

SOME CHANGES IN THE BREEDING BIRDS OF UPSHUR
COUNTY, WEST VIRGINIA

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Geographically speaking, the State of West Virginia is in an anomalous position. Since it extends farther north than Philadelphia, it should rate as a Northern state, were it not for the fact that it reaches farther south than Richmond, and therefore may be ranked with the South. The Eastern "Panhandle" goes farther east than Buffalo, so it might qualify with the East, did it not extend farther west than Cleveland, and so must be placed with the Middle West. Coupled with this geographical range is a wide elevation range; from 262 feet at Harper's Ferry to 4,860 feet at Spruce Knob. In no way is this confusion more plainly marked than in the field of outdoor life. The State is a meeting place for diverse forms, and it has not yet had a tithe of the study it deserves.

Upshur County is well located as a field of study, for it lies near the geographical center of the State, may be regarded as typical in soil and forest conditions of a large part of our area, and has no extremes of elevation, since it extends from 1,300 to 2,700 feet above sea level. Furthermore, outdoor life, bird, plant, mammal, and insect, has probably been more thoroughly studied here over a long period of time than in any similar area in West Virginia.

It is the purpose of this paper to record, and comment briefly upon, some of the changes that have taken place in the county's list of breeding birds during the last twenty years. This covers the period of the author's observations, but he has also been assisted by the observations of Earle A. Brooks, A. B. Brooks, F. E. Brooks, and others, some of whose studies extend much farther back. From 1913 to 1933, however, the author has spent a part of every season in the county, and during most years this has been a major portion of the time. Work has been done in every one of the six Magisterial Districts of the county, although the vicinity of the village of French Creek has been headquarters.

At the time this study begins the well-known eastward movement of the Prairie Horned Lark had already reached the county, so it is not covered in this paper. Neither do I include the Starlings which have become established during the period, nor the Ring-necked Pheasants and Hungarian Partridges that have been introduced by the State Game Commission. Only native birds that are believed to have changed their breeding status here materially are included.

Practically all of Upshur County has been ascribed to the Transition Life Zone, such birds as Least Flycatcher and Black-throated Green Warbler being nesting species at the average elevations, and over a wide territory. Were it not for such summer residents as these, some of the following notes might tend to indicate that the county might better be included in the Carolina section of the Upper Austral Life Zone. It is this mingling of forms that makes the bird life here particularly interesting.

The following species have changed their breeding status here sufficiently to be included in these notes:

LEAST FLYCATCHER. *Empidonax minimus*. Twenty years ago Least Flycatchers were regarded as breeding only in the higher Alleghanics of the state. In 1927, however, I first heard it in June along the Buckhannon River, near Sago, Upshur County. In 1928 it appeared at French Creek during the breeding season, and it has been here every year since. I have also noted it during the summer at Tennerton and Rock Cave. In June, 1931, I watched old birds feed young along French Creek. There are no indications that it bred here prior to the time that I first discovered it in 1927.

EASTERN HOUSE WREN. *Troglodytes aedon aedon*. For some reason unknown to the writer House Wrens were exceedingly rare in Upshur County, some years being entirely absent, until the 1920's. They first appeared in numbers about 1925, and have been increasingly abundant since. Three pairs nested near our residence in 1933 (at least there were three nests!) and every building in the neighborhood seemed to have its pair. Our first breeding record was in 1911, and scattered pairs probably nested before that time, but at no period was the bird at all common.

BEWICK'S WREN. *Thryomanes bewicki bewicki*. As the House Wrens waxed in numbers the inevitable happened; the Bewick's have become strikingly less common. At the beginning of the period covered in this paper, Bewick's Wrens were by far the commonest breeding species of the group in the county. Their disappearance has coincided exactly with the increase in the House Wren population. In 1914 there were six pairs on the premises; in 1933 a single pair bred. At Tennerton I recorded three nests in 1927, three in 1928, one in 1929, one in 1930, and not a single one since. In the town of Buckhannon the Bewick's Wrens were common until a few years ago, but, save for a few days during migration, they are not heard now. This is a matter of concern to us, for the Bewick's Wrens are in every way

more desirable. Incidentally, observations in other parts of the state have shown the same thing taking place; the Bewick's not nearly so common as formerly. I have one positive record of force being used by House Wrens to dispossess the Bewick's. In 1931 a pair of Bewick's began a nest in a box on one of our outbuildings. A few days later I found the House Wrens carrying material into the same box, and they subsequently raised a brood there.

EASTERN MOCKINGBIRD. *Mimus polyglottos polyglottos*. Numerous observers have written of the northward spread of the mockingbird, and it has been quite noticeable in Upshur County. A pair were recorded as nesting in Buckhannon as early as 1914, but of recent years the species seems to breed sparingly every season. I have recorded nests at Tennerton, in Buckhannon, and near French Creek. As in other areas, the birds seem more common in winter. I knew of six wintering birds in the county last year, although but a single nest was recorded during the preceding breeding season.

