



Beaverhill Bird Observatory Summer Report

2020

By:

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Executive Summary

Operations at the Beaverhill Bird Observatory were quite different this summer due to COVID-19. Head biologist Sara Pearce Meijerink and summer student Jon Van Arragon were responsible for the remaining field operations at the station. MAPS banding was unable to occur at any of the 3 stations due to COVID-19, and the Young Ornithologists Workshop had to be cancelled as well. Continued rain limited the amount of time staff could spend working in the field and made the access road impassable for periods of time.

Monitoring Avian Productivity and Survivorship (MAPS)

None of the 3 MAPS stations at the BBO were operated this summer due to COVID-19.

Migration Monitoring

As with the spring field season, BBO staff were unable to do migration banding since it was not feasible while maintaining 2 meters physical distance. Starting on July 20, staff once again began running double daily censuses: one along the standard census route and a second census out to the weir. While fall migration has not yet started, the staff have had some interesting sightings such as 26 American White Pelicans at the weir and White-faced Ibises.

Breeding Bird Surveys

From early June until early July, staff ran standardized surveys of the local breeding birds within the two established grids in the grassland and forest. Staff walked the entirety of each grid and recorded the position of detected birds, making special note of instances where 2 birds sang simultaneously or in quick succession. These sightings were then put on a map, and approximate territory boundaries were deduced based on the locations of simultaneous singing events. The purpose is to determine the density of nesting birds in the two habitats.



Sunrise over the natural area during one of the morning's censuses.

Intern Programs

BBO staff continued to monitor weekly the breeding Tree Swallows and House Wrens as well as the occupancy of bats in the bat roosting boxes. The bat surveys were very productive this year, with staff documenting 3 maternity roosts in the natural area as well as over 100 bats in one survey! This is a dramatic increase from past years. Surveys of Tree Swallow and House Wren boxes were not conducted for a couple of weeks due to the rainy weather. Towards the end of the summer the nesting boxes were mostly unoccupied with the occupants having fledged, allowing staff to clean out the nest contents in preparation for the next field season.

Nestling Banding

BBO staff banded 186 Tree Swallow chicks throughout the summer from boxes in the spiral grid, road grid, and new grid. Unfortunately, the banding window for many of the nestlings was missed due to the constant rain. Two of the 20 Northern Saw-whet Owl nest boxes were occupied this season. The chicks from both nests were banded, with the exception of 2 chicks from one nest box whose eyes were completely shriveled closed. These chicks appeared to be quite weak and were taken to WildNorth where they unfortunately could not be saved.



Left: The staff and Irene banding some Northern Saw-whet Owl chicks

Right: One of the blind Saw-whet Owl chicks

Young Ornithologists Workshop

Due to COVID-19, the Young Ornithologists Workshop had to be cancelled.

Rain

This summer has been extremely rainy – and this created many issues for the BBO staff. The constant rainfall made it difficult for staff to find windows in which to do their weekly Tree Swallow and House Wren nest box surveys, as well as the breeding bird surveys since birds will stop singing when it's raining. This forced staff to spend more time doing office work both from home and in the field. Even more problematic was the access road through the front pasture, which was very muddy due to all the precipitation and became deeply rutted as a result. Sara's car even got stuck in the ruts! To prevent further damage to the road, at the request of the landowner, staff closed vehicle access into the natural area and padlocked the front gate. Signs were installed on the front gate asking visitors to walk in due to the road being deeply rutted.



Sara's vehicle stuck in the pasture. A big thank you to Geoff Holroyd for coming out and giving her a tow!

Other Activities

Staff continued working to ensure that the BBO lab is ready for demolition and reconstruction once the building permits go through. Sara, John Scott, and Geoff Holroyd



Sara and John marking the lease boundary

marked the perimeter of the lease area around the lab in preparation for construction using a very expensive and accurate Trimble GPS unit. Staff also worked on maintaining the trails in the natural area, including mowing the local paths and net lanes and removing downed trees due to high winds and beaver activity. Most of the main trails were not mowed this summer since it was too wet and many sections remained flooded.

Near the end of the summer, Jon replaced several Tree Swallow boxes in the spiral grid that were old and falling apart. Staff also spent plenty of time performing nest searching throughout the summer season, the highlight of which was a Sora nest with 13 eggs! Staff heard baby Soras calling in the vicinity of the nest later in the breeding season.

In July and August, Shane Abernethy, BBO's newest Assistant Biologist, worked from his home in Ontario, since he was 'trapped' there by COVID travel restrictions. Shane spent his office time organizing our banding Excel files, created a file of past employees, board members and volunteers, and analyzed bird weights and measurements looking for long-term changes and investigated changes in age ratios over the past 20 years. He arrived at BBO at the end of August ready to participate in our owl monitoring program.



A Sora nest with 13 eggs!

Acknowledgements

A big thank you to BBO Chair Geoff Holroyd for supporting the day-to-day operations of the field station, over-seeing programs, and helping tow Sara's car out of the mud; Darren MacGregor for maintaining the BBO's website; Helen and Phil Trefry for housing our educational birds and providing space for staff to do office work; Rose Scott for tracking our income and expenses, Al DeGroot for taking down the awning from the lab; and Irene Crosland for being a wonderful human being and hosting the staff for dinner. A huge thank you to all the members of the BBO board as well for working so hard in your spare time to get our building permits through and helping to make all the research at the BBO possible. Thank you to all the visitors who walked all the way in from the front gate to visit the natural area! Thank you to Steve and Kay from the Wildbird General Store for continuing to provide the BBO with free birdseed, the staff (and birds) are incredibly grateful!

I thank Sara Pearce Meijerink and Geoff Holroyd for editing this report.

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