Dave didn't see that day!

One bird stood out for him - it was the first time he had recorded a Northern Wheatear. He thought the snow in the nearby mountains may have forced them into his area temporarily.



A Stilt Sandpiper that stopped to fuel up in Yellowknife last spring.

CHECKLIST DATA IN ACTION - EXAMPLE DISTRIBUTION MAPS

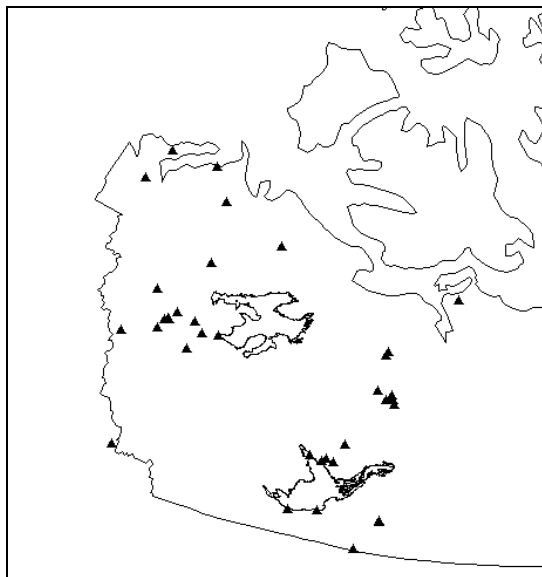
Now that we have 4 years of data, we are able to start to show just how well everyone's efforts are paying off. We made four maps for species that have been reported fairly frequently in the database.



← Snow Bunting

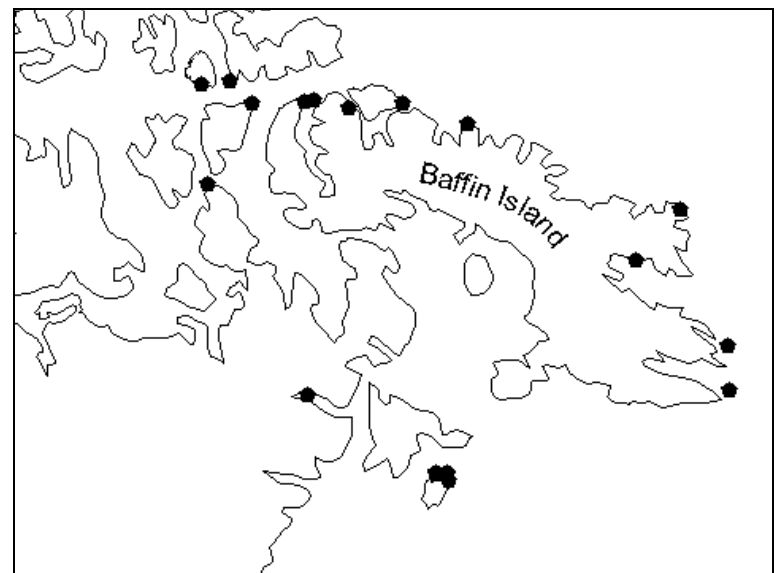
Snow Buntings are one of the top 10 most often reported species in our database. As the map shows, we have records from all across the NWT and Nunavut. We did not omit any records based on the date of observation. That is why there are records from Yellowknife - Snow Buntings don't breed here, but they can be seen at other times of the year.

FACTS ON FILE: Most individual Birds on One Checklist: 40 043! Well, as is obvious from the total, Carmen Field of Homer, Alaska visited some seabird colonies. On her work for Zegrahm Expeditions, she was visiting Cape Hay, near Bylot Island. She recorded 10 000 Black-legged Kitiwake and 30 000 Thick-billed Murre, and also saw Black Guillemot, Common Eider, Glaucous Gull, Northern Fulmar and Thayer's Gull. However, since the totals for such counts are estimates, we thought we should mention the next highest total, from Tony Gaston of the Canadian Wildlife Service in Hull, Quebec. Tony recorded 35 054 birds -- all except 54 were Thick-billed Murres.



Bald Eagle

Bald eagles are one of those birds only seen in the west. Most of our records are from treeline and below. However, there are records from around Lac de Gras and Bathurst Inlet, slightly beyond the typical distributions in published references such as *Birds of Canada* or the *National Geographic Birds of North America*.



Thick-billed Murre

Thick-billed Murres are a colonial species. However, they are sometimes seen away from colonies, as some of the dots on this map represent individual birds. So far we don't have any checklists returned for the lone murre colony in the western arctic, the Cape Parry Bird Sanctuary.

FIRST ANALYSIS OF THE DATA COMING UP!

After this year is complete, we plan to send our database to some colleagues in Ottawa who will take an analytical look at the information. It takes a great deal of time to build up data that are good enough for more than just mapping distributions (e.g. such as to determine population trends) and we probably aren't there yet. However, we will get a very good idea on where we stand and where we need to improve. One thing that is certain is that the more records we have the more likely it is that the data will be useful. With that in mind, our major initiative this year is to make sure we get as many people as possible to participate in the survey. **So go out birding and send us your Checklists!!**



A
Mallard
hen having
a stretch.

