

NORTHERN NEW YORK AUDUBON: ORGANIZATIONAL PROFILE

Supporting Avian Research, Discovery, and Enjoyment

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INTRODUCTION

The abundance of avian species, relatively intact habitats, and opportunities to explore makes the Adirondack Mountains and the surrounding St. Lawrence and Champlain Valleys a birders' paradise. For several decades, Northern New York Audubon (NYAA) has facilitated research and exploration in the greater Adirondack region. The goal of the organization is to conserve and restore natural ecosystems in the Adirondacks, focusing on birds, other wildlife, and their habitats for the benefit of humanity and the Earth's biological diversity.

HISTORY AND ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE

Northern New York Audubon, a nonprofit corporation, began its existence as High Peaks Audubon Society, Inc. (HPAS) in 1978. HPAS was the initiative of Norman Mason, a retired Episcopalian priest. The organization initially had trouble gathering the thirty-five members required for a National Audubon Society (NAS) chapter but eventually achieved that threshold and incorporated as a 501(c)(3). The board meets six times per year and generates and reviews actions and policies by way of committee discussions, with a round table conversation about particular programs and/or events. The following committees consist of a chair and at least two other board members: Finance, Membership, Education, Field Trips, Publications, Publicity, and Conservation. Board Members serve on a volunteer basis.

From the beginning, NNYA sought to emulate the National Audubon Society's mission and to "engage in any such educational, scientific, investigative, literary, historical, philanthropic, and charitable pursuits as may be part of the stated purposes of the National Audubon Society, of which this Corporation shall function as a Chapter," and as one of National

Audubon Society's 27 local chapters across New York, NNYA endeavors to "promote the protection and proper management of birds, other wildlife and their habitats through advocacy and education."

In 2008, HPAS merged with St. Lawrence/Adirondack Audubon (SLAA), another local chapter of National Audubon Society, to become NNYA. The boards of both HPAS and SLAA felt that a larger Audubon chapter, embracing significantly more territory in northern New York and a twofold increase in membership, would benefit both organizations as well as the memberships they served. The members at large agreed and handily exceeded the ten percent in favor votes needed to ratify the merger.

For many years, John M.C. Peterson functioned as NNYA's driving force, editing its newsletter for twenty-five years and developing and overseeing its two signature initiatives—the Four Brothers Island gull banding project and the Crown Point Bird Banding Station. When Peterson retired as editor of the newsletter in 2001, his two immediate successors published inconsistently or not at all. Joan Collins offered to try her hand at publishing the newsletter. Joan went to press every deadline for five years and then gave up editorship. She then moved to Potsdam and joined SLAA where she edited their newsletter. John Thaxton was appointed newsletter editor upon Joan's departure and continues as editor of the NNYA newsletter.

ACTIVITIES

Peterson, on behalf of NNYA, entered into a contract with The Nature Conservancy/Adirondack Land Trust to manage Four Brothers Islands, a group of four islands in Lake Champlain approximately two miles offshore from Willsboro, NY. Over the next ten years, a group visited the islands annually and banded a thousand gulls per annum. Most were Ring-billed Gulls (*Larus delawarensis*) but quite a few were Herring Gulls (*Larus argentatus*) and Great Black-backed Gulls (*Larus marinus*) as well.

The annual banding on Four Brothers attracted many volunteers and amounted to a major educational and environmental experience for many attendees. Over the course of ten years the Four Brothers Islands program banded 25,352 individual birds of 12 species with some birds recovered as far afield as the Azores, Ireland, and Spain. On one occasion, the group encountered sixteen dead Double-Crested Cormorants (*Phalacrocorax auritus*) arranged in a tight pattern among dozens of .22-caliber shell casings and 20-gauge shotgun shells. It made for a powerful environmental statement, which was not lost on the young volunteers.

