

**PERRY COUNTY SUMMER BIRD COUNT – 2003****Lawrence F. Gardella****INTRODUCTION**

Perry County is located in west-central Alabama. Although some sites in the county have received the attention of birders seeking wintering sparrows, and Wood Storks and kites during post-breeding dispersal in July, there is relatively little information about the breeding birds of Perry County. Therefore, a quantitative study of the breeding birds of Perry County was undertaken in June 2003 in conjunction with Breeding Bird Atlas surveying efforts. This study is a continuation of the work that began in 2000 to gain a better understanding of the breeding birds in Alabama, especially in counties that have received very little attention in the past (Jackson 2000, Gardella 2003).

**STUDY AREA AND METHODS**

Physiographically, Perry County (Fig. 1) is in the Upper Coastal Plain of Alabama and the southern part of the county is within the natural prairie region of the Black Belt (Lacefield 2000). Four level IV ecoregions (Fall Line Hills, Southeastern Flood Plains and Low Terraces, Blackland Prairie, and Flatwoods/Blackland Prairie Margins) and three major river systems (Cahaba, Black Warrior, and Alabama) (Mirarchi 2004) are located within its borders. The county is considered part of the Inland Coastal Plain bird recording region (Haggerty et al. 2004). Predominant habitats within the county include agricultural fields, pond complexes, pine woods, clearcuts, bottomland hardwoods and wooded swamps. Elevations rise to about 376 feet in Marion.

To conduct the count, 25 km<sup>2</sup> Breeding Bird Atlas blocks were surveyed in June 2003. This method was employed so that the results of the count could be used for the Alabama Breeding Bird Atlas project that officially began in 2002. Nine blocks were surveyed thoroughly. Observers typically surveyed from pre-dawn or dawn until late morning (ca. 1100 hrs). A total of 49 hours of daytime surveying was conducted for diurnal species and 3.1 hours 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 and that have been used

previously on similar counts (Gardella 2003). “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 mini-route 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 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” status was used for species that were seen or male song heard in suitable habitat outside 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 Perry County (darkened).

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

*The count.* — Totals of 97 species and 6299 individuals were recorded during 52.1 hrs of surveying for a total of 120.9 individuals per party hour (Table 1). The most frequently encountered species (i.e., > 200 individuals) found on the count were Purple Martin, Barn Swallow, Northern Mockingbird, Yellow-breasted Chat, Northern Cardinal, Indigo Bunting, and Red-winged Blackbird (Table 1). The most widely distributed species (i.e., discovered in 9 blocks) were Mourning Dove, Yellow-billed Cuckoo, Red-bellied Woodpecker, Great Crested Flycatcher, White-eyed Vireo, Blue Jay, Tufted Titmouse, Carolina Wren, Blue-gray Gnatcatcher, Northern Mockingbird, Yellow-breasted Chat, Summer Tanager, Eastern Towhee, Northern Cardinal, Blue Grosbeak, Indigo Bunting, and Orchard Oriole (Table 1). Thirty-three species (34%) were confirmed breeders, 35 (36%) were probable breeders, 22 (23%) were possible breeders, and 7 (7%) were noted only as observed species (Table 1). An additional species (Scissor-tailed Flycatcher) was not recorded during the official count time period (i.e., before 1100 hr), but is included on the total count list of 98 species.

TABLE 1. Perry County Summer Bird Count Totals, June 2003.

Species	No. Individuals	No. Blocks	Breeding Status
Canada Goose	150	1	Observed
Wood Duck	17	4	Confirmed
Mallard	18	3	Probable
Wild Turkey	4	1	Possible
Northern Bobwhite	24	7	Probable
Pied-billed Grebe	1	1	Possible
Great Blue Heron	61	8	Observed
Great Egret	95	7	Observed
Little Blue Heron	3	2	Observed
Cattle Egret	3	2	Observed
Green Heron	12	5	Probable
Wood Stork	3	2	Observed
Black Vulture	49	8	Observed
Turkey Vulture	83	8	Possible
Bald Eagle	1	1	Confirmed

