

## COA Annual Meeting

On Saturday, March 20, the Connecticut Ornithological Association held its 20<sup>th</sup> Annual Meeting, at Middlesex Community College in Middletown. Over 100 people attended the meeting, featuring a number of excellent speakers, highlighted by Dr. Robert Ridgely's talk on conservation efforts in Ecuador. The day's program began with introductory remarks by COA President Steve Oresman. Steve noted that COA is the only statewide birding group in Connecticut, publishes both *The Connecticut Warbler* and the *COA Bulletin*, is working with the State DEP on providing breeding records for certain rare species, is a source for scientific information on birds, and holds a number of birding workshops throughout the year. The first speaker of the day, David Spector, was introduced by COA Director Jerry Connolly.

Mr. Spector's talk, *Birders, Birdwatchers, and Ornithologists - Oh My!* was an entertaining look at the many ways in which we birders define ourselves. The earliest definition of ornithology, from the 1655 Oxford English Dictionary, was the study of bird song, from the Greek words *ornis* (bird) and *logos* (words). However, the word *birder* predates that, having appeared in written text as early as 1481. Elliot Coues, whose work

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## The Status of Least Terns in Connecticut: An Alternative View

By Dennis Varza

### Introduction

After reading COA's status report on the Least Tern (*Connecticut Warbler*, January 2004), I felt it necessary to present an alternative view. COA did a thorough job of presenting the recent literature and describing the problems faced by Least Terns in general. This report describes the history of the bird and nest sites in the state and the conservation program in place to protect them.

In the early 70's I did a study on Long Beach in Stratford for the Connecticut Audubon Society. It included banding, color banding, and color marking the birds. On January 10, 1985 the Piping Plover was listed as a federally-threatened species. Because Least Terns use the same nesting habitat and face the same problems, the protection program became the Piping Plover-Least Tern Recovery Project. The Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) Wildlife Division has been responsible for the management of the project since the beginning. I was responsible for the initial setting up of the program.

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## Carolina Wren (*Thryothorus ludovicianus*)

### Attempting to Survive the Harsh Inland Connecticut Winters

By Paul Carrier

The Carolina Wren has been surviving here in CT along the coast for most of the early 1900's, but has just recently moved northward to inland CT as a permanent resident. It is written they survive here if the winters are mild, but lose out when a severe, deep snowy winter arrives.

Even during harsh snowy winters, this large resident wren still seems to survive at the coast and within the CT river valley, though in somewhat reduced numbers.

However, in the Northern parts of the State, this fairly new resident still seems to have a hard time holding on in exceptionally hard, snowy winters. But despite this, some do survive; Why is this so?

Many books describe how this wren prefers skulking around under tangles and brush, searching out every nook and cranny looking for its favorite food, insects and spiders. In fact, animal prey accounts for 95% of the Carolina Wrens diet, with some vegetable matter eaten limitedly, such as fruit pulp, weed seeds and acorns.

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formed much of the basis for the first editions of the American Ornithologists' Union checklist, was noted for writing 40,000 definitions relating to birds for The Century Dictionary. Mr. Spector referenced birds from sources as diverse as natural history writer John Burroughs to the comic strip Pogo. Ultimately, Mr. Spector thought the most appropriate definition came from Joseph Hike in 1943, who said "birding is anything you care to make it."

Dr. Robert Ridgely was the next speaker, and he not only inspired the crowd with tales and photographs of South American birds, but with his efforts to protect land through the newly formed Jocotoco Foundation. In November, 1997, while travelling in southeast Ecuador, at the base