



Annual Report 2011

The Migration Research Foundation was busy in 2011 with core activities at McGill Bird Observatory and Frontenac Bird Studies, while also wrapping up another phase of our Short-eared Owl research and putting plans in place for some new projects. This report summarizes highlights of our work in 2011; additional details on current and past projects are available on the MRF website at www.migrationresearch.org, which is updated frequently throughout the year.

McGill Bird Observatory (www.migrationresearch.org/mbo.html)

2011 was the seventh full year of operation for McGill Bird Observatory. After a cold and snowy January, conditions eased up in late winter and we banded a record number of Common Redpolls. The early part of our Spring Migration Monitoring Program (Mar 28-Jun 5) was colder than usual, and it was an exceptionally wet season. Nevertheless, we banded a record high count of 906 birds of 64 species, and observed 140 species. In summer we operated our MAPS (Monitoring Avian Productivity and Survivorship) program for the third time, with a relatively poor yield of 111 birds of 21 species. However, the returns included a Veery banded at MBO as a juvenile in August 2005, and which we estimate has flown at least 70,000 km since then. As usual during the breeding season, we also branched out to band nestling Peregrine Falcons in Montreal, and a variety of species being rehabilitated for release at Le Nichoir, in Hudson, Quebec.

In sharp contrast to spring, we banded fewer birds during our Fall Migration Monitoring Program (Aug 1-Oct 30) than in any previous year, just 2789, although the 77 species banded was above average, and we observed a near record 146 species. Very generally, warbler numbers were strong, but sparrows were unusually scarce. In the second half of fall, we again had great coverage for our Northern Saw-whet Owl season, and banded 199 owls while also recapturing 9 individuals banded elsewhere, from as far as 1200 km away. In November, we switched back to our winter banding setup, and launched a new program of fitting House Finches and American Goldfinches with coloured alphanumeric bands in the hope of documenting local movements of these species throughout the year with community involvement.

We added two species to the site checklist in fall, thanks to a Tundra Swan and a Common Goldeneye flying right overhead, bringing the cumulative total to 204 species. In March we banded our first Hoary Redpoll, and in August we banded three of the local Wood Ducks, increasing our banding list to 108 species. A detailed 75-page report of all research at MBO from November 2010 through October 2011 was published on the MBO home page in December.

Simon Duval and Gay Gruner continued as Coordinator and Director of MBO this year, largely sharing bander-in-charge duties, assisted on occasion by Barbara Frei, Marcel Gahbauer, and Lance Laviolette; Bob Barnhurst took over this fall as the lead owl bander. Malcolm Johnson continued to provide tremendous service taking care of all our maintenance needs. As always, the banders were supported by a large team of terrific volunteers, without whose help the year could not have been such a success. This year's work was funded primarily by proceeds from our annual Baillie Birdathon, and rounded out by contributions from Bird Protection Quebec, Environment Canada, and Canada Steamship Lines, as well as many individual donors. Seeds for our winter program were generously provided by CCFA (Centre de Conservation de la Faune Ailée).

Short-eared Owl research (www.migrationresearch.org/research/shortear.html)

Kristen Keyes successfully submitted her thesis to McGill University in spring (available on the MRF website) and moved on to study threatened birds in the Scottish highlands over summer before taking on a position as an ecological consultant in Scotland this fall. While this phase of MRF's Short-eared Owl research is largely coming to a close, work is continuing on some fronts. In November, local volunteers resumed the weekly monitoring surveys on Amherst and Wolfe Islands in Ontario for a third consecutive winter, providing valuable data continuity for future analysis. Meanwhile, MRF is playing a key role in the informal international Short-eared Owl Working Group by coordinating a listserv for discussion and working with other core members to identify, publicize, and put into action a set of priorities for research and conservation.

