



Results of the Second Connecticut Bird Atlas - A Wake Up Call for Action -

Min T. Huang, PhD, Migratory Bird Program Leader, State of Connecticut Department of Energy and Environmental Protection (DEEP)

The second Connecticut Bird Atlas was the most intensive and comprehensive wildlife survey ever conducted in the state. Encompassing four years of data collection across all seasons, and a subsequent two years of data analysis, this project provides the current state of all Connecticut breeding birds and critical information on how birds in the winter distribute themselves across the state. The project attracted almost a thousand volunteers who contributed over 600,000 points of data to the study.



*While still threatened, breeding populations of Bald Eagles *Sturnella magna* have dramatically increased in CT during the past several decades. Photo by Paul J. Fusco*

Unfortunately, as we suspected, the current state of many of our birds is not good. The breeding distribution of many of our species has contracted since the initial atlas in the mid 1980's, some to the point of extirpation as a breeding species. The birds are truly telling us that things are amiss in the natural environment.

When we envisioned this project in 2016, we had two major objectives for the project,

1. Obtain contemporary information on breeding and wintering birds in Connecticut.

- a. Develop spatially explicit estimates of the distribution and abundance of all breeding birds in Connecticut,



*Eastern Meadowlark *Sturnella magna*, a most important Species of Greatest Conservation Need (SGCN) in CT Photo by Paul J. Fusco*

- b. Determine changes in the distribution and occurrence of breeding birds compared to the initial Connecticut breeding bird atlas,
c. Provide detailed information on the status,

survey, continued on page 3

Save the Date!

Mark your calendar to ensure your attendance at our next Annual Meeting and Environmental Conference scheduled for **Saturday, November 14, 2026.**

Our workshops will help commissioners and staff learn how to best respond to the impact of changing weather patterns ranging from severe storms and flooding to persistent heat and drought conditions. Topics will include the critical role of natural area preserves, how to protect forests and riparian areas along with understanding inland wetlands law for both new and experienced commissioners.

Please watch our website and the next issue of *The Habitat* for additional updates!

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CACIWC News Briefings

While preparing this Summer issue of *The Habitat*, the CACIWC Board of Directors was again reminded of the increasing threats to our critical habitats posed by the constantly changing weather patterns across North America and throughout the world. These patterns, many of them driven by climate change, have ranged from severe storms producing extensive flooding through persistence heat domes resulting in record breaking temperatures and areas of widespread drought. This year also witnessed extensive wildfires throughout North America and Europe. While we wait for the impact of a possible super El Niño, we will continue to provide you with the latest scientifically based information on habitat and wildlife changes as also described in the cover article in this issue outlining trends in breeding bird populations in Connecticut.

In other news:

1. We are now selecting final workshop speakers for our **49th Annual Meeting and Environmental Conference**, scheduled for **Saturday, November 14, 2026**. Watch our website for the additional detailed conference news at www.caciwc.org. Please do not hesitate to contact us with any questions at AnnualMtg@caciwc.org.
2. The Board of Directors had decided not to increase our **CACIWC membership dues for our 2026-27 fiscal year**, which started on July 1, 2026, to help limit your yearly expenses. We are offering a substantial discount on the annual conference registration fee for our commissioners. Please use the links for both the 2026-27 online and mail-in membership renewal forms on our website: www.caciwc.org.
3. Please also let us know of any changes in staff and commissioner contact information on the membership renewal forms or directly to us at: board@caciwc.org.

Thank you for all your ongoing efforts to protect habitats within your community!

Alan J. Siniscalchi, President
CACIWC 🦉

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distribution, relative abundance and habitat associations of migrating and wintering birds in Connecticut, with an emphasis on Species of Greatest Conservation Need (SGCN) in Connecticut,

- d. Develop an interactive website detailing results of the atlas and allowing for public access to and manipulation of the data,
- e. Provide a quantitative assessment of birds in Connecticut that can be used to inform management decisions.

2. Upon completion of the atlas, utilize the momentum and galvanize the conservation community to work together to develop a stable funding mechanism to better protect habitat and investigate other causes of decline.

Our first objective has been accomplished, and with that incredible milestone behind us, we are now ready to take on and achieve our second objective. We firmly believe that collectively the conservation community can work together to achieve a truly generational piece of legislation that will help protect our state's cherished wildlife habitat and with it, all the components (e.g. clean water, healthy wildlife) that make these habitats what they are.

Results of the Second Connecticut Bird Atlas

The breeding portion of the atlas demonstrated a marked decline in the breeding distribution and abundance of many species, both non-migratory residents, and many migratory species. A number of factors operate either singly, or in tandem, to influence bird populations. The main drivers of bird populations are; (1), habitat loss, conversion, and degradation, (2),

anthropogenic influences that increase mortality (e.g. building strikes, feral cats, over-harvest, etc.), (3), invasive species, (4), environmental contaminants, and (5), climate change. We have the ability to positively influence all of these drivers, should we choose to and most importantly, have the means with which to do so.

Causation for the changes we see in species breeding distribution is often more complex than just one single factor such as outright habitat loss and may be due to, for instance, declines in food resources, environmental contaminants that affect reproduction and/or survival, collisions, over-harvest, or problems on the wintering ground.

However, there are some clear examples where one factor is easily identified as the major cause of decline. This is particularly the case with habitat loss and/or conversion. Changes to, loss of, conversion of, and degradation of habitat during any part of the annual cycle of birds (breeding, migration, wintering) can result in lowered productivity and/or survival, leading to declines. Since the 1980s, our state has seen marked changes in the landscape. Although we are still 65%

survey, continued on page 4

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forested, much of that forest is fragmented and full of invasive plants in the understory. Conditions such as these don't particularly lend themselves to many species of birds. Over this same time frame, we have lost most of our grasslands and in the absence of active management, much of our early successional habitat is gone. Some examples of species declining over the past 40 years whose decline is due largely to habitat changes (Figures 1-4) are:



Figure 1. Ruffed grouse *Bonasa umbellus*. Photo by Paul J. Fusco. The maps below display a very dramatic decline in confirmed, probable, and possible breeding location observations between the 1982-1986 and the 2018-22 surveys.

