



Annual Report 2008

In 2008, MRF focused largely on maintaining and further developing two core projects – McGill Bird Observatory and Short-eared Owl research. This report summarizes highlights of those projects and brief news on other MRF initiatives. Additional details are on the MRF website at www.migrationresearch.org, updated periodically throughout the year.

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

2008 marked the fourth full year of operation for McGill Bird Observatory (MBO), with efforts again concentrated during spring (Mar 28 – Jun 5) and fall (Aug 1 – Oct 30) migration, supplemented by casual observations in winter and summer. Operations were coordinated by Marie-Anne Hudson with assistance from Barbara Frei; they both served as banders-in-charge in spring and also filled in during fall when James Junda or Marcel Gahbauer had days off. As usual, nearly 100 volunteers rounded out the team, contributing thousands of hours as extractors, observers, scribes, and more. Migration monitoring this year was largely funded by proceeds of the Baillie Birdathon and grants from Bird Protection Quebec and Canada Steamship Lines. In 2009 we will continue to work toward acquiring funding to hire a full-time coordinator for MBO, which would enable us to expand our analyses and publications as well as our public education efforts.

Over the course of the year, 154 species were observed at MBO, somewhat lower than the average of 163 in previous years. These included another 6 species new to the site, bringing the total over 5 years to 197. Spring numbers were only slightly above normal (828 birds of 64 species, compared to an average of 705 of 62 over the previous three years). As usual, the most abundant species was Red-winged Blackbird, but Ruby-crowned Kinglet and White-throated Sparrow were notable for being much more common than in previous years. The fall season was more remarkable, with the 5101 individuals banded representing a more than 50% increase over our previous season record of 3268. This was largely attributable to a massive influx of over 1700 Yellow-rumped Warblers, though 13 more warblers plus 16 other species were also caught in record numbers. However, the 78 species banded this fall were in line with the range of 76-79 in previous years. Two species, Solitary Sandpiper and Bobolink, were banded for the first time this year, bringing our cumulative total to 105 species. Recoveries received this year included a European Starling banded at MBO in March 2007, rediscovered in Harrisville, New York, in mid-December 2008.

Training of volunteers remains a priority at MBO. Nearly 30 undergraduate students from McGill University's ornithology class received instruction in basic field research techniques. In early September, our third annual weekend identification workshop focused on shortcuts to ageing and sexing common species at MBO, and tips for recognizing rarities. Also of note this year, Simon Duval was MBO's first student intern, helping out almost daily throughout the spring season, and Gay Gruner completed her apprenticeship and will be a full member of the banding team in 2009.

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

The Short-eared Owl was one of MRF's first targets for research due to its severe yet poorly understood population decline over the past several decades. We began by surveying historical nest sites in southern Ontario and assessing habitat characteristics at a subset of these, then moved on to using satellite telemetry to track migration, following one female for nearly 2000 km in the fall of 2007. This year we were pleased to take on Kristen Keyes as MRF's first grad student, in partnership with McGill University. She will be using a variety of techniques to assess both local and long-distance movements of Short-eared Owls, with field work beginning around Kingston, Ontario in spring 2009. She will track as many of the local birds as possible, to document in detail their habitat use, determine whether or not individuals remain present throughout the year, and if so, whether they shift their habitat preferences in winter – all of this to help guide management and conservation efforts. In addition, Kristen will be taking small feather samples from each fledgling, and is soliciting other researchers scattered across North America to do the same. Collectively, these will be used to develop a species-specific "isotopic base map" that can be used to help backtrack the origins of birds from unknown locations. Unlike satellite telemetry, this technique only identifies an approximate hatching/breeding location, but it will give us some insights into population connectivity and may help address the question of whether the species is nomadic.

