Aton Forest Breeding Bird Survey 2020

Unfortunately, it appears impossible, as of now, to get exact numbers for species comparisons from previous years, due to the disappearance of the data analysis tool on eBird. Count numbers seem largely in line with previous years, with some noticeable increases from last year, as well as a few species never recorded on the breeding bird point counts since I began in 2017.

Common Loon continued to fledge one chick on Benedict Pond (apparently their second chick was taken by an eagle). Sandhill Crane was not present in June, but appeared in their usual spot on N. Colebrook Rd. in July. Alder Flycatcher continued on the two ponds on the north line, and in the Benedict Pond outlet at the end of the south line, even though they weren't counted as often as previous years. Purple Finch appeared a couple of times on point counts, as in previous years. Some notable nesting activity this year was the discovery of Cedar Waxwings building a hanging nest at the west end of the beaver pond on Line 1. This was observed on June 18. It was unclear if the nest was used, though, as no waxwing activity was observed directly at the nest on subsequent visits. Bobolink that began to breed in the fields by the large beaver pond (Line 1) had disappeared later in the month when the fields were mowed.

A species that reappeared this year after being absent for the last two years is the Louisiana Waterthrush. It presumably returned to breed in the ravine on the south line where it was frequently seen in 2017. It was singing at that location during the first point count, and though it wasn't heard again there, it or possibly a different individual was singing farther west on the line, by the other small stream, which is within half a kilometer of the ravine.

Warbler species that use boreal forest types continue to breed at Aton Forest, most commonly the Yellow-rumped, Blackburnian, and Black-throated Green. Smaller numbers of Northern Waterthrush, Canada, and possibly Magnolia are present. Two pairs of Northern Waterthrush were clearly present in the same swampy locations as last year and sometimes previous years: one pair each on Line 1 (the bog near the base of the hill) and Line 2 (the area between the two beaver ponds). Canada Warbler was recorded slightly more frequently than last year, but in line with the two or three sightings a year during previous years: once by the large beaver pond on the north line, and once on Line 4 (N. Colebrook Rd., near the intersection with State Line Hill Rd.), which is where it was heard last year. At the end of May, I also happened to hear a Canada Warbler on Line 1 in the bog area, though this was likely a migrating bird making use of its typical habitat while passing through. No definite Magnolia Warblers were recorded in 2020, the first year this was the case, though numbers have been very low with the exception of 2017. There was, however, a possible singing bird near the pond on the north line, but I couldn't rule out Chestnut-sided Warbler.

Other northern species that showed a marked increase last year continued to be observed in strong numbers. Winter Wren continued an upward trend; it was recorded on 15 checklists in 2020, up from 10 checklists reporting one last year, which was the first year it was recorded. Brown Creeper, which showed a dramatic increase last year, continued in similar high numbers this year, being reported on about 20 checklists. Unlike the Winter Wren's sudden appearance in 2019, though, Brown Creeper had been recorded infrequently in previous years. Having tallied these two species by hand, it is interesting to note that the distribution of these two species

around the property was not at all even. Both species were largely absent from Line 2, the north line, and seemingly most abundant on Line 3, the south line. WIWR was also scarce on the road lines, which is not entirely surprising, though BRCR were recorded there about as frequently as anywhere else (excepting Line 2).

Dark-eyed Junco, as well, appeared in 2020 more frequently than ever. The last few years, it was counted just once or twice a year, or not at all; this year it was reported on seven checklists all around Aton Forest. One of these checklists from the end of the month contained a family group. Even though juncos can be tricky to record because they seem to vocalize only very briefly, an increase of this degree would seem to indicate an actual increase in abundance on the property.

Red-breasted Nuthatch, another species associated with boreal forests, has been present in Aton Forest, but has never been recorded on the point counts. This year, it was recorded on three checklists, as well as between points (near Aton headquarters). It may be that some factor is boosting all nuthatch populations, because even the common White-breasted Nuthatch was noticeably, surprisingly abundant this year. Previously, it has been recorded with very moderate frequency, appearing on 13, 19, and 9 checklists, respectively, going back the past three years. This year, White-breasted Nuthatch was counted on 51 checklists, or roughly a third of all point counts. Since their call is relatively soft, it is even more likely that these numbers represent individual birds along each survey route. All survey routes contained good numbers of WBNU, but they were most numerous on the road lines, particular Line 4 (N. Colebrook Rd.), where there were often two individuals at a point.

Other species that were recorded for the first time on point counts are Pied-billed Grebe and Blue-gray Gnatcatcher. One Pied-billed Grebe, probably a juvenile, was seen swimming on the beaver pond on Line 2, Point 6 near the end of June. While grebes are not uncommon and have likely been present all along, they are secretive marsh birds that vocalize at night. Blue-gray Gnatcatchers are also not uncommon, but may tend to be more of a southern species that doesn't favor northern-type forests. They were seen on Line 4 (N. Colebrook Rd.) around Point 9 and near the adjacent pond.

Perhaps the most notable story of 2020 was the cuckoos. Neither the Yellow-billed or the Black-billed Cuckoo had ever been recorded on a point count at Aton Forest, at least not recently. I have encountered them twice near headquarters and Woodchuck Hill, but they are not common in this region. This year, however, was a banner year for cuckoos at Aton and the broader region. Yellow-billed were especially prevalent, though Black-billed was recorded on a point count once on Line 5, at Point 2, and heard two additional times, once near that point, and once at the other end of Line 5 (S. Sandisfield Rd.).

The sounds of the Yellow-billed Cuckoo, a more southern species, became a relatively common occurrence on all of the survey routes—its woody, guttural call as well as the softer cooing that is more reminiscent of the Black-billed's song, but given at a steady even tempo, unlike the grouped notes of the Black-billed. YBCU was recorded on at least 20 checklists, sometimes with two birds at one point. Taking into account possible overlap between the points where they were recorded, I estimated that the occurrences represented at least 12-14 individual Yellow-billed Cuckoos. However, the vocalizing birds may not indicate the number of pairs, as females may

give the cooing song, according to Cornell Lab. Also, there could be fewer cuckoos that simply move around more; David George Haskell writes in *The Forest Unseen* that cuckoos "don't set up predictable territories but wander nomadically on their breeding grounds looking for clusters of food, then quickly set up camp and breed."

Why so many cuckoos all of a sudden? The local abundance fluctuates according their main food source, caterpillars, whose hairy barbs their stomachs are specially designed to tolerate. Cornell Lab notes that they are drawn to outbreaks of tent caterpillars, and may eat as many as 100 in one sitting. It is apparently a good year for caterpillars. Richard Guthrie, a regional eBird coordinator and guest on WAMC's birding talk show, suggested that the cuckoos are able to respond to environmental triggers while still on their wintering grounds, sensing how plentiful their prey will be up north.