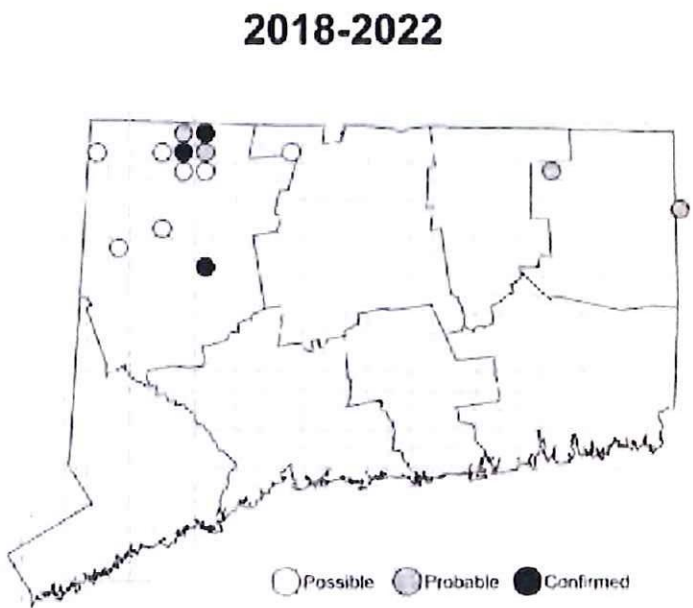
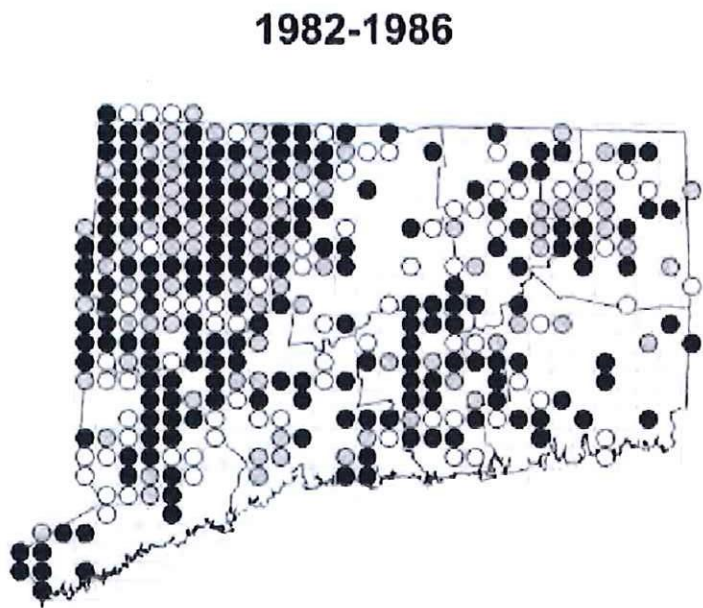
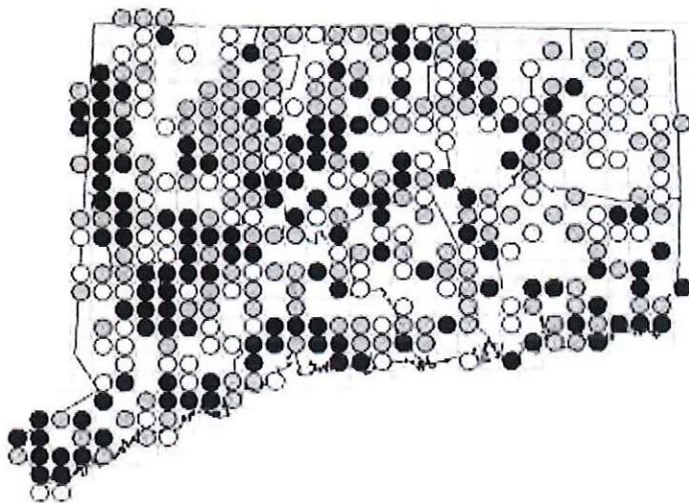


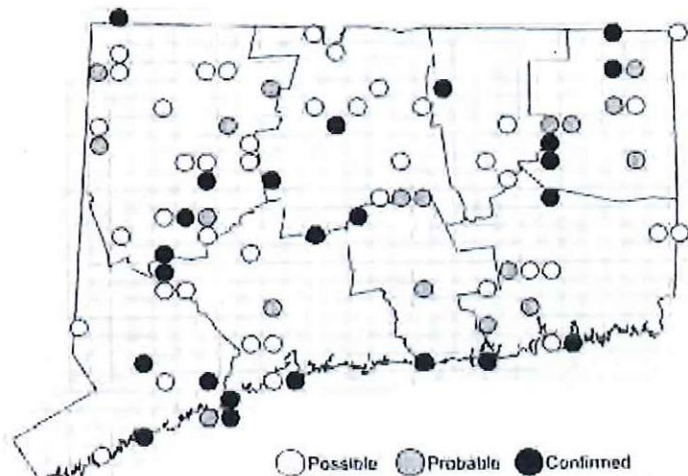
Figure 2. Brown Thrasher *Toxostoma rufum*. Photo by Paul J. Fusco. The maps below display a dramatic decline in confirmed, probable, and possible breeding location observations between the 1982-1986 and the 2018-22 surveys.

survey, continued on page 5

1982-1986



2018-2022



survey, continued on page 6

Save the Date for the next Connecticut River Watershed Seminar*

On Wednesday, October 14, 2026, when Stephen Gephard, recently retired CT DEEP fisheries biologist will present his webinar on "Aquatic Habitats." For more information, please see: [Conservation Events | Old Lyme, CT.](#)

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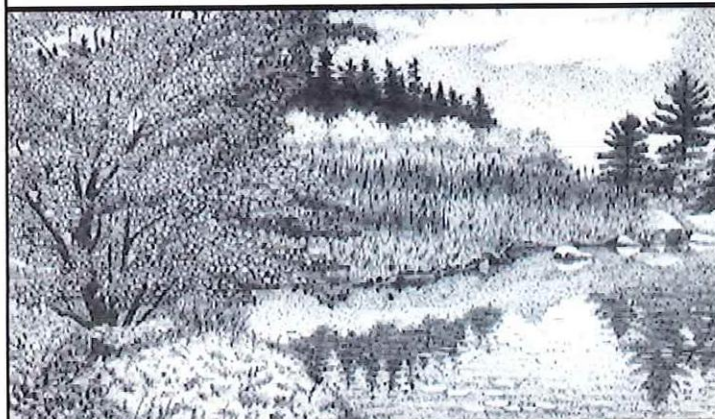
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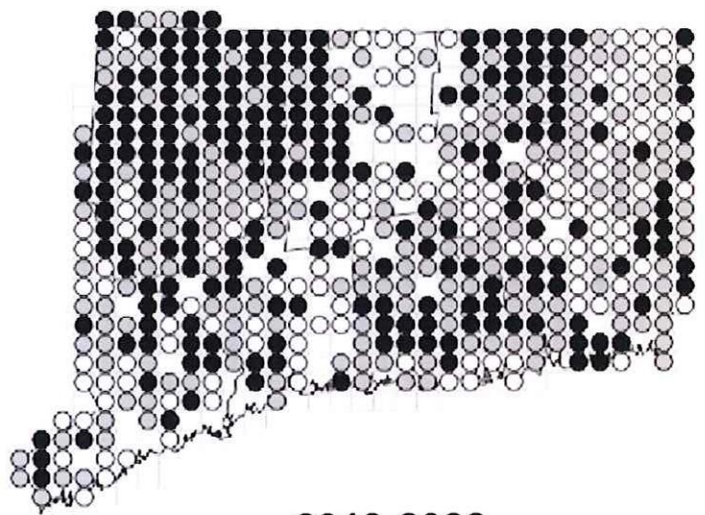


