MIGRATION RESEARCH FOUNDATION

Annual Report 2004

The Migration Research Foundation celebrated its second full year of operation in 2004, and it was an eventful period. Below are brief summaries of our key activities over the past twelve months; detailed reports on all projects are updated regularly throughout the year on the MRF website at www.migrationresearch.org.

Short-eared Owl research:
Early in the new year, we visited Kay McKeever at the Owl Foundation in Vineland, Ontario to discuss our Short-eared Owl research and gain some insights from her four decades of hands-on work with owls. Before leaving, we put a dummy transmitter on one of the Foundation's non-releasable Short-eared Owls, to evaluate how this species copes with backpack harnesses. Over the course of several months, staff closely monitored the owl's behaviour, and the consensus was that neither the harness nor the weight of the transmitter had a negative effect on the owl. With this test completed, we now look forward to putting transmitters on wild owls to research their movements.


The Short-eared Owl at the Owl Foundation, just after the harness and transmitter were attached (photo by Marcel Gahbauer).

In June, Research Director Marcel Gahbauer headed to Polar Bear Provincial Park in northern Ontario to assist with surveys for the Ontario Breeding Bird Atlas. Of particular interest was the opportunity to study the Hudson Bay lowlands breeding population of Short-eared Owls. Unfortunately, it was the coldest spring in over 30 years, coinciding with a low point in the rodent population cycle, and as a result there were no nesting owls to be found.

Meanwhile, Project Director Leslie Hunt continued to compile reports on breeding Short-eared Owls from across southern Ontario, though they were scarce there this year as well. We have put out funding applications to support a more intensive study of key southern Ontario populations in 2005 and 2006. This research would address the local and long-distance movements of Short-eared Owls, as well as studying habitat characteristics and management, and the implications of those on various other grassland species.

More details: www.migrationresearch.org/research/shortear.html

Peregrine Falcon research:
One of the highlights of 2004 has been our monitoring of Hafoc, a juvenile Peregrine Falcon hatched this spring on the Kodak tower in Rochester, New York. Spearheaded by Executive Director Linda Boutwell, this project involved fitting Hafoc with a solar-powered satellite transmitter in June, allowing us to track his movements for up to three years. Over the first six months, his movements have generally remained quite local. Aside from three brief forays of 75-125 kilometres to other parts of western New York State, Hafoc has kept to within a 25 kilometre radius of Rochester. His short-distance movements have given us valuable insights into the local dispersal of young Peregrine Falcons, and we hope that as he embarks upon the search for a territory and a mate that we will continue to learn more about these previously undocumented aspects of Peregrine Falcon behaviour.

Also in 2004, MRF remained involved with the banding and blood sampling of Canadian Peregrine Falcons. This program will likely be expanded again in 2005 as part of the five-year national Peregrine Falcon population survey.

More details: www.migrationresearch.org/research/peregrine.html

McGill Bird Observatory:
A new initiative for MRF this year was the establishment of the McGill Bird Observatory (MBO) in collaboration with the Avian Science and Conservation Centre of McGill University. Situated on a private nature reserve near the western tip of the island of Montreal, MBO is the only bird observatory in southwestern Quebec, and will hopefully become an important part of the Canadian Migration Monitoring Network. As one of the northernmost observatories in the east, MBO will be particularly important for studies of boreal migrants and other northern species that reach the southern edge of their range there.

Migration monitoring occurred on a part-time basis in fall 2004, with 715 birds of 45 species banded over 21 days spread between mid-September and the end of October. In total, 111 species were observed at MBO during the fall season, despite missing some early migrants. While most of the efforts were targeted at monitoring songbird migration, some nighttime efforts were made for owls too, resulting in the banding of 17 Saw-whet Owls and one Eastern Screech-Owl over the course of the season. The pilot project was a great success overall, and plans for 2005 are to seek funding for more complete coverage of the fall season, in addition to conducting a trial run of spring migration monitoring. MBO research has continued into the winter, with the cumulative species total for the site at 135 as of December 2004.


A Lincoln's Sparrow banded at MBO in October 2004; it and other boreal birds are among MBO's top priorities for population monitoring (photo by Marcel Gahbauer).

More details: www.migrationresearch.org/mbo.html

Conferences and presentations:
Marcel Gahbauer attended several conferences this year on behalf of MRF. The Ontario Bird Banding Association meeting in February provided an opportunity to share MRF's ideas about Saw-whet Owl migration with other researchers conducting similar work; a collaborative analysis involving many Ontario owl banders is now getting underway. In April, Marcel presented a review of MRF's Short-eared Owl research to the eastern Ontario gathering of Ontario Breeding Bird Atlas volunteers. At the meeting of the Raptor Research Foundation in November, he presented a paper on the nesting habits and productivity of Peregrine Falcons in Ontario. Other scientific meetings which yielded interesting news and/or potential collaborations for the future included the joint conference of the Association of Field Ornithologists and Wilson Ornithological Society at Cornell University in April and the annual meeting of the American Ornithologists Union in Quebec City in August.

Acknowledgments:
The list of people and organizations that have contributed to MRF projects in 2004 is too long to include here in its entirety. We do very much appreciate everyone's generous donations of time and funds, and have listed full acknowledgments on the website in relation to each project. Special thanks are due to the New York Department of Environmental Conservation for donating the satellite transmitter for Hafoc, and to the 111 donors whose contributions made the project possible; to the TD Friends of the Environment Foundation for financial support of our Short-eared Owl research; and to Joan Boardman for generous donations in support of MRF projects.

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