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Atlantic Flyway Review: Region IV Piedmont-Coastal Plain, Fall 2008 Bill Baggs Cape Florida State Park

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Bill Baggs

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Cape Florida State Park

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Cape Florida is in its seventh year as a fall migration banding station. The park is on the southern tip of a mostly developed barrier island just off the coast of Miami. We have up to 18 nets set in a restored tropical hardwood hammock that is part of a multi-million dollar effort to return native vegetation to the park following Hurricane Andrew in 1992.

We started banding on 15 Aug and were open on all but seven days until we closed on 5 Nov. We ran anywhere from 6 to 18 nets from first light until early afternoon on most days. The weather in 2008 was very active, with threats from several tropical systems during the early part of the season, and a very powerful cold front passing in mid-October. Tropical Storm Fay soaked the entire state in late August, and we received only a small push of birds as a result. Banding was comparatively slow for the first month, and it took until 6 Sep to have more than a 25-bird day and until 25 Sep to band more than 100 birds in a day.

The pace of migration picked up considerably in late September and October, with multiple heavy flights into Florida. The first was a flight of mostly Caribbean-bound warblers on 25 Sep following a cold front. This was followed by another cold front on 2 Oct that brought the largest thrush movement south Florida has seen in years. This probably accounted for our record of 43 Swainson's Thrushes banded this season, as they were present in decent numbers for the next two weeks. This is a species whose presence in south Florida during migration is extremely weather-dependent. Past seasons have seen as few as six or seven banded, as large-scale weather patterns directed the birds away from here, for example to the Panhandle and straight across the Gulf of Mexico.

David La Puma of Rutgers University in New Jersey provided loops of the Miami and Southeast US Doppler radar overnight signature on his website (www.badbirdz.com). We monitored this site most nights and saw some interesting phenomena during the season. The most interesting was what appeared to be flights of birds leaving the Outer Banks and other points along the North Carolina coast and heading south out over the ocean, most noticeably around 15-17 Oct. These birds seemed to be pushed into the Florida peninsula on prevailing E-ENE winds at Miami's latitude. This did not happen every night, but apparently sometimes the synoptic flow across the entire SE coast favors a 'cutting over' from the Carolinas to Florida rather than simply following the coastline down. This could explain occasional decent migration days we have had in the past on an easterly wind, which usually is not good at our site, since birds are shifted inland and to the west coast of the state.

Our record-breaking busiest day was on 19 Oct, when 227 birds were banded of 20 species: 130 of them were Black-throated Blue Warblers. This day featured a late-morning fallout of mostly warblers that may have been displaced out over the Atlantic Ocean by strong northwest winds the preceding night. Our previous fall high was 145 on 29 Oct 2007, and the previous spring high was 208 on 11 May 2007. Finally, an unseasonably powerful cold front passed around 27-28 Oct and ended our migration season abruptly, as it seemed to scoop up any Neotropical migrants still traveling through Florida and send them on the Caribbean Express Nonstop Overnighter. We closed for the season on 5 Nov after a week of single-digit banding days.

The 2008 season continued a trend from last year of lower b/100nh than we had seen in 2004 - 2006. We captured 35 b/100nh in 2008, even lower than the 37 b/100nh in 2007. The overall number of birds captured remained respectable thanks to a significant increase in net hours; close to 1700 more net hours than in 2007. Some species were captured in record numbers in 2008, most notably Chuck-will's-widows. Thirty-one were banded in 2008, compared to a previous high of 10 in 2006. This

may have been because we consistently got all the nets open before sunrise, as these birds are common migrants most years and are very active before dawn. Worm-eating Warblers also came through in good numbers, with 131 banded in 2008 (101 in 2006). Black-throated Blues were the most common capture, with 580 banded in 2008 (558 in 2006), but American Redstarts were second overall for the first time, with 264 banded compared to 253 Ovenbirds. Ovenbird captures have been half that of Black-throated Blues in the last three years. Two changes to the site have occurred that may be the cause rather than an actual reduction in Ovenbird numbers: Hurricane Wilma broke up the canopy and the bottom shelves of our nets are now set 1 m above the ground as a deterrent to raccoon and feral cat depredation. As a consequence, we see Ovenbirds passing unimpeded under nets quite often. Red-eyed Vireo numbers were also down, with 49 banded in 2008 compared to 94 in 2007, 169 in 2006 and 72 in 2005.

Interesting captures during the 2008 fall season included several species that were banded for the first time at the site in 2007: three Philadelphia Vireos, another Baltimore Oriole, another Hermit Thrush, and three Myrtle Warblers. Sixty-three species were banded for a record diversity; the 28 species of warblers banded did not include the Bay-breasted Warblers or Yellow-breasted Chats seen onsite, but we did band our second-ever Cerulean and Blackburnian warblers, as well as two each of Golden-winged and Blue-winged warblers. Three Canada Warblers was a high number for that species.

We captured 18 returning birds of seven species, including Black-and-white Warbler, Painted Bunting and White-eyed Vireo. The oldest were two Ovenbirds banded in fall 2004. All returns were of either resident or wintering species.

The bird of the season undoubtedly was the immature Bananaquit banded on 15 Sep following close to two weeks of easterly wind as major Hurricane Ike took the unusual path of passing south of (rather than over) the Florida peninsula. This may represent the first continental North American banding record for this species.

Finally, Cape May Warblers continued to be abundant for the second year in a row, with 24 banded. We banded 23 in 2007, compared to previous highs of six in 2004 and 2006.

Volunteers this fall included Rafael Galvez, Nancy O'Hare, Carlos Sanchez, and Angel and Mariel Abreu, who are banders-in-training. Special thanks goes to Robert Yero the Park Manager for continuing to support our project.

Lakeshore Estates

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In the fall season of 2008 I began my banding activities at the Tallahassee site, not at the end of September as I did in 2006 and 2007, but on 20 Aug. Therefore, the new data should be compared with those of the 2004 and 2005 seasons when such an early start was also possible. However, past calculations have shown that the netting success in terms of $b/100nh$ did not significantly depend on the length of the banding period. By this measure, the 2008 season hit a new low point with a netting success of just 5 $b/100nh$. In 2008, moreover, only 53 percent of the newly banded birds actually were presumed migrants. This value is lower than the average from the past ten years by more than two standard deviations and might reflect in a particularly dramatic way a general decline of migrants visiting my location since I submitted my first report to the Atlantic Flyway Review 15 years ago.

Looking at my data from recent years, I conclude that it now may take extraordinary circumstances to be able to band many migrants. The last really "good" season, by my standards, was in 2004 when two hurricanes and one tropical storm brushed this area. In contrast, relatively few migrants showed up in the next season, when the ferocious hurricanes of 2005 were kind to us and spared the eastern Florida panhandle. Under these conditions, there must have been little incentive for a stopover at my inland banding location that, admittedly, has become