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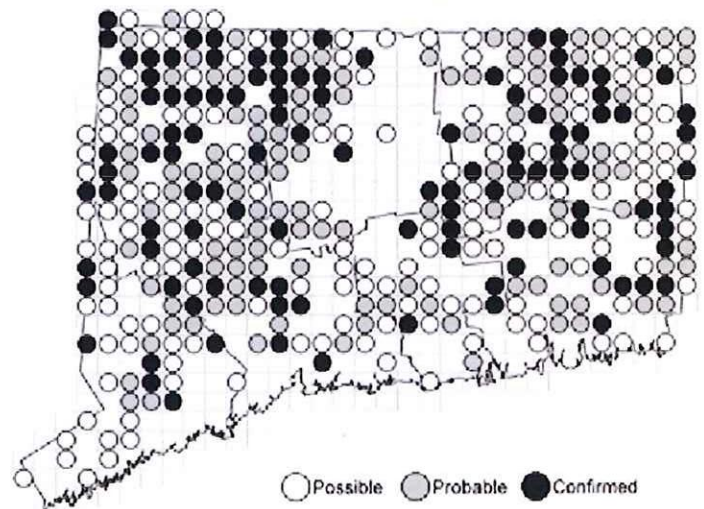


Figure 3. Black-and-white Warbler *Mniotilta varia*. Photo by Paul J. Fusco. The maps to the right display a decline in confirmed, probable, and possible breeding location observations between the 1982-1986 and the 2018-22 surveys.

1982-1986



2018-2022



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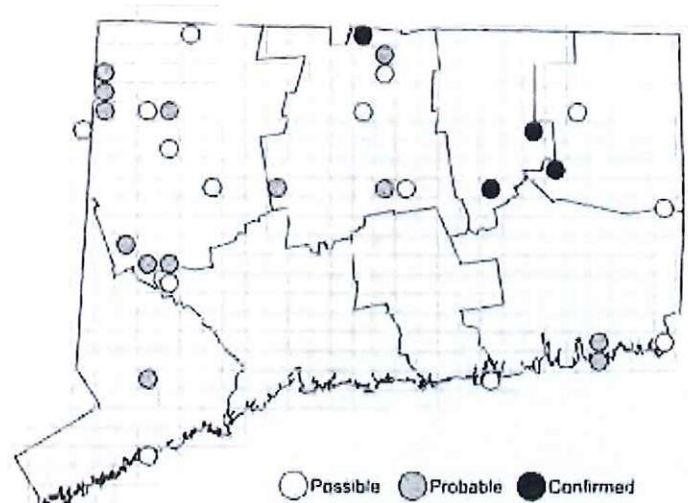
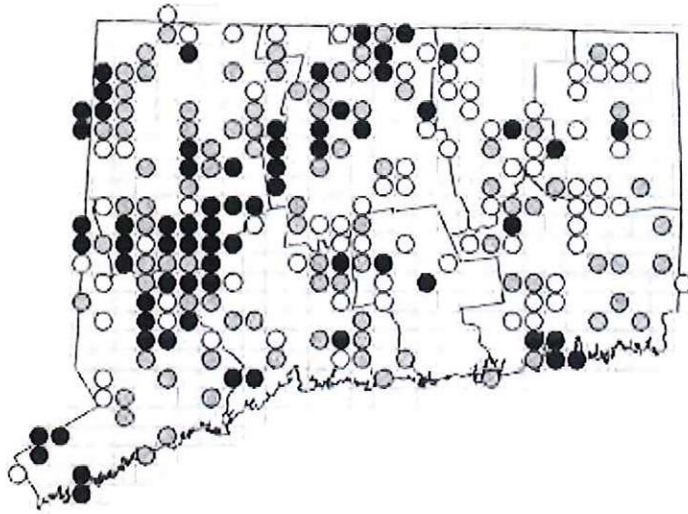


Figure 4. Eastern Meadowlark *Sturnella magna*. Photo by Paul J. Fusco. The maps on page 7 display a dramatic decline in confirmed, probable, and possible breeding location observations between the 1982-1986 and the 2018-22 surveys.

survey, continued on page 7

1982-1986

2018-2022



survey, continued on page 8

Enjoy the 10th anniversary celebration of **Bat Appreciation Day** on **Saturday, September 19, 2026**, from 10:00 AM until 3:00 PM at the Old New-Gate Prison and Copper Mine in East Granby. For additional information, please see: [Bat Appreciation Day at Old New-Gate Prison and Copper Mine](#). Please also see: [Agenda for Bat Appreciation Day 2026](#).