Other projects

Four scientific papers have now been prepared on Peregrine Falcons, based in part on MRF research over the past several years. These have been somewhat delayed by prioritizing MBO and Short-eared Owl research, but we hope to have them all submitted for publication in 2009. Meanwhile the Swainson's Hawk project in New Jersey remains on hold, since again in 2008 none were caught by the Cape May Raptor Banding project. Such is the challenge of studying a species far outside its normal distribution! The team will try again in fall 2009.

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

We make an effort each year to publicize MRF research in a variety of settings, and to keep up with current topics by attending relevant conferences. Marie-Anne Hudson gave presentations on bird banding and migration monitoring research to schools in Montreal, while Marcel Gahbauer led the annual bird identification workshop at MBO. In August, Marcel attended the joint meeting of the American Ornithologists Union and Society of Canadian Ornithologists in Portland, Oregon, where topics of discussion included nighthawk population monitoring, boreal bird conservation, studies of long-distance migration, and population connectivity. He also attended the meeting of the Raptor Research Foundation in Missoula, Montana in September, presenting (on behalf of co-authors Leslie Hunt and Kristen Keyes) a talk on monitoring population distribution and abundance as part of a symposium on Short-eared Owl conservation.

Fundraising news

Even though we rely heavily on volunteer labour to conduct MRF projects and try to minimize our expenses, a certain amount of funding is required to ensure that we can undertake all of our work without compromising its scientific integrity. We are therefore always very grateful for the generosity of our supporters.

Our biggest annual fundraising event remains the Baillie Birdathon, in which participants go out for a single day in May to observe birds and raise money through flat-rate or per-species pledges. The easiest way to improve our success with this event is to recruit more participants. If you are at all interested in birds, please consider registering for the 2009 Baillie Birdathon (www.bsc-eoc.org/support/birdathon) and indicating MRF as your beneficiary. Even if you only sign up a few sponsors, the collective contributions will add up significantly – and you can do anything from counting the species in your backyard to traveling around all day in search of the highest total possible. Plus, all participants are eligible to win great prizes supplied by Bird Studies Canada. At MBO last year we pioneered a “green” Birdathon, done solely on foot, and came up with an impressive total of 98 species! However, our Birdathon proceeds were down somewhat in 2008 compared to 2007, so we really need to make an effort to have a successful event in 2009, as it forms a substantial part of the operational funds for MBO. An added benefit of a successful Birdathon is that it provides us a base amount to work with for grant applications requiring matching funding.

Over the past year, several donors have taken advantage of the new Paypal donation option available by clicking the yellow button on the navigation panel along the left side of any page of the MRF website. This is an easy way for anyone in the world to make a donation to MRF by credit card, via a secure website (no Paypal account is required). We also have registered with Giveline (www.giveline.com) in the US, where a portion of any purchases of a wide variety of products will be directed to MRF (just click “search for your cause” and type in Migration Research Foundation).

MRF website

The MRF website remains our focal point of communication, and has developed a strong following. In 2008, we recorded over 100,000 unique visits, or close to 280 per day on average, continuing a pattern of annual increase. We also transferred nearly 50 GB of data – this despite most of the photos on the site being considerably reduced in size for quicker downloading. As in the past, visitors focused most commonly on the MBO and satellite telemetry pages, and the most frequent source of new visitors to the site was Google searches. The fastest-growing section of the website remains the MBO Photo Library, which now contains annotated diagnostic images of over 50 eastern North American birds. We have several hundred more photos to process this winter for addition to the galleries in the first half of 2009. Thank you to Milburn Innovations Ltd. for ongoing technical support and advice regarding the website.

Organizational news

All members of the MRF board have agreed to remain in their positions for 2009. We expect to focus primarily on maintaining and expanding our research programs at McGill Bird Observatory and with Short-eared Owls in 2009. However, we are also looking forward to launching a new research initiative in the Frontenac area of eastern Ontario, a highly biodiverse region that has been recognized as one of just 13 UNESCO World Biosphere Reserves in Canada, yet has little formal protection. Watch for news about this development on the MRF website, and in next year’s annual report.

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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