



Annual Report 2012

In 2012, the Migration Research Foundation maintained its focus on core activities at McGill Bird Observatory in Montreal, Quebec, and Frontenac Bird Studies in eastern Ontario, but also developed publications on our Peregrine Falcon and Short-eared Owl research, and began new field work on arctic species including Snowy Owl and Snow Bunting. This report summarizes highlights of our work in 2012; 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)

2012 was the eighth full year of operation for McGill Bird Observatory. It was the mildest winter since MBO was launched, and over the course of the season we banded 380 birds. Among them were 69 House Finches and 87 American Goldfinches given black/white bands with unique two-digit codes that can be read from a distance, allowing for observers to report their movements without needing to recapture the individuals. Our Spring Migration Monitoring Program (Mar 28-Jun 5) set new records this year with 993 individuals of 66 species banded, and we also had 103 returns from previous years, the oldest of which was a Yellow Warbler banded at MBO in August 2005. Black-bellied Plover, Fish Crow, and Tufted Titmouse were observed for the first time, bringing the MBO checklist to 207 species. The summer MAPS (Monitoring Avian Productivity and Survivorship) program in summer also yielded high numbers (184 individuals banded of 31 species), largely due to an unprecedented early movement of fall migrants on July 23, highlighted by a remarkable 56 Yellow Warblers.

The 4064 birds banded during the Fall Migration Monitoring Program (Aug 1-Oct 30) was above average, but the season was more notable for the record count of 87 species banded and the near-record 149 species observed. Warblers were less dominant in fall than usual; instead most thrushes and sparrows were more abundant than usual, highlighted by record banding totals for Swainson's Thrush (176) and White-throated Sparrow (506). In the final week of the season, Red-bellied Woodpecker and Bohemian Waxwing were banded for the first time ever at MBO, increasing the cumulative total to 110 species. The Northern Saw-whet Owl program was again a full-time effort for six weeks in late fall, plus some additional effort extending into mid-November. It too generated record counts this year with 249 saw-whets banded – plus 10 individuals of four other species, three of which (Barred, Long-eared, and Boreal) had not previously been banded at MBO. A detailed 75-page report of all research at MBO from November 2011 through October 2012 was published on the MBO home page in December, and as usual, MBO results have been shared with the Canadian Migration Monitoring Network and the Eastern Bird Banding Association.

Simon Duval and Gay Gruner remained as Coordinator and Director of MBO this year, largely sharing bander-in-charge duties, assisted on occasion by Barbara Frei, Marcel Gahbauer, James Junda, and Lance Laviolette. Bob Barnhurst continued this fall as the lead owl bander, with Nicolas Bernier serving as an intern for the season. Malcolm Johnson remained a critical pillar in our team, taking care of all our maintenance needs, and leading the way with renovations, including creation of a stand-alone shed that allowed us to move all our equipment out the banding cabin and expand our capacity there. The final development of the year was the addition of a large solar panel array to provide power at the cabin, thanks to a \$4,000 donation from TD Friends of the Environment Foundation. Other funding this year was provided by Bird Protection Quebec, Environment Canada, Home Depot, and Canada Steamship Lines, as well as many individual donors, both directly and through our annual Baillie Birdathon. As always, the research programs were enabled by an army of dedicated volunteers, with over 110 people contributing more than 4500 hours throughout the year.

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

This was the fourth year for Frontenac Bird Studies, continuing to be undertaken primarily by Dan Derbyshire, with the assistance of a small team of dedicated volunteers. FBS focuses on the impressive avian diversity of the Frontenac Arch in eastern Ontario, aiming to improve knowledge of local bird populations and collaborate with other agencies and the public to raise awareness and encourage protection of the region's biodiversity. The two most promising MAPS stations from previous years were operated again in 2012, but due to theft and vandalism at one location and logistical challenges at the other, coverage was incomplete, and the future of this aspect of FBS is under review. One of this year's highlights was a Veery at the Maplewood Bog site, recaptured at exactly the same location for a fourth consecutive year.