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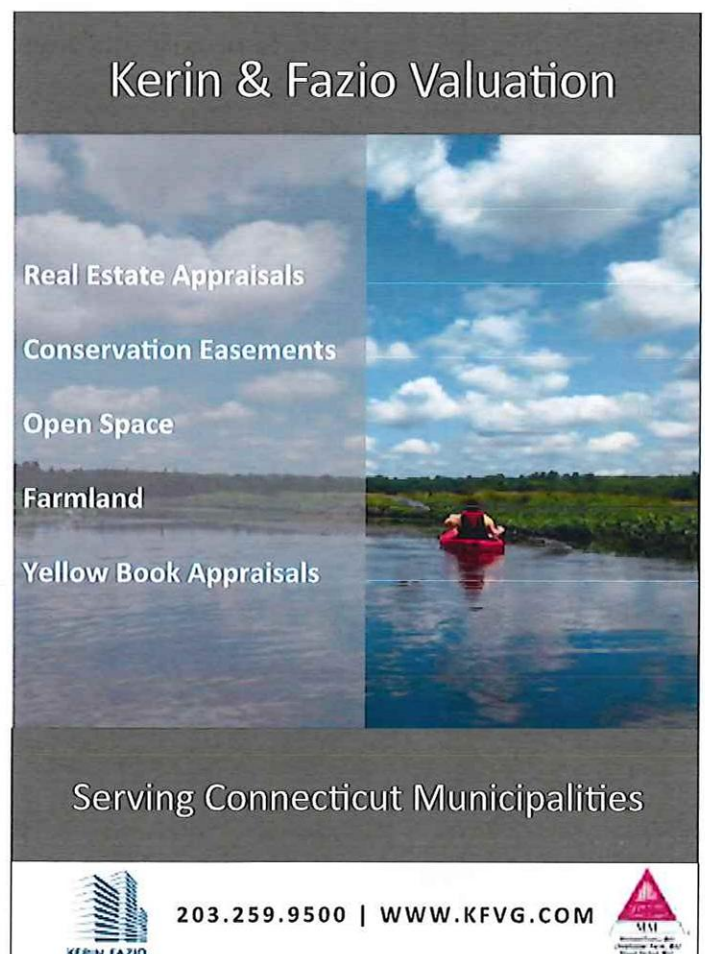
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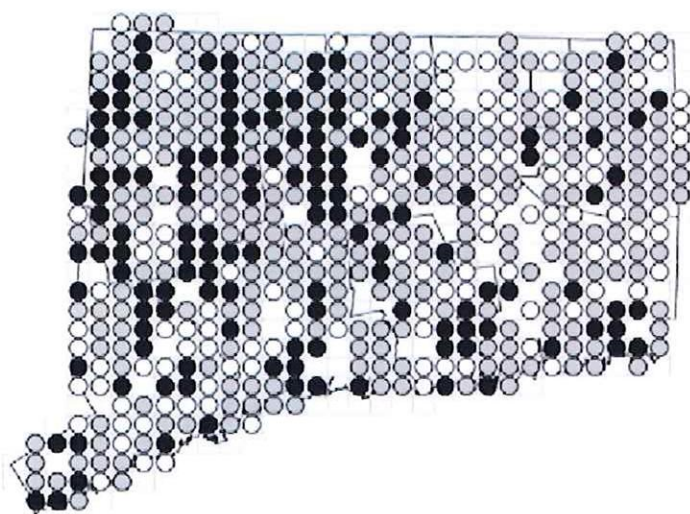
survey, continued from page 7

Declines of other species are more difficult to place on one single driver, but outright habitat loss and conversion certainly plays a role in the decline of many other species. The decline of species like chimney swifts (Figure 5) is likely a combination of habitat loss on both breeding and wintering areas, and a change in the abundance of insects due to increased pesticide applications.

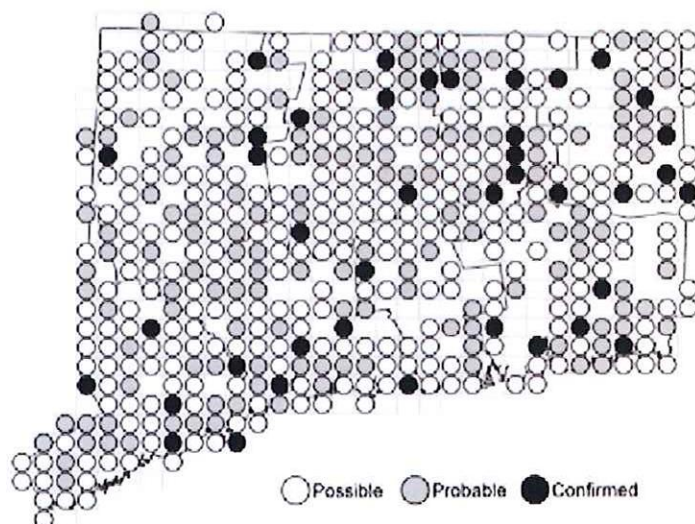


Figure 5. Chimney Swift *Chaetura pelagica*. Photo by Paul J. Fusco. The maps below show a decline in confirmed and probable breeding location observations between the 1982-1986 and the 2018-22 surveys.

1982-1986



2018-2022



Declines in some species, such as the belted kingfisher, may be due to a whole suite of factors that have slowly chipped away at their populations. Factors such as loss of habitat along waterways, contamination in prey fish, and invasive species may all be impacting species such as belted kingfishers (Figure 6).

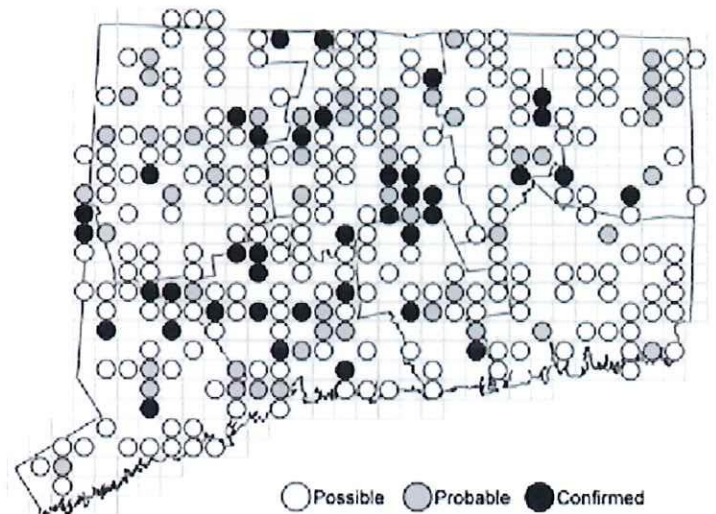
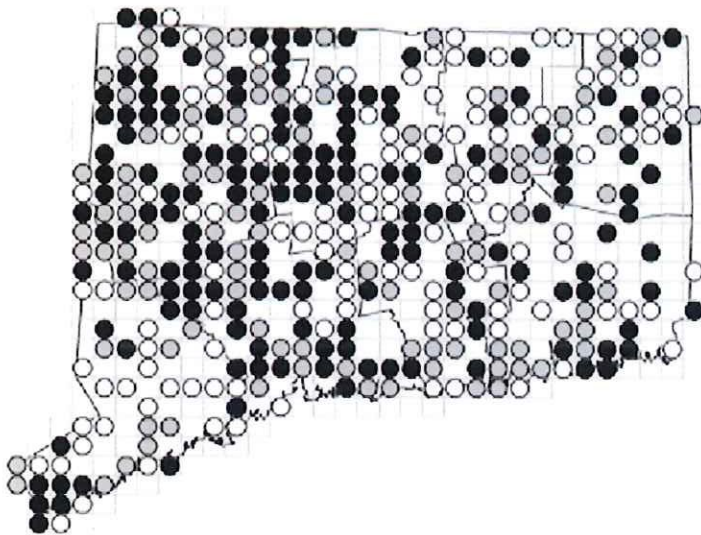


Figure 6. Belted Kingfisher *Megasceryle alcyon*. Photo by Paul J. Fusco. The maps below display a decline in confirmed, probable, and possible breeding location observations between the 1982-1986 and the 2018-22 surveys.