Peterson also started the Crown Point Bird Banding Station on the western shore of Lake Champlain. The site, a peninsula extending into the lake and a natural site for migrating birds, is part of the Crown Point Bird Conservation Area located on the state historic site. The banding station was linked to NNYA for many years and celebrated its fortieth

consecutive year of operation in 2015. From 1976-2015 the station banded 18,604 individual birds of 106 species (including 28 warblers) and has hosted thousands of visitors, ranging from school groups to prisoners from the Moriah Shock Incarceration Correctional Facility in Essex County, NY. It represents a major environmental/educational initiative and operates entirely on a volunteer basis. The station separated from HPAS in 2004 when the Crown Point Bird Banding Association formed.

Peterson's tenure as newsletter editor lasted for twenty-five years, during which he held forth with inexorable regularity on all things Adirondack, especially birds; his efforts won accolades from NAS, which named the newsletter the *Best National Audubon Society Chapter Newsletter of the Year* and which flew Peterson to Colorado to receive an award. Peterson also served as the Region 7—Adirondack/Champlain editor of *The Kingbird*, the journal of the New York State Ornithological Association. For 26 years he kept track of avian sightings throughout the Adirondacks and submitting detailed reports quarterly. Under the aegis of HPAS, Peterson also served as regional coordinator for the *Atlas of Breeding Birds in New York State* and the *Second Atlas of Breeding Birds in New York State*, a monumental task that he performed twice.

In 2003, board member Brian McAllister conceived of the Great Adirondack Birding Celebration, a three-day festival featuring field trips, workshops, lectures, and other activities that HPAS organized with the staff of the Paul Smith's Visitor Interpretive Center. The celebration has taken place every year since and has attracted visitors from all over the United States and Canada hoping to see iconic Adirondack boreal bird species such as the Boreal Chickadee, Gray Jay and Black-backed Woodpecker. Other birds of interest are the region's signature northern-breeding birds such as Yellow-bellied Flycatcher, Blackpoll Warbler, and Bicknell's Thrush. Bicknell's Thrush nests above thirty-seven hundred feet (the Bicknell's breeds only in New York, New Hampshire, Vermont, Maine, Quebec, and the Maritime Provinces).

The celebration's keynote speakers have included birding luminaries such as Dr. Frank Gill, Lang Elliott, Dr. Bridgette Stutchberry, Dr. Peter Mara, Scott Weidensaul, Dr. Sara K. Morris, Noah Stryker, and Richard Crossley. NNYA continues to support the celebration by offering an honorarium to the keynote speaker and its members lead many of the field trips. Only three summits in the northeast are accessible by car: Whiteface Mountain in the Adirondacks, Mt. Washington in New Hampshire, and Mt. Mansfield (gondola access) in Vermont. The celebration offers two trips up Whiteface to see these special montane birds before the highway opens to the general public. These trips always fill to capacity.

In 2005, the Hamilton County Bureau of Tourism started the Adirondack Birding Festival, which consists of field trips, lectures, and a dinner cruise. The bureau reached out to HPAS board members for help in designing and leading the field trips. Joan Collins played an

instrumental role in planning the festival and asked John and Pat Thaxton for help in leading the field trips. Collins and the Thaxtons have led field trips every year of the festival, and Joan and John have delivered lectures at several festivals. Hamilton County designed the festival to take place the weekend after the celebration with the hope that attendees will stay in the Adirondacks for both occasions and positively impact the regional pre-summer economy.

NNYA sponsors and promotes six Audubon Christmas Bird Counts (CBC) and devotes considerable newsletter space to documenting the results. The CBCs attract sizable groups of birders, from the expert to the clueless. Most birders have a warm and lively CBC Count Dinner, during which a compiler puts together a list of all species and the number of each observed. The CBC results must comply with NAS criteria and are entered into the main CBC database. CBCs in the Adirondacks have revealed a steady increase in the numbers and varieties of several species traditionally found only further south in winter, such as Red-bellied Woodpecker (*Melanerpes carolinus*) and Carolina Wren (*Thryothorus ludovicianus*).

NNYA members participate in the following CBCs: Elizabethtown (NY), Ferrisburgh (VT/NY), Massena (NY), Plattsburgh (NY), Potsdam-Canton (NY), and Saranac Lake (NY). (To learn more about the Saranac Lake CBC, see Master this issue.)