Frontenac Bird Studies (www.migrationresearch.org/fbs.html)

Now in its third year, Frontenac Bird Studies continued under the leadership of Dan Derbyshire, and with the assistance of a small team of dedicated volunteers. The program focuses on an ecologically diverse yet relatively poorly studied area of eastern Ontario, with the objectives of increasing knowledge of local bird populations, establishing long-term monitoring programs, and working together with other agencies and the public to raise awareness and encourage protection of the region's biodiversity. Three MAPS stations were operated again this year, but like at MBO, the results

were somewhat disappointing, with only 256 birds banded, and especially few during the later part of the season when an influx of juveniles would usually be expected. Also similar to MBO, one of the highlights was the return of a Veery, in this case to exactly the same location for a third consecutive year, and this year as a breeder. Other efforts this year focused on Louisiana Waterthrush and Prairie Warbler, two species with very limited distribution in Canada, and for which the Frontenac area represents an important stronghold. To facilitate monitoring of territorial fidelity in future years, 15 of the Prairie Warblers were colour-banded this summer. Meanwhile, 27 sites were searched for Louisiana Waterthrush, with territorial pairs or couples located at three of them, and breeding confirmed at one. We gratefully acknowledge the John Hackney Foundation for the Noosphere, the McLean Foundation, and TD Friends of the Environment Foundation for financial support of FBS, as well as the participants and donors to the 2011 Frontenac Biothon, held for the second year as an effort combining fundraising with a thorough blitz to inventory the flora and fauna of part of the FBS study area.

Northern raptors research (www.migrationresearch.org/research/raptors.html)

Since MRF's inception, there have been tentative plans to research some of the raptors breeding in northern Canada that receive relatively little monitoring. Funding, time, and relevant training were always limiting factors. While funding challenges have not yet been resolved, we now have banders with raptor experience (Simon Duval and Alexandre Ancill) to coordinate the research in southwestern and eastern Quebec, respectively. Applications for research permits have been submitted, and we hope to commence research early in 2012. The initial focus will be on banding Rough-legged Hawks, Snowy Owls, Great Gray Owls, and Northern Hawk Owls, in the hopes of learning about the inter-year movements of these species through future recoveries. Pending funding, there is potential to expand this research by deploying satellite transmitters on one or more species to follow the movements of individuals in detail.

Conferences and presentations (www.migrationresearch.org/publications.html)

Every year, MRF researchers make an effort to communicate results to the public and network with others in the scientific community. This year Marcel Gahbauer spoke at the Society of Canadian Ornithologists meeting in Moncton, New Brunswick, summarizing results from the first six years of migration monitoring at McGill Bird Observatory. He and Kristen Keyes gave three presentations arising from her thesis in a Short-eared Owl symposium at the annual meeting of the Raptor Research Foundation in Duluth, Minnesota. Simon Duval presented an update on McGill Bird Observatory at the biennial meeting of the Canadian Migration Monitoring Network in Penticton, British Columbia, and gave additional presentations locally to Montreal-area birding groups. Also this year, Marcel was appointed to a four-year term on the Birds Subcommittee of the Committee on the Status of Endangered Wildlife in Canada (COSEWIC) and was elected as co-chair of the Canadian Migration Monitoring Network steering committee (sharing the role with former MBO director Marie-Anne Hudson, who now coordinates the Breeding Bird Survey for Environment Canada).

MRF website

The MRF website remains very popular, providing regular updates on all our research, and attracting visitors this year from over 130 countries. We have continued to expand our photo ID library, which is becoming increasingly recognized as a valuable reference for banders and birders. Thanks to Milburn Innovations Ltd. for continued excellence in providing technical support and advice regarding the MRF website. Our Facebook following (under our French alias, Observatoire d'Oiseaux de McGill) also continues to grow, with 1270 friends to date – please feel free to look us up and join the crowd for updates throughout the year, especially photographic highlights!

Organizational news

The MRF directors have all agreed to remain in their positions for 2012. The top priorities for MRF in 2012 remain the continued operation and strengthening of organizational support for McGill Bird Observatory and Frontenac Bird Studies. We will continue to contribute to Short-eared Owl research, and are open to partnering with a new student on this or another migration-related project. Although MRF's annual budget remains modest, largely because we continue to operate without any paid full-time staff, finding sufficient funding to maintain our research programs is a challenge every year. In addition to our annual "green" Birdathon in support of MBO and plans to hold another Biothon for FBS, we are hoping to expand our network of corporate sponsors – please contact us if you have any suggestions.

Donations of any amount are always welcome, whether in support of specific projects (please specify on your cheque), or toward general operations. All donations are eligible for charitable income tax receipts. Please make cheques payable to the Migration Research Foundation, and send to the appropriate address below, or click on the "Paypal donate" button at www.migrationresearch.org to use our secure online donation option using a Paypal account or major credit cards. Thank you for your support!

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