survey, continued on page 9

1982-1986

2018-2022



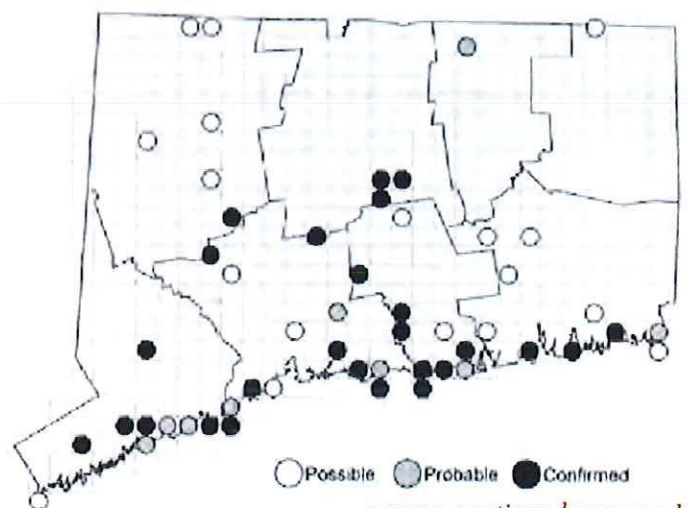
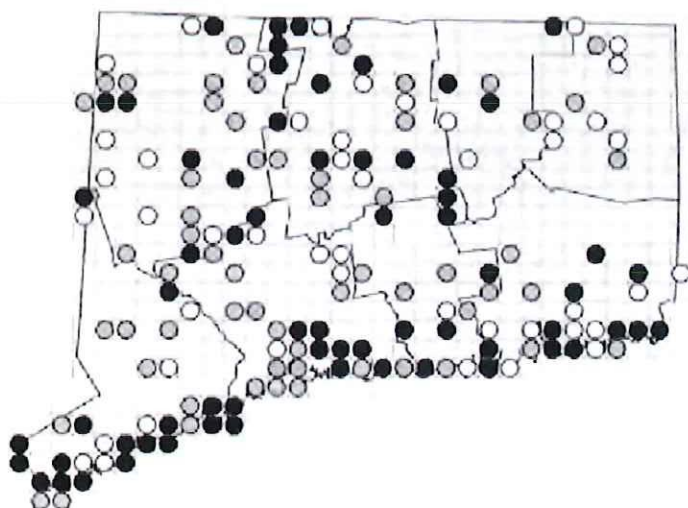
Declines in the breeding numbers of species such as the American black duck (Figure 7), are likely due to increased development and disturbance. Many of the wetlands that black ducks historically occupied are now ringed by development and taken over by more disturbance tolerant species such as Canada geese and mallards. Species, such as the American Bittern (Figure 8) have seen decades of decline associated with wetlands loss.



Figure 7. American black duck *Anas rubripes*. Photo by Paul J. Fusco. The maps below display a dramatic decline in confirmed, probable, and possible breeding location observations between the 1982-1986 and the 2018-22 surveys.

1982-1986

2018-2022

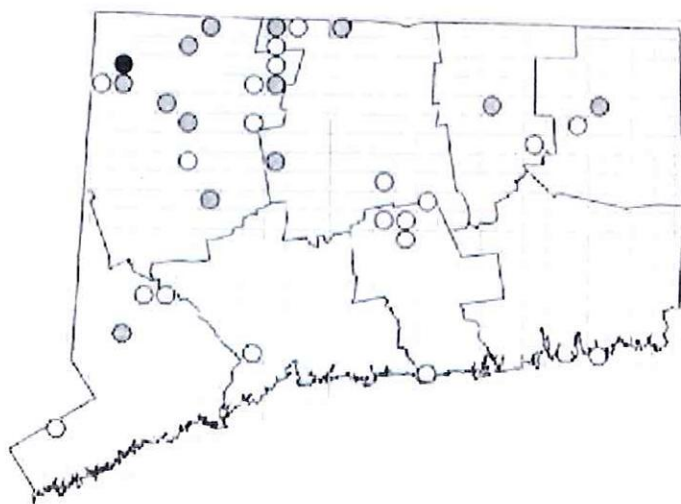


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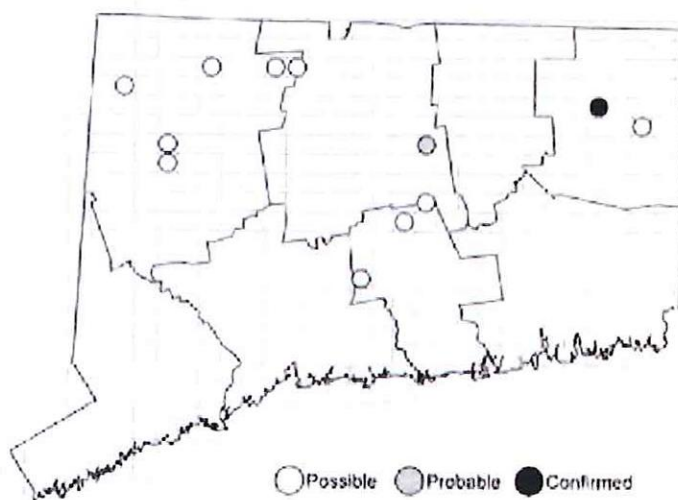


Figure 8. American Bittern *Botaurus lentiginosus*. Photo by Frank Mantlik. The maps below display a continued decline in the low number of confirmed, probable, and possible breeding location observations between the 1982-1986 and the 2018-22 surveys, below.

1982-1986



2018-2022



survey, continued on page 11

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Other factors, such as contaminants have, in the past, decimated species such as peregrine falcons (Figure 9), bald eagles (Figure 10) and osprey (Figure 11). Public awareness of the environmental impact of pesticide use grew, following the publication of Rachel Carson's book *Silent Spring* in 1962. Additional scientific studies documented how DDT exposure resulted in development of thin eggshells in raptors which drastically reduced their populations. The growing public outcry and action by the Environmental Defense Fund (EDF) and others led the US Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) to ban the use DDT in 1972. Several decades later raptor populations began to recover and these species in particular, have made incredible rebounds in Connecticut.