In 2007, the Joseph and Joan Cullman Conservation Foundation gave a ten thousand dollars grant to fund the organization's conservation and education initiatives. After much discussion, the board decided to give away all of the grant money rather than to put half of it in the bank. For the past nine year since, the Cullman Foundation has given HPAS/NNYA ten thousand dollars or more per year.

HPAS/NNYA has partly or fully funded include staff positions, research, and education/outreach programs such as:

Research topics:

- White-crowned Sparrows on Cranberry Lake
- Bicknell's thrush and other high-elevation boreal birds
- Monitoring Avian Productivity and Survivorship at the Smitty Creek Bird Banding Station
- Effects of acid deposition on songbird populations
- Two studies of Rusty Blackbirds (*Euphagus carolinus*) (see McNulty et al. this issue)
- Bird population trends at Spring Pond Bog
- The Spruce Grouse (*Falci pennis canadensis*) Management Plan
- Bird point counts at Shingle Shanty Preserve and Research Station
- DNA sequencing of Bicknell's Thrush via the nucleotides of mitochondrial ND2

- The effects of exurban sprawl on Ovenbirds (*Seiurus aurocapilla*)
- Golden-winged Warblers (*Vermivora chrysoptera*) at the Indian River Preserve
- Soundscapes in Adirondack peatlands

Monitoring and outreach:

- Nets for the Crown Point Bird Banding Station
- The All Taxa Biodiversity Inventory
- The Living Bird Exhibit by the SUNY ESF Northern Forest Institute
- Project Silkmoth, an effort to map and monitor giant moths
- Publication of *The State of the Adirondack Boreal, Part 1: Composition and Geography* and *Part 2: Changes and Threats* by Jerry Jenkins
- Development of two new routes for Mountain Birdwatch.

Interns for organizations:

- Wildlife Conservation Society's (WCS) Boreal Bird Initiative
- Biodiversity Research Institute's Adirondack Loon Conservation Project (see Schoch this issue)
- The Wild Center

In 2010, Malone resident Nancy Smith Collins and her family gave NNYA a bequest of fifty thousand dollars to use as the organization saw fit. The board decided to invest the money in the Adirondack Community Trust and to spend it down over the course of ten years. The hope is to award five thousand dollars grants for eleven years. Some of the funded projects include:

- Bird-friendly Hayfields as Refugia for North Country Grassland Birds
- Avian Biodiversity Indicators to Diagnose the Health of Estuarine Wetlands in the Massena Great Lakes Area of Concern
- Red-headed Woodpecker Breeding Ecology and Nest-site Selection at the Northern Limit of its Distributional Range
- Recurring Bird Surveys in Lowland Boreal Habitat at Shingle Shanty Preserve and Research Station
- The American Kestrel Project
- Initiation of a Monitoring Program for Climate Change Adaptation: Fixed Radius Bird Surveys at Intervale Lowland
- Funds to construct a High School Phenology Trail at National Sports Academy in Lake Placid.

A third resource NNYA manages is the Rutkowski Fund, an endowment of two thousand dollars donated by David and Catherine Rutkowski in memory of their son. The NNYA uses the interest to partially cover the cost of sending a child to one of the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation summer camps. The fund has almost tripled in value over the past twenty years.

Since 2010, NNYA has sent either a board member or a teacher from the area to NAS's Hog Island, an educational summer camp on an island off the coast of Bremen, Maine. The camp offers a week-long program for Audubon leaders and another one for environmental educators. The board members and teachers who have participated in the programs have described them with lavish praise.

HPAS published has two books, *Birds of Essex County* by Geoffrey Carleton (1976, edited by Peterson) and *Birds of Clinton County* by Charles W. Mitchell and William E. Krueger (1997, edited by Thaxton). Both books are available for sale on the NNYA website.

To learn more about membership, field trips, and research and conservation projects, visit www.NNYA.org