Buffy Baldpates

Ron Pittaway

Baldpate is a former name of the American Wigeon. Baldpate aptly describes the shiny white crown of male American Wigeon in breeding (alternate) plumage. Most ducks acquire their breeding plumage in the fall, wearing it through the winter to late spring or early summer.

Almost every year in *October*, birders ask me about Eurasian Wigeon because they have seen male wigeon with buffy crowns. Some even wonder if they have seen a hybrid American x Eurasian Wigeon. Bird guides say that male American Wigeon have white crowns and Eurasian Wigeon have buffy crowns. Some books even say the buffy crown is one of the best field marks of the Eurasian Wigeon.

So why is there confusion about wigeon with buffy crowns? Most bird guides do not tell you that it is perfectly normal for male American Wigeon to have buffy crowns in early fall, when they have just acquired fresh breeding plumage. However, the buff fades rapidly to white, which is why it is not often seen or mentioned in most bird books.

If you see a wigeon before late October with a buffy crown, first suspect American Wigeon. Confirm it by seeing the broad green patch from the eye to the nape. If you see a wigeon after October with a buffy crown, suspect a Eurasian Wigeon, but confirm it by noting its reddish head and neck. Interestingly, the buffy forehead of the Eurasian fades to a pale cream in time.

American and Eurasian Wigeon occasionally hybridize, but rule out variations in each species before naming a hybrid. Eurasian Wigeon have a variable touch of green behind the eyes, which may indicate past hybridization with American Wigeon or a character of the ancestral form of both species.

Grass Fire Birds

Ron Pittaway

Has the huge decrease in grass fires in recent decades contributed to the puzzling declines in some grassland birds?

When I was a young birder in the 1960s, I often returned home with charcoal on my pants and boots after roaming fields that had burned in spring. Grass fires and grassland birds were much more common then than they are today. Every spring many fields burned in southern Ontario. I haven't had charcoal on my shoes in many years.

Putting out grass fires is an ecological mistake because many plant and animal communities require periodic burning for renewal. Studies indicate that grass fires temporarily reduce bird numbers, but breeding grassland birds soon increase as invertebrates re-establish in the rapid new growth. Grasshopper Sparrows, for example, increase significantly 1-3 years after a burn. We must support resource managers who use controlled burns to enhance wildlife habitats.

Reference

L.R. Mitchell et al. 2000. Ecology of Grassland Breeding Birds in the Northeastern United States - A Literature Review with Recommendations for Management. Department of Natural Resources, Cornell University, Ithaca, NY 14853-3001. Available free. I thank Chip Weseloh for telling Jean Iron and me about this important publication.

Atlas Up and Flying

Mike Cadman

The new atlas isn't just up and flying – it's soaring like an eag after the first year of field work. Results are pouring in t Regional Coordinators (RCs) throughout the province. RCs ar summarizing their first year's results, providing the first glimpse of how the status of many species has changed over the past 20 years. A few examples follow. First the good news:

Charlie Whitelaw reports Sandhill Cranes in 18 squares in Sudbury West region, whereas there were only 5 reports in the whole first atlas. There are also reports from 3 squares in Muskoka Region, and confirmed breeding at Long Point and near Waterloo.

Merlin numbers and range are expanding south and east. Christine Hanrahan reports Merlins in 10 squares so far in Ottawa region, with 3 nesting pairs in one square alone; there was only one possible breeding record in all of Ottawa region during the first atlas.

Dave Martin reports that Pine Warblers have increased greatly in Middlesex County as pine plantations there are reaching maturity. Records are from 4 squares so far, with none during the first atlas.

Hooded Warblers are doing very well around Long Point, with over 50 nests discovered this year. There was also a territorial bird near Mono Mills. It will be interesting to see how far north the population extends.

Watch out for exploding Northern Mockingbirds in the Toronto-Richmond Hill area. Glenn Coady reports confirmed or probable breeding in 11 of Toronto's 16 squares, and Theo Hofmann reports 8 confirmed, 4 probable, and two possible breeders in a single 10-km square near Richmond Hill.

Unfortunately, all the news isn't good (and it is easier to detect expansions than contractions in range at this stage of the project). Red-headed Woodpeckers, Golden-winged Warblers (at least in the south), Loggerhead Shrikes, Henslow's Sparrow, and Northern Bobwhite all appear to be well down since the first atlas, and there are suggestions that some of the grassland sparrows are also a lot harder to find. There were no reports of breeding Purple Martins in Sault Ste Marie in 2001, though they were in 12 squares during the first atlas.

Everyone can participate in the atlas and help our efforts to define the current range and status of all breeding species in the province. If you're not already involved, sign up soon, there are only four more years of data collection. Help is needed everywhere, but particularly in central and northern Ontario. See the atlas web page **www.birdsontario.org** for more details about the project and how to get involved, or contact us:

Ontario Breeding Bird Atlas
University of Guelph
Blackwood Hall, Room 211
Guelph, Ontario, N1G 2W1
Phone: 519-826-2092, Fax: 519-826-2113
e-mail: atlas@uoguelph.ca

Happy atlassing,

Mike Cadman
e-mail: mcadman@uoguelph.ca