

Report to the Nuttall Ornithological Club

Rusty Blackbird Migration Blitz Coordination

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Introduction

Rusty Blackbird populations throughout North America have experienced a significant decline over the past four decades. Conservation biologists in the United States and Canada are coordinating research activities to maximize the benefit of data collection, and an International Rusty Blackbird Working Group (IRBWG) has been established to identify major conservation issues and prioritize research needs.

During the past decade, numerous research projects in northern and southern North America have greatly increased understanding of Rusty Blackbird distribution and habitat use on their breeding and wintering grounds, respectively. The migration period remains a poorly known component of the annual cycle. The availability and quality of migration stopover sites are important factors in determining the condition of birds arriving on the breeding grounds, and subsequently their fitness to reproduce. Documenting locations, characteristics, and use patterns of these areas will provide important information for conservation planning.

Following a highly successful Rusty Blackbird Winter Blitz in 2009-2011, the IRBWG initiated a continent-wide, three-year Rusty Blackbird Spring Migration Blitz (the Blitz) in 2014. This effort engages volunteer citizen scientists to help identify important stopover habitat along Rusty Blackbird migration routes. Support from the Blake-Nuttall Fund enabled us to promote the Blitz in New Hampshire among birders, wildlife agencies, and the general public, and share ideas with coordinators in other states and provinces.

The objectives of this project were to:

1. Identify target survey sites and routes along major rivers.
2. Recruit citizen scientist volunteers to conduct surveys.
3. Prepare survey packets and hold training session for volunteers.

Methods

We recruited citizen scientist volunteers through the NHBirds Google Group, the NH eBird website, and NH Audubon website, Facebook page, and electronic and print publications. We also taped a segment for New Hampshire Public Radio's "Something Wild." We used Google

Earth to identify potential Rusty Blackbird migration stopover habitat in the Merrimack, Connecticut, and Coastal watersheds and provided maps, , and survey instructions to interested volunteers. We prepared survey packets that include information on Rusty Blackbird identification, survey guidelines, maps and Google Earth images of target survey locations, and instructions for submitting data to eBird to participants electronically and at two training sessions.

Results

New Hampshire observers submitted 105 reports of migrant Rusty Blackbirds during the Blitz, exceeding report numbers in 32 other states and provinces. While this may seem like a small number, it is substantial for a declining species that spends most of its time in inaccessible wetlands where birders seldom venture. Table 1 puts the New Hampshire data in perspective with other participating states and provinces.

Table 1. Summary of Rusty Blackbird Spring Migration Blitz 2014 sighting reports for North American states and provinces.

Number of reports	Number of states/provinces
<100	32
100-499	14
500-999	7
>1000	3

Figure 1 shows weekly eBird reports of Rusty Blackbird sightings in New Hampshire during the spring migration periods for 2010 through 2014. The positive effects of Blitz publicity show clearly in the higher sighting numbers for 2014, and underscore the importance of organizing a targeted effort for this species.

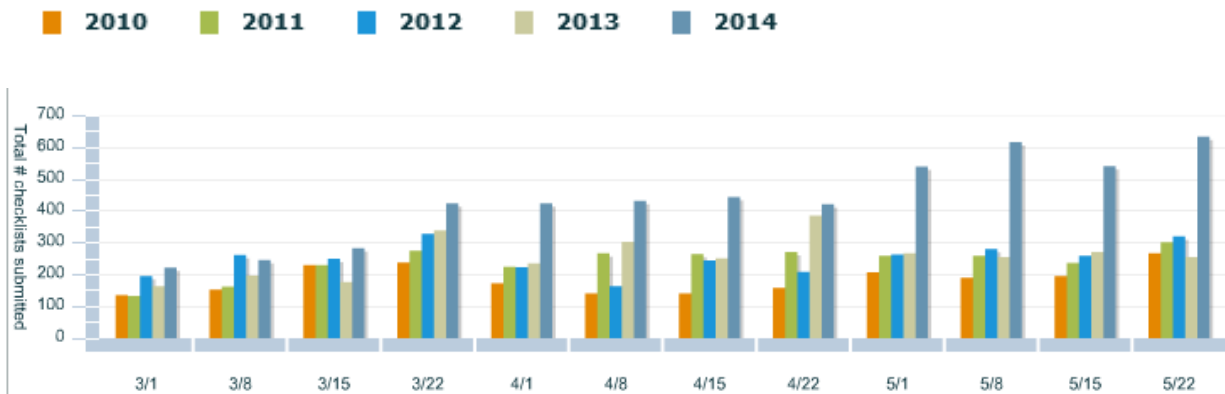


Figure 1. New Hampshire Rusty Blackbird Observations for March – May 2010-2014 reported to eBird

Challenges

The biggest challenge, which was common to the overall Blitz effort and not unique to New Hampshire, was that the 2014 Rusty Blackbird spring migration was later than usual this spring. As a result, the target Blitz observation periods for many states and provinces did not line up well with peak migration. In the case of New Hampshire, migration peaked during May, after the target period of 15 March to 30 April. The majority of New Hampshire's breeding population did not initiate nests until at least May 15, migrants continued to move north through the State throughout the month. While the lack of birds was discouraging for participants during the target period, birders continued to report migrants throughout the spring, and succeeded in documenting the late migration. Having learned from this experience, the international Blitz Coordinating Committee will be changing the protocol for 2015 to eliminate the target dates for specific states and provinces and encourage birders to look for and report Rusty Blackbirds throughout the spring migration period.

Conclusions

The first year of the Rusty Blackbird Spring Migration Blitz was highly successful in documenting numbers and stopover sites for migrating Rusty Blackbirds and in raising the public profile of this declining species. Support from the Blake-Nuttall Fund enabled NH Audubon to develop outreach materials for Blitz participants and the general public that can be easily adapted for use during the next two years, and recruit a cadre of participants. During the coming months, the IRBWG will be identifying 2014 hotspots and geographic gaps for priority efforts in 2015. We look forward to building on the firm foundation the Blake-Nuttall Fund helped establish here in New Hampshire.