

World Birdwatchers Compete at Montezuma Wetlands

By Jillian Liner

ARMED WITH field guides, binoculars, and spotting scopes, birdwatchers traveled from across New York and as far as Ireland to participate in the sixth annual Montezuma Muckrace held September 6-7, 2002.

The sixth annual Montezuma Muckrace had high temperatures, a high number of teams entered, and high winning team totals. Twenty-three teams with 3-4 members each endured the 90-degree weather on Saturday, September 7, scouting and scanning for waterfowl, shorebirds, wading birds, and songbirds. It is the highest number of participants since the competition's inception in 1997.

The 177 total species observed was one shy of the record 178 seen in 1999. Malar Stripe, an Ithaca-based

unaffiliated team, won the competition with a record-breaking 132 species.

"Compared to a lot of the other top notch Muckrace teams, our team was actually rather inexperienced...however all were active birders in the area this year, which in my mind is just as important," commented team member Pete Hosner. "We (also) focused on birding spots that tend to have a lot of birds, rather than finding a spot for each individual species the week before."

The second place team, Beasts of Birding, also from the Ithaca area, broke the previous record as well with 129 species. Third place went to the E & E Eagles from Buffalo sponsored by Ecology & Environment, Inc. who have consistently placed in the top three teams.



"Malar Stripe" an Ithaca-based unaffiliated team, won the competition with a record-breaking 132 species. Team members included (L to R) Mike Andersen, Jesse Ellis, Ryan Bakelaar, and Pete Hosner.

Jeff Wells, founder of the Muckrace, emceed the event. It is through the help of numerous sponsors who provide

prizes, food, and team entry fees, that this year's Muckrace raised \$2,700 for bird conservation.

BICKNELL'S THRUSH: Challenge in the High Peaks

By Guest writer, Margot Ernst
Audubon New York Trustee

THE CHALLENGE BEGAN after a casual conversation with Jillian Butler, Audubon New York's Important Bird Area coordinator, last spring. I had never heard of BirdLife's "Red List of Threatened Birds of the World," a Bicknell's Thrush, or any other thrush for that matter. Jillian described the Vermont Institute of Natural Science's (VINS) Mountain Birdwatch program, and I thought this would be an excellent way for me to participate in one of Audubon New York's main priorities - science based advocacy. Since I live part time at the Elk Lake Preserve in the Adirondack High Peaks, songbirds are all around me. I have since learned that this area is part of the core Bicknell's Thrush habitat in the United States. The Mountain Birdwatch proved to be one of the great adventures of my life.

I prepped myself by participating in a day-long training workshop with Dan Lambert (VINS' Conservation Biologist) and the Wildlife Conservation Society at the Adirondack Lodge in early May. There I learned that the survey would target five species: the Blackpoll Warbler, White-throated Sparrow, Winter Wren, Swainson's Thrush and, most elusive of all, the Bicknell's Thrush. The Bicknell's Thrush is one of the most rare, range-restricted breeding species found in the

northeast. VINS has been coordinating surveys of the Bicknell's through the Mountain Birdwatch program since 1999. To date, there are about 100 survey routes throughout the northeast, 31 of which are located in New York.

Documentation and stewardship of high-elevation habitats was our goal. The promise of solitude in a boreal habitat and a glimpse of some rare birds were compelling. When Dan mentioned that we might have to scale our peak three times and be on the summit to begin the quest at 4:30 am, I began to realize that I needed a support team and maybe a helicopter. It was then that I enlisted an excellent team committed to the Birdwatch, consisting of Jillian Liner and Mike Sheridan, the caretaker at Elk Lake Preserve.

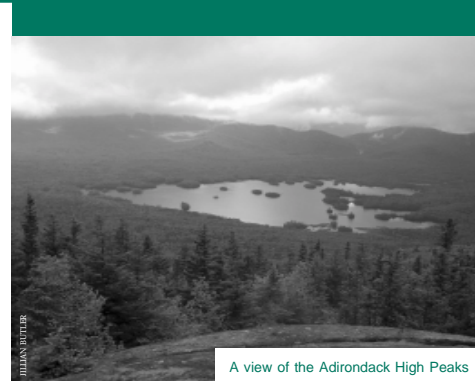
On June 17, Mike, Jillian and I set out at 2:30 am with our

headlamps blazing in a thick rain and steady run-off coursing down the trail. We reached the first false summit of Sunrise (3000 feet.) at 4:39 am and as we ascended to the true summit at 3614 feet we heard all of our targeted species in full song except for the Bicknell's. Following the monitoring protocol, on our descent we surveyed each point again with a playback tape. But as dawn advanced and the wind and light rain continued, we recorded no Bicknell's. Drenched and frustrated we had to call it a morning at 10 am since the Bicknell's only vocalizes at dawn and at dusk.

Clearly dusk was our last chance.

After we refueled on buckets of hot pasta primavera and strong tea we armed ourselves with a better playback device and set out once again for Sunrise Peak at 5:30 pm in cold, muddy boots. The sky was auspiciously clear as we reached the summit at 8:15 pm. Our audio player belted out the Bicknell's song across the montane forest. Down we went, playing the song every 250 meters at our designated survey points. By the third point, as the stars were just coming out and I had really lost hope, we heard the unmistakable retort of the Bicknell's. Not only did he call, sing, and make his odd wailing quip, but he also started dive-bombing us. We ducked his attack and got a great view of this rare and high-spirited creature. We were thrilled and I was ready to go home and celebrate as it was almost pitch black. Jillian and Mike, as stalwart scientists, reminded me that protocol included two more stops. We were rewarded again at the lower summit where we heard another Bicknell's in a drowsier mood. We descended by headlamp elated with our successful search and quiet with fatigue.

As fall approaches I think of the Bicknell's Thrush heading back to the Dominican Republic where in the last 30 years his winter forests have been reduced to eight percent of their historic extent. Conservationists believe that increased recreation, acid deposition, and loss of wintering habitat may all be threatening the Bicknell's population. From Slide Mountain in the Catskills to Mount Marcy in the Adirondacks, Audubon New York is working hard to address the problems of mountain species like the Bicknell's. Next year I plan to get my daughter on the quest and my grandchildren in a few years. When you sign on for the Mountain Birdwatch it is a long-term commitment, and I hope to enlist others in this worthwhile annual alpine adventure. The challenge is to conserve migratory songbirds in the Northeast for generations.



A view of the Adirondack High Peaks



Margot and Mike surveying for Bicknell's Thrush.