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Atlantic Flyway Review: Spring 2008 Kestrel Haven Avian Migration Observatory

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Blackbird returned in mid-April for the third straight year and was finally banded on 14 May.

This spring will be remembered for the unusual number of early migrants that lingered very late. When one finds both White-crowned and White-throated sparrows and Yellow-bellied Flycatchers on the same day, it is safe to assume we are dealing with an atypical season. Even American Tree Sparrows, a wintering species in southern Ontario, were found in the first week of May. This trend continued well into late May and early June. Finally, on 26 Jun, Long Point's fifth Scissor-tailed Flycatcher was found along Highway 24 near Backus Woods.

Volunteers banded 9598 birds of 124 species this past spring, bringing LPBO's grand total to 759,073 birds of 279 species. Overall numbers were down, but diversity was on par with previous years. Some unusual species, a few 'big days,' and the good company of fellow volunteers left a lasting impression. From the birds' perspective, although the timing was off this season, eventually they got to where they needed to go. From the birder's point of view – there's always next year.

Kestrel Haven

422-0764

Avian Migration Observatory

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This was a dismal spring. Weather was usually bad with winds picking up within an hour or two of opening on those days we were able to band safely. Just about all migrants were late and, at that, appeared in very few numbers. Wood Thrush did not arrive until closing day. American Goldfinches, our staple, were here in very small numbers. On a positive note, we welcomed our first assistant in the history of our operations in New York. Clara McCarthy, with an academic background in ecology and natural resources, has joined our field team as a sub-permittee. Her assistance and company has been very much welcomed and enjoyed.

<u>Species</u>	<u>#</u>	<u>% SY</u>	<u>% ASY</u>	<u>% AHY</u>
1. American Goldfinch	127	42	30	28*
2. Slate-colored Junco	52	42	50	8
3. Red-winged Blackbird	35	60	40	0
4. E.White-cr. Sparrow	34	0	0	100
5. White-throated Sparrow	27	22	41	7
6. American Robin	17	06	0	94
7. Blue Jay	16	88	12	0
8. Yellow Warbler	16	70	13	12
9. Chipping Sparrow	15	40	40	20
10. Common Yellowthroat	15	6	14	80

* See Text

We banded 503 individuals of 53 species in 26 days of operation. We also had 104 repeats, 114 returns, and 8 hummingbirds not banded. We had a foreign Tree Swallow captured on 27 Apr; although we reported this to BBL immediately, we have yet to hear of its origin by this date (12 Jun). The bird was an active nester here. Our measure of efficiency was 105 b/100nh for newly banded birds and 152 b/100nh overall. Our best day was 27 Apr with 57 banded and our most species diverse day was 6 May with 18 species banded.

Our age data are somewhat skewed due to an ongoing study that has revealed covert feather shape to be a less than accurate age criterion in some species. We examined returns of known age birds and found less than 50% accuracy with this method of ageing. This was first noticed in Chipping Sparrows but we felt our sample size was too small. After achieving hundreds of returns of the thousands of American Goldfinch banded at this station, we were able to definitively determine that covert shape was an inaccurate means of age determination in this species. As a result, we aged all spring females as AHY and aged males according to other criteria. On known age returns of several other species, we have seen so called "SY coverts" on many elder birds. While we will continue this study, we have lost confidence in this criterion for all species and advocate using multiple ageing cues when they are available.

Upon reflection and a close check of our banding and point count records over the last 23 years, we were

dismayed to note the documentation of tragic declines in many migrant species. No longer do we see the large groups of Neotropicals or "fallout" mornings. Many species have declined, while some have been extirpated as breeders in this area.

While some of this can be attributed to Neotropical deforestation and wintering habitat loss or fragmentation as well as increasing man-made hazards encountered during migration, the bulk of the cause is right here in the breeding grounds. No, the prime cause is not fragmentation or loss of habitat due to housing or population and consumerism growth. The root of the loss of these migrants is soundly rooted in changing agricultural practices.

In this area, small dairy farms following pasturing techniques have given way to huge agri-businesses that practice Concentrated Animal Feeding. The huge increase in the animal base has caused a need for a larger land base to handle liquid manure (slurry) and much of that pasture has given way to mono-cropped field crops in support of animal forage. Legumes, such as alfalfa, have largely replaced hay. Very few species will nest in corn and alfalfa or in the biomass crops. To make matters worse, harvest techniques and timing occur more quickly and catch what birds remain before they fledge.

Further, equipment has grown in size and efficiency demanding larger fields. The concomitant loss of hedgerow habitat has caused the degradation or loss of many species requiring such places for nesting. Add to that the burgeoning interest in growing bio-fuel crops and both field and edge nesting birds are in greater peril today than ever before. Short of eschewing dairy products and advocating against CAFOs and biomass energy schemes, there is little we can do. It's truly a depressing situation.

No new species were added to the cumulative station list of 131 species plus five forms; point count cumulative grew to 220 species seen at Kestrel Haven. Abnormalities were unremarkable and no significant health or parasite problems were noted. The real pleasure of this spring was in our returns. We enjoyed 114 returning individuals! Of that number, over a third, or 45, were at least four years of age or older. The eldest

return was a Downy Woodpecker at nine years of age. The elders were:

- Four Downy Woodpeckers at 4, 4+ (2) and 9 years old
- Yellow-bellied Sapsucker at 5 years old
- Blue Jay at 7+ years old
- Four Black-capped Chickadees at 4, 4+ (2) and 6 years old
- Six American Robins at 4 (3), and 4+ (3) years old
- Three Gray Catbirds at 4 and 4+ (2) years old
- Brown Thrasher at 4+ years old
- Red-eyed Vireo at 4+ years old
- Four Yellow Warblers at 4, 4+, 7+ and 8+ years old
- Two Common Yellowthroats at 4 years old
- Northern Cardinal at 6+ years old
- Rose-breasted Grosbeak at 4+ years old
- Song Sparrow at 4 years old
- Four Red-winged Blackbirds at 5+, 8(2) and 8+ years old
- Two Baltimore Orioles at 4 years old
- Purple Finch at 4 years old
- Seven American Goldfinches at 4 (2), 4+, 5 (2), 5+ and 7+ years old.

A Tree Swallow we had as a foreign recovery was banded as a nestling last June at Long Point, near Port Rowen, Ontario.

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Our eighth spring season was certainly an improvement over the past two springs even with starting much later than usual due to many factors. Nets were open for the first time on 26 Apr and our season ended on 16 Jun for