TABLE 1. Continued

Species	No. Individuals	No. Blocks	Breeding Status
Mississippi Kite	3	2	Possible
Red-shouldered Hawk	7	5	Probable
Broad-winged Hawk	1	1	Possible
Red-tailed Hawk	9	6	Probable
Killdeer	10	4	Confirmed
American Woodcock	2	1	Probable
Rock Pigeon	5	1	Possible
Eurasian Collared-Dove	17	4	Probable
Mourning Dove	165	9	Probable
Yellow-billed Cuckoo	74	9	Confirmed
Eastern Screech-Owl	8	4	Possible
Great Horned Owl	2	2	Possible
Barred Owl	6	2	Possible
Chuck-will's-widow	15	3	Probable
Chimney Swift	30	5	Probable
Ruby-throated Hummingbird	10	5	Probable
Belted Kingfisher	4	3	Possible
Red-headed Woodpecker	9	4	Possible
Red-bellied Woodpecker	62	9	Probable
Downy Woodpecker	29	8	Probable
Hairy Woodpecker	2	1	Possible
Red-cockaded Woodpecker	2	1	Probable
Northern Flicker	2	2	Possible
Pileated Woodpecker	11	3	Probable
Eastern Wood-Pewee	23	7	Probable
Acadian Flycatcher	33	6	Probable
Eastern Phoebe	12	6	Confirmed
Great Crested Flycatcher	52	9	Confirmed
Eastern Kingbird	95	8	Confirmed
Scissor-tailed Flycatcher			
Loggerhead Shrike	19	5	Probable
White-eyed Vireo	119	9	Confirmed
Yellow-throated Vireo	18	3	Probable

TABLE 1. Continued

Species	No. Individuals	No. Blocks	Breeding Status
Red-eyed Vireo	93	8	Probable
Blue Jay	157	9	Confirmed
American Crow	182	8	Confirmed
Fish Crow	19	5	Possible
Purple Martin	278	7	Confirmed
Northern Rough-winged Swallow	152	7	Confirmed
Cliff Swallow	74	1	Confirmed
Barn Swallow	237	7	Confirmed
Carolina Chickadee	78	8	Probable
Tufted Titmouse	141	9	Confirmed
Brown-headed Nuthatch	2	1	Possible
Carolina Wren	142	9	Probable
Blue-gray Gnatcatcher	144	9	Confirmed
Eastern Bluebird	33	5	Probable
Wood Thrush	39	7	Probable
American Robin	4	1	Possible
Gray Catbird	4	4	Possible
Northern Mockingbird	242	9	Confirmed
Brown Thrasher	26	6	Probable
European Starling	82	5	Confirmed
Northern Parula	15	3	Probable
Yellow-throated Warbler	4	3	Possible
Pine Warbler	86	8	Confirmed
Prairie Warbler	74	6	Confirmed
Black-and-white Warbler	5	2	Possible
American Redstart	21	7	Confirmed
Prothonotary Warbler	16	7	Confirmed
Worm-eating Warbler	2	1	Possible
Swainson's Warbler	18	3	Probable
Louisiana Waterthrush	9	4	Confirmed
Kentucky Warbler	27	6	Confirmed
Common Yellowthroat	71	8	Probable
Hooded Warbler	73	7	Confirmed
Yellow-breasted Chat	245	9	Confirmed

TABLE 1. Continued

Species	No. Individuals	No. Blocks	Breeding Status
Summer Tanager	79	9	Probable
Eastern Towhee	218	9	Probable
Chipping Sparrow	5	3	Probable
Field Sparrow	29	5	Probable
Lark Sparrow	2	1	Probable
Northern Cardinal	425	9	Confirmed
Blue Grosbeak	127	9	Confirmed
Indigo Bunting	394	9	Confirmed
Dickcissel	89	6	Confirmed
Red-winged Blackbird	238	7	Confirmed
Eastern Meadowlark	183	6	Probable
Orchard Oriole	94	9	Confirmed
Common Grackle	73	7	Confirmed
Brown-headed Cowbird	137	8	Probable
House Finch	3	2	Possible
House Sparrow	28	3	Possible

*Species Accounts.* — Several species were targeted based on significant questions about their distribution. Below are brief accounts of those species and unexpected species.