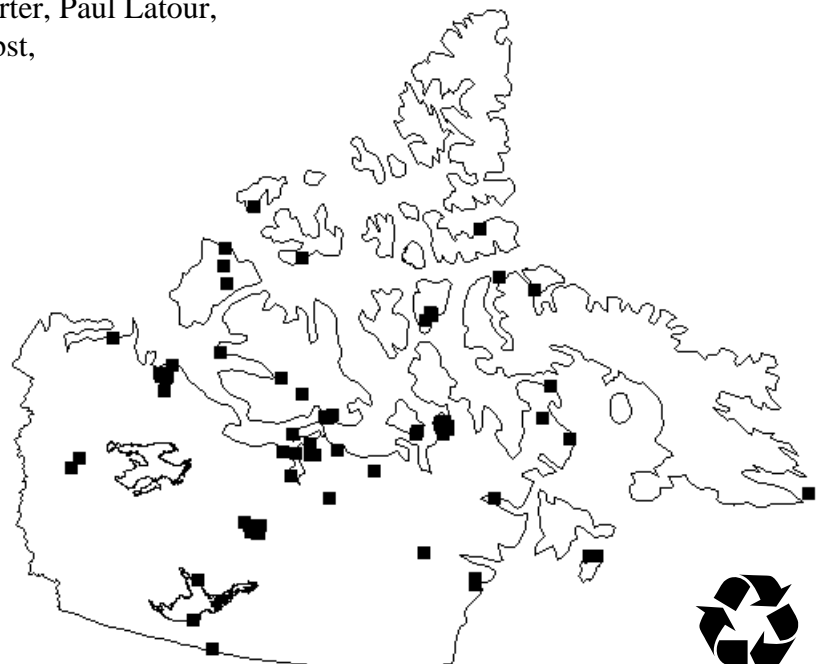
DON'T FORGET ABOUT OUR WEBSITE!

Our web site is now 1 year old. We've recently added a counter to the site to keep track of visitors outside the government and in the last 6 months the site has been visited a few hundred times, which is great. As usual, we will be posting this year's newsletter on the site, and you can find our previous versions there too. Remember - if you are ever in need of some forms and don't want to wait for us to send you some, just visit the webpage, download one of the files for yourself and print off as many copies as you need. We only updated our News page once last year, but we'll try harder to put something new on there every few months to keep you informed of interesting Checklist tidbits. If you have never visited the site, come and see us at www.NWTChecklist.com and pass the address on to any of your friends or colleagues that might be interested in participating.

FACTS ON FILE: Fewest Birds on One Checklist: 0. You might be thinking this is a rather dubious honour. In fact, we are quite happy to get a checklist with no species recorded (assuming you spent some time looking for birds!). Scientists are strange that way - it is just as important for us to know that you spent hours looking for birds and found none as when you do find some. The lucky winners in this category are Christian Bucher, Carilee Cole, Tony Gaston, Robert Gau, Nic Larter, Paul Latour, Robert Montgomerie, Steve Moore, Joachim Obst, and Michael Rain. Keep up the good work!

Lesser Golden-Plover →

As for other species, some of these records are not in breeding locations. The three records around Great Slave Lake are from spring migration, while most of the others represent breeding locations on the tundra.

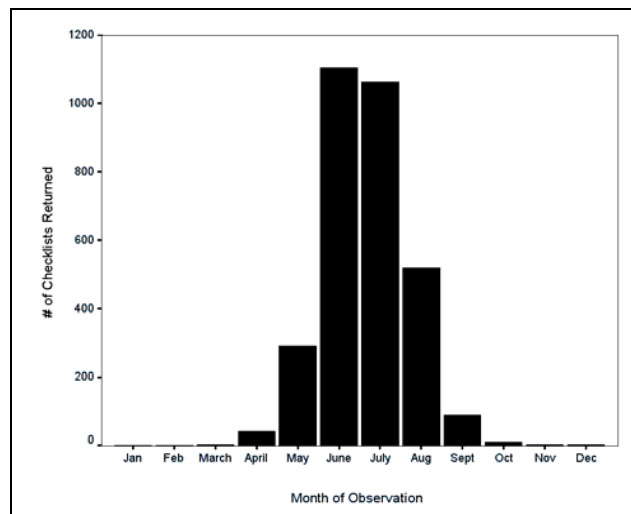


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THOSE NEGLECTED RESIDENT BIRDS

(a.k.a. woodpeckers, owls, ravens,
ptarmigan....)

For most people, bird watching is a seasonal activity. Folks generally get out birding when most or all of the southern migrants have returned from their winter vacation. As a result, most of our checklists are filled out during the summer months - June and July (see the graph on the right). Hardly anyone sends us checklists from late-fall through winter to early-spring. We know that many of you don't live in the north, but for those that do, we'd love to get a few more checklists from the "off-season". For residents, a personal goal of sending us just 2 or 3 checklists from the winter would dramatically improve our current totals.



Black-bellied Plover eggs.



THE YEAR AHEAD

We have several important goals we'd like to achieve in the next year:

- We'd like to get more historical data (data that has already been collected in some form, but not summarized for the Checklist Survey - such as field diaries of bird researchers). If we get sufficient funding, we should be able to continue the initiative started two years ago.
- The database needs to be "cleaned" and proofread. It takes an unbelievable amount of work to make sure the information we have in our database is complete and accurate. Sometimes the corrections are obvious, such as spelling errors, but sometimes the problems are hard to find. For instance, when we made the distribution maps for this newsletter, records from Resolute Bay were located in the ocean, north of Somerset Island! As it turns out, the coordinates provided for the hamlet in the official Gazetteer of Canada (NWT) were wrong!
- We would like to start providing data to people with specific queries. After four years of work putting information into the Survey, it is time to start giving something back.



QUESTIONS? SUGGESTIONS? PLEASE CONTACT US!

Vicky Johnston or Craig Machtans
Canadian Wildlife Service
Suite 301, 5204-50th Avenue
Yellowknife NT X1A 1E2



ParksCanada

Phone: (867) 669-4767
Fax: (867) 873-8185
E-mail: NWTChecklist@ec.gc.ca



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