Figure 9. Peregrine Falcon *Falco peregrinus*. Photo by Paul J. Fusco. The maps on page 12 reveal several confirmed, probable, and possible breeding location observations during the 2018-22 surveys when no breeding sites were observed during the 1982-1986 surveys.

survey, continued on page 12

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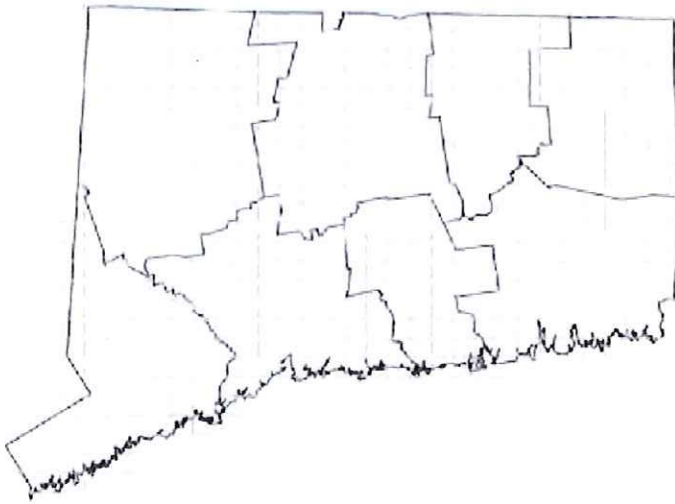
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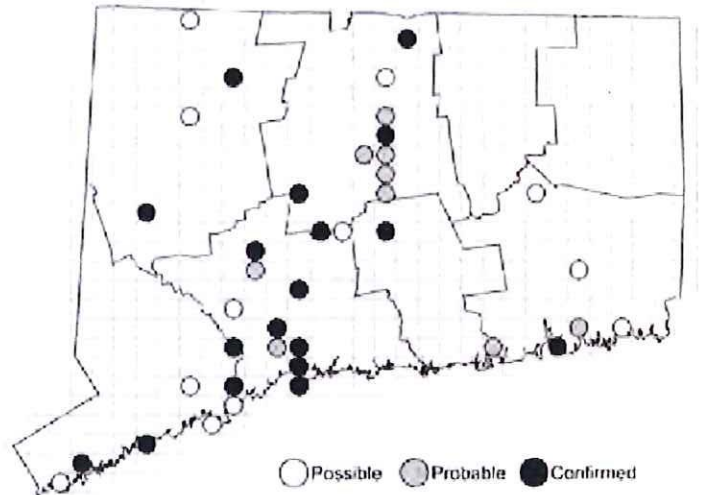
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1982-1986

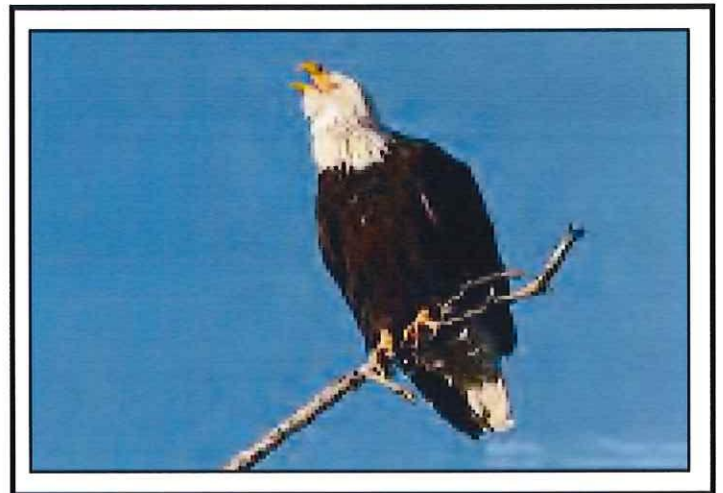


2018-2022

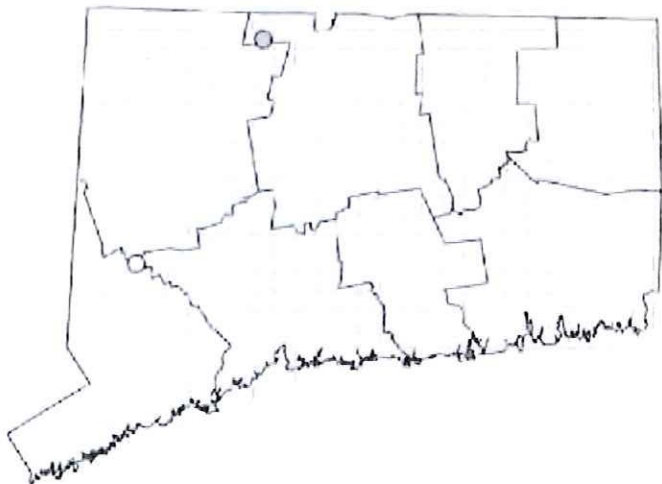


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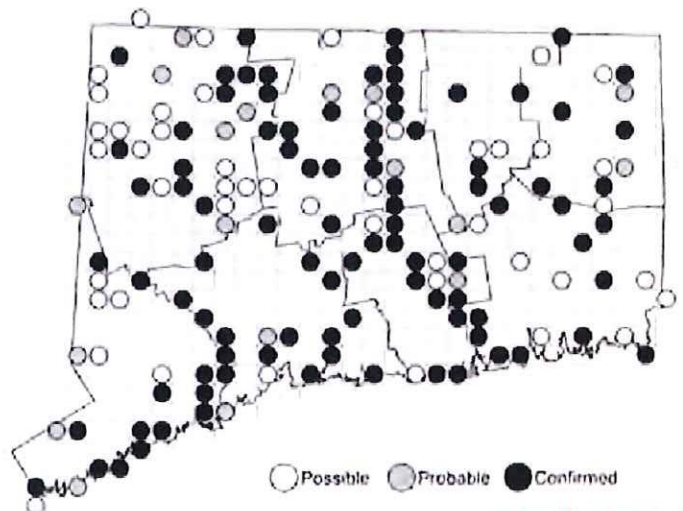
Figure 10 Bald Eagle *Haliaeetus leucocephalus*. Photo by Paul J. Fusco. The maps below now reveal many confirmed, probable, and possible breeding location observations during the 2018-22 surveys when only one probable site was observed during the 1982-1986 breeding surveys.