BLACK-THROATED GREEN WARBLER. *Dendroica virens virens*. If Upshur County is really a part of the Transition Life Zone, the presence of this species as a breeding bird should occasion no surprise, but the fact is that it was entirely absent from the greater portion of the county until the last few years. The first definite county breeding record was established by Fred E. Brooks when he found a nest with three eggs near French Creek on May 29, 1922. In 1933 I knew of six singing males in an area of 150 acres. I have heard the song during the nesting season at French Creek, Sago, Tennerton, Selbyville, Rock Cave, and other points in the county. These birds are now widely spread over an area where, until a few years back, they were entirely wanting.

CERULEAN WARBLER. *Dendroica cerulea*. Brewster's classic description of this bird as a breeding species in West Virginia was written of conditions as he found them in Ritchie County, a region very definitely within the Carolina Life Zone. The first summer record for Upshur County was made at French Creek June 21, 1925. A male bird sang in the grove of the Presbyterian Church there throughout the season. There seems to be no reason for doubting that it bred there. In 1932 I saw a female feed young birds at French Creek. These birds sing regularly now along the Buckhannon River near Tennerton and Post's Mills. I have heard them along the Little Kanawha River near Arlington.

NORTHERN PRAIRIE WARBLER. *Dendroica discolor discolor*. This bird is one of the most striking additions to our avifauna. Until recent

years it was not known to breed in this general section of West Virginia, but individuals sang here during the summer of 1927. The first nest was found at French Creek on June 23, 1930. I have recorded in the WILSON BULLETIN that a pair used the identical location again in 1931, the nest having three eggs on July 2. Last year the nest was again close to the original location. Three male birds sang in a twenty-acre brushy region in 1933. These birds are now common in all sections of the county.

AMERICAN REDSTART. *Setophaga ruticilla*. The redstarts overlooked this county as a breeding place for many years, but they are now making up for lost time. I first noticed them at French Creek in the summer of 1929, and they have become more abundant each year. They nest regularly along the Buckhannon and Little Kanawha Rivers. Why they appeared here only recently (no previous records for at least forty years) I do not know.

SUMMER TANAGER. *Piranga rubra rubra*. This is another Upper Austral bird to extend its range to our territory during the last few years. In 1933 a male Summer Tanager sang through the season within a hundred feet of a pair of nesting Least Flycatchers. Nearly fifty years of observation in the county failed to yield a single record until 1930, when one was seen in June at French Creek. Since that time they have been present every season, and I have recorded them from Tennerton, Rock Cave, and Kanawha Head. They have been reported from Daysville and Sago. A pair developed quite a fondness for our early cherries in 1933.

EASTERN SAVANNAH SPARROW. *Passerculus sandwichensis savanna*. I have noted elsewhere (*Auk*, October, 1933) the remarkable spread of the Eastern Savannah Sparrow through northern West Virginia and western Maryland. Since that note appeared, I have observed adults with young near Buckhannon. So far as I know, this is the southern breeding record for the species.

EASTERN LARK SPARROW. *Chondestes grammacus grammacus*. One of the noteworthy bird movements that the state has experienced took place about twenty years ago when the Eastern Lark Sparrows appeared in numbers. The first state breeding record was made in Upshur County May 12, 1915. The following year I found four nests within one hundred yards of my home. About 1920 the birds began to be less abundant, and by 1933 it was something of an event to see one, although I have a breeding record for 1932. A few still occur each season in favored places in the state, but the birds are very much on

the decline in this area. In fact, I have not heard of a single record outside this county for the last three years.

BACHMAN'S SPARROW. *Aimophila aestivalis bachmani*. An ornithological surprise of the year 1910 was the appearance in West Virginia of numbers of Bachman's Sparrows. This visitor from the Carolina Life Zones lost little time in making himself at home here with birds of the Transition Zone. The first West Virginia breeding record for this species also was made in Upshur County, July, 1915. In 1925 a pair used our feeding shelf during May, a most unusual experience. By 1928 we were recording them much less frequently. In 1931 I heard a single individual near Rock Cave. Two were seen near Buckhannon during the summer of 1932, and in 1933 I heard a single individual near French Creek. I do not know of other recent records for this species.

This concludes the list of those species whose breeding status has changed enough to make it worth recording. As may be seen, some species spread from the higher elevations down to our area, more came to us from the lower elevations, one species (the Savannah Sparrow) seems to be definitely moving south, while the Lark Sparrow came to us from the West. It is worth mention that until recent years the Prairie Warbler had not been reported from the state except in the eastern portion. Thus, North, East, South, and West have contributed to make bird life richer for a time at least.

Two notable changes in migration might be recorded. Until the last ten years Fox Sparrows were exceedingly common here in migration; now they are regularly very rare. Until 1924 White-crowned Sparrows were definitely regarded as rare migrants. That year they were abundant, and they have been so every season since, both Spring and Fall. It is fascinating to watch these changes in any locality, but I am of the opinion that in the twenty years covered Upshur County has had more than its share.

FRENCH CREEK, W. VA.