The remainder of the FBS program this year again focused on Louisiana Waterthrush and Prairie Warbler, two species for which the Frontenac area represents a substantial portion of their very limited Canadian range. Five of the adult male Prairie Warblers banded in summer 2011 returned, and nested within 33-81 m of last year's territory. Overall, numbers

have been relatively stable over the past three years, but there has been a fair amount of annual variability in local occupancy. As in 2011, Louisiana Waterthrush occupancy was low, with territorial males detected at just three of the 14 sites surveyed this year. We are grateful to the John Hackney Foundation for the Noosphere, the McLean Foundation, and TD Friends of the Environment Foundation for their financial support of FBS, as well as the participants and donors to the 2012 Frontenac Biothon, held for a third year as an effort to combine fundraising with a weekend inventory of the flora and fauna of part of the FBS study area.

Raptor research programs

Peregrine Falcons and Short-eared Owls have been the subject of MRF research for several years, but in 2012, work on these species was primarily at the keyboard. Marcel Gahbauer co-authored (with Eve Belisle and David Bird) a short note in the Journal of Raptor Research (“Unusual behaviors by a juvenile Peregrine Falcon: parental interference, siblicide, and incest”). Also, Marcel and Kristen Keyes contributed to a forthcoming review paper on Short-eared Owls (being led by Travis Booms of the Alaska Department of Fish and Game) that recommends research priorities for this declining species, including expansion of the winter monitoring program that Kristen established in Ontario as part of her M.Sc. research (and which members of the Kingston Field Naturalists are maintaining on Amherst and Wolfe Islands for a fourth consecutive winter). Meanwhile, MRF has since 2006 been hoping to deploy a satellite transmitter on a vagrant Swainson’s Hawk at Cape May, New Jersey in collaboration with the local raptor banding team, to learn more about this atypical migratory route. However, since none have been caught there in six years, plans have changed, and instead Bill Clark will attempt to deploy the unit on an individual wintering in southern Texas, also atypical for a species that mostly winters in Argentina.

The only raptor field work that did take place in 2012 was in Quebec, where the northern raptor research program (www.migrationresearch.org/research/raptors.html) finally got underway. It was a modest start, with only a couple of Snowy Owls banded, one near Rimouski, and another near Montreal. However, it provided a good opportunity to prepare for expanded plans in the early part of 2013, when Great Gray Owls are expected to be present in larger than usual numbers. Also, while certainly not raptors, Snow Buntings were a new target of research in winter 2011-12, with MRF teams banding 321 of them on the outskirts of Montreal, as a contribution to the Canadian Snow Bunting Network.

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

Sharing the results of MRF research is a priority. However, after a heavy series of conferences in the second half of 2011, it was a quieter year in 2012, with presentations limited to a talk at the Congrès des ornithologues amateurs du Québec and a few lectures to Montreal-area birding groups. Looking ahead to 2013, MRF is considering submitting abstracts for meetings of the Raptor Research Foundation, Society of Canadian Ornithologists, and the Canadian Migration Monitoring Network (which will be co-chaired by Marcel Gahbauer).

MRF website

All MRF programs are described on the website, with McGill Bird Observatory particularly well represented. The website again received attention from all around the world in 2012, with the MBO photo ID library and our owl research programs drawing the greatest interest. Thanks to Milburn Innovations Ltd. for continued excellence in providing technical support and advice regarding the MRF website. Meanwhile, the Facebook page for MBO (under our French alias, Observatoire d’Oiseaux de McGill) gained further popularity in 2012 and now has over 1530 followers – please feel free to look us up and join the crowd for updates throughout the year, especially photographic highlights!

Organizational news

The MRF board will remain unchanged in 2013. Once again, the top priorities for the coming year are the continued operation and strengthening of organizational support for McGill Bird Observatory and Frontenac Bird Studies. We are also hoping to build on the pilot research being done on arctic species wintering in eastern Canada, and are working on preparing at least two more manuscripts on our past Short-eared Owl and Peregrine Falcon studies. Although MRF continues to operate without any paid full-time staff, ensuring that these projects have sufficient stable funding remains an ongoing challenge, and we welcome all donations and suggestions for expanding our network of sponsors.

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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