1982-1986



2018-2022



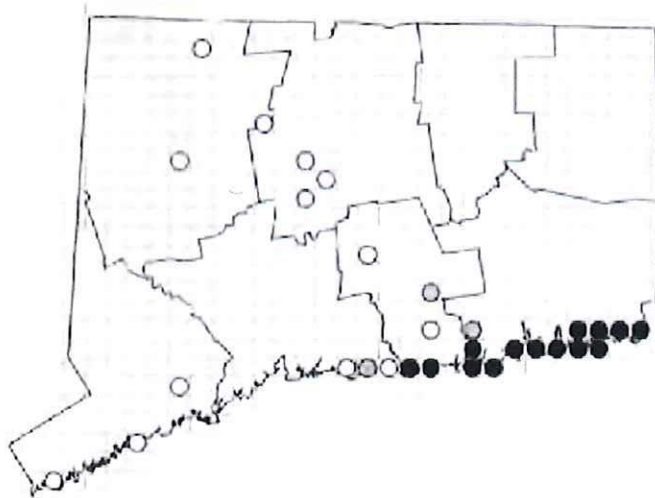
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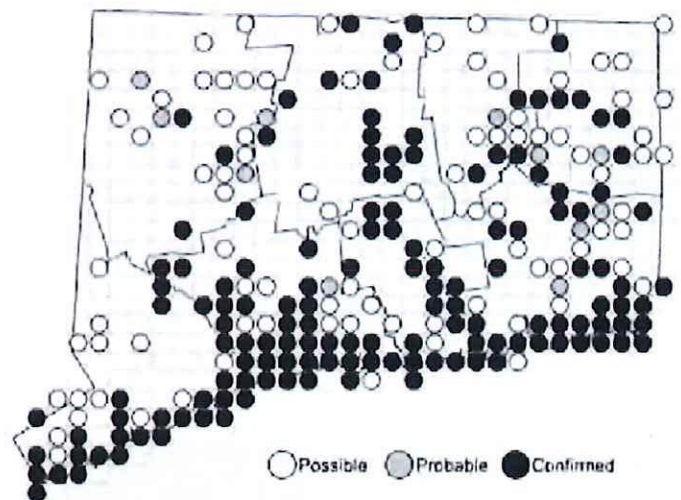


Figure 11 Osprey *Pandion haliaetus*. Photo by Paul J. Fusco. The maps below now reveal a dramatic increase in breeding location observations during the 2018-22 surveys compared with the 1982-86 surveys.

1982-1986



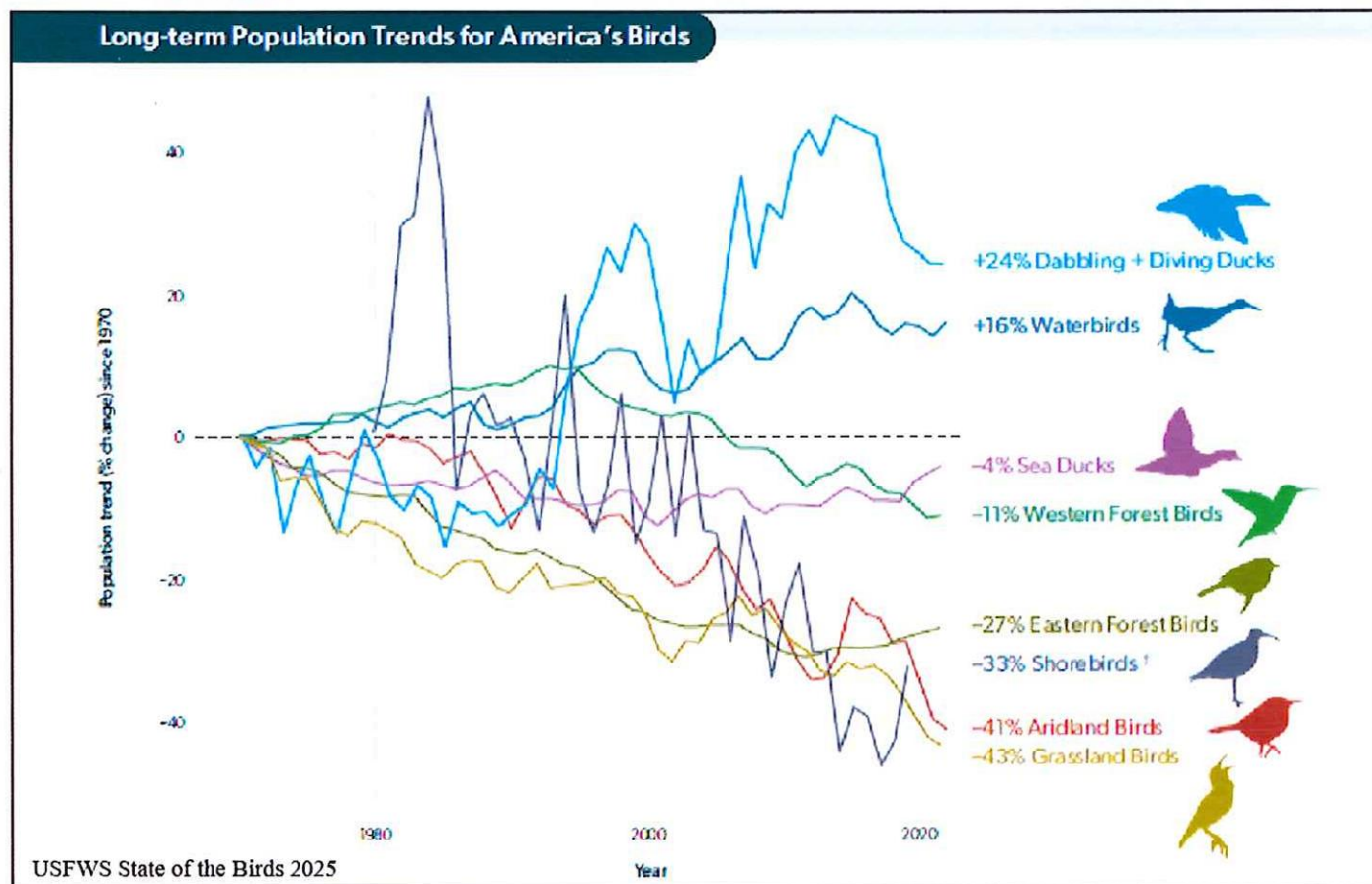
2018-2022



The wintering portion of the atlas broke new ground, as we had never had as comprehensive a picture of the wintering distributions of birds as this provided us. The value of this part of the atlas is to provide managers with priority areas of the state to concentrate habitat conservation actions, delineate critical winter habitats, and provide critical information for planning. As one might expect, wintering distributions center upon the coast and open water for many species. The urban and exurban environment provides reasonable habitat for some, whereas agricultural land is very important for others. Our forests are not as critical to birds during the winter as they are during the other seasons.