**Pied-billed Grebe** — An individual was discovered by one observer. This species is considered a rare and erratic breeder in Alabama away from the Tennessee Valley (G.D. Jackson, pers. comm.).

**Wood Stork** — This species is considered a possible breeder in the state (Haggerty et al. 2004) and is listed as a species of high conservation concern (Major 2004). In this study, three were sighted in appropriate habitat. Were they dispersing early after breeding elsewhere? 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.

**Bald Eagle** — Even before Bald Eagles became endangered in the lower 48

states, there were not many inland summer records south of the Tennessee River (Imhof 1976). Nesting now occurs at numerous sites in Alabama (Hudson 2002), and the bird seen near a nest was in a known breeding area.

**American Woodcock** — This species is considered rare in summer in most of Alabama and is a Priority II (i.e., high conservation concern) species (Haggerty et al. 2004, Mirarchi and Shelton 2004). A pair was found in the Buck Creek CW block.

**Red-cockaded Woodpecker** — This federally listed endangered species is considered rare and local in the Inland Coastal Plain (Haggerty et al. 2004). Several colonies are in the Talladega National Forest in Hale and Bibb counties, which border Perry County. A pair of Red-cockaded Woodpeckers was observed in the Harrisburg CE block. This species is considered a Priority I species (i.e., highest conservation concern) in Alabama (Tucker and Robinson 2004), so data on its occurrence are significant.

**Cliff Swallow** — This species is considered uncommon in the Inland Coastal Plain region (Haggerty et al. 2004), so the discovery of 74 individuals and used nests in the Heiberger CE block is worth noting.

**Wood Thrush** — This is a Priority II species (Kittle 2004a) in Alabama, so the 39 individuals in seven blocks reported from our study are important to note.

**Black-and-white Warbler** — This species is considered rare in the Inland Coastal Plain (Haggerty et al. 2004), so the two found in two northern blocks were a surprise.

**Worm-eating Warbler** — In the Inland Coastal Plain this species is considered rare in summer (Haggerty et al. 2004) and is currently listed in Alabama as a Priority II species (Kittle 2004b). Two were found in the Buck Creek CW block near the Bibb and Dallas County lines.

**Swainson's Warbler** — In Alabama, this is a Priority II species (Soehren 2004), therefore it should be noted that in the northern part of the county three were found in the Heiberger quadrangle, and one in the Harrisburg CE block. In addition, an amazing 14 were found in the Buck Creek CW block.

**Kentucky Warbler** — In Alabama, this is a Priority II species (Hill 2004), so the 73 individuals from six blocks are of interest.

**Lark Sparrow** — This species is a rare-but-regular breeder in the Black Belt region (Imhof 1976) and is considered rare in summer in the Inland Coastal Plain (Haggerty et al. 2004). Further, there is recent evidence of a possible range expansion (Gardella and Reed 2001). In this study, a pair was found in the Scott Station CE block.

**Dickcissel** — This species is uncommon to locally fairly common in the Inland Coastal Plain (Haggerty et al. 2004), especially in the Black Belt (Imhof 1976). All three blocks where Dickcissels were found in this study were in the Black Belt region. Breeding was documented in the Scott Station CE block, where 65 individuals were counted.

*Species not found.*— Blue-winged Teal, Hooded Merganser, Anhinga, Least Bittern (Priority II), Osprey, Sharp-shinned Hawk, American Kestrel (Priority II), Purple Gallinule, Common Moorhen, White-breasted Nuthatch, Yellow Warbler, Bachman's Sparrow (Priority II), Grasshopper Sparrow, Painted Bunting and Baltimore Oriole have all been found in nearby areas during the summer, but were not found in this study.

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