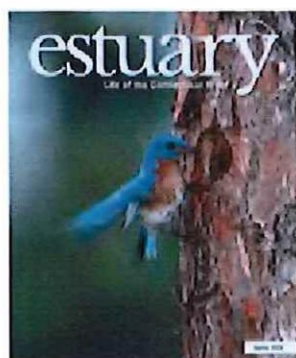
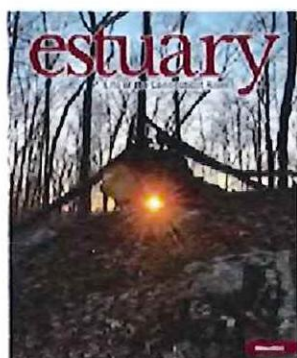
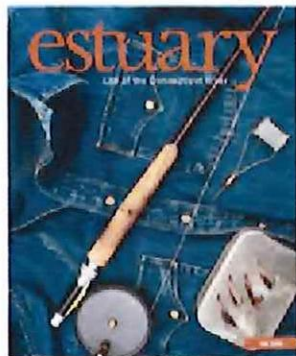
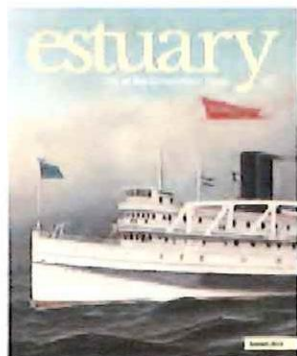
The results of this second Connecticut Bird Atlas paint a fairly grim picture of the state of most of our birds. This is not dissimilar from the overall trends that we see on the continental scale, many of our birds are not doing well. The illustration below prepared by the US Fish & Wildlife Service (Figure 12) shows these continental trends.

survey, continued on page 14



survey, continued on page 15

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survey, continued from page 14

It is very clear that wetlands-associated birds are faring much better than all other groups. The reason for this is also very clear. In the early 1980s, in the midst of plummeting duck populations and a protracted drought throughout the prairies of North America, an initiative to protect critical habitat for ducks was born, the North American Waterfowl Management Plan (NAWMP). Through this initiative literally billions of dollars have been raised and spent on protecting wetlands and associated uplands across the continent. The accomplishments of NAWMP are undeniable. Since 1990, all other groups of birds have been declining steeply, while wetland associated species are increasing.

The second Connecticut Bird Atlas shows similar general declining trends in our breeding species. It is also pretty clear that stable funding that can protect habitat and influence legislation, results in more birds. In the 1980s waterfowl hunters saw a problem and developed a solution. Now, in the mid 2020s, we find ourselves in a very similar position with many species and habitats.

A stable funding mechanism for habitat protection similar to NAWMP, exists in our state, the Connecticut Migratory Bird Conservation Stamp Program. Since 1993, this small program, primarily funded through hunters, has raised and spent over \$1,400,000 on acquiring and restoring over 3,900 acres of wetland habitat in the state. This contribution has certainly made a difference, particularly with locally breeding wetland species. A bigger stable funding mechanism, however, the Wildlife and Fisheries Restoration (WSFR) program, funded by hunters and anglers in the state, has had an even more profound impact on habitat protection, restoration and enhancement in the state. Since 2010, the hunter funded portion of this fund brings in approximately \$7,000,000 annually. A portion of this money is spent on habitat acquisition and restoration. Since 2010, over \$12,000,000 has been spent on 2,558 acres of upland habitat. As witnessed by the results of the atlas, however, this is not nearly enough to arrest the decline in many of our breeding birds.

Our call to action for the conservation community, and the second objective of the atlas project is to come together to develop a stable funding mechanism in our state that does not rely upon federal money, and that will enable the land trust community, local conservation commissions, the NGOs, and the state of Connecticut to invest in habitat protection and

restoration at the scale necessary to change the current population trajectory of many of our breeding birds. This accomplishment would be a truly generational milestone that would greatly enhance the natural habitats of Connecticut.

We have some ideas that we would like to share with you, please stay tuned and keep an open mind to ideas that may be outside of the traditional box. It will take all of us in the same frame of mind to craft a lasting funding mechanism so that we can leave a legacy of healthy bird populations for generations to come.

References:

State Geological and Natural History Survey of Connecticut, Bulletin 113. 1994. *The Atlas of Breeding Birds of Connecticut*. Edited by Louis Bevier; illustrated by Michael DiGiorgio; 461 pages., 184 maps, 190 illustrations.

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The Connecticut Bird Atlas, a joint project of the Connecticut Department of Energy and Environmental Protection Wildlife Division and the University of Connecticut, with additional funding from the Connecticut Ornithological Association, Connecticut Audubon Society, Audubon Connecticut, Great Hollow Nature Preserve and Ecological Research Center, the Community Foundation of Middlesex County, Hartford Audubon Society, Litchfield Hills Audubon, Menunkatuck Audubon Chapter, New Haven Bird Club, Potopaug Bird Club, and the Western Connecticut Bird Club. (in preparation), see: [Connecticut Bird Atlas | Chris S. Elphick](#)

US Committee of the North American Bird Conservation Initiative (NABCI) *State of the Birds 2025*. Released March 13, 2025 at the 90th annual North American Wildlife and Natural Resources Conference in Louisville, Kentucky. See: [State of the Birds 2025](#)

Editor's note: The CACIWC board thanks Min T. Huang, PhD, for preparing this article based on his presentation at our 2024 conference. We again extend our appreciation to Chis S. Elphick, PhD and the entire team at the University of Connecticut Department of Ecology & Evolutionary Biology for their Connecticut Bird Atlas database and website. We also acknowledge the hundreds of volunteers who submitted their observations to the survey including several members of our board! 🍄



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Register Now for the CIPWG 2026 Symposium!

The **Connecticut Invasive Plant Working Group (CIPWG)** has again organized a full day in-person program scheduled for **Wednesday, October 28, 2026**, from 9:00 AM-5:00 PM, at the UConn Student Union in Storrs, CT.

This year's theme is ***From Awareness to Action - Strengthening Our Response to Invasive Plants.*** The morning session will include a keynote presentation by Tom Zetterstrom, Housatonic Valley Association: "Land Trust Decision Model for Invasive Control in Severe Impact Areas" and a Panel Discussion: "Myths of Invasive Plant Management."

The afternoon breakout sessions are:

Group A (Concurrent):

- 1) **Identification and Management of Invasive Vines:** Dr. Bryan Connolly, ECSU; Pete Picone, CT DEEP
- 2) **Rugged Native Plants for Restoration of Managed Areas:** Frederick (Erik) C. Sechler, Jr., Native Plant Trust

3) **Invasive Aquatics: Updates on Hydrilla and Water Chestnut:** John Hall, Jonah Center for Earth and Art; Greg Bugbee, CAES

Group B (Concurrent):

- 4) **Special Topics in Invasive Plant Management:** Christian Allyn, Invasive Plant Solutions; Joshua Tracy, Regional Water Authority; Tim Mack, Hamden Land Conservation Trust
- 5) **Building Layers for Biodiversity with Native Plants:** Anna Fialkoff and Maggie Redfern, Connecticut College Arboretum
- 6) **Herbicide Management of Invasives: Law and How to Apply it:** Zach Donais, CT DEEP

CEU's for organizations and Pesticide Recertification Credits are available.

\$90 General Registration (in person attendance). \$80 Recording Only; Student Registration Available.

For additional information including how to register please see: cipwg.uconn.edu/2026-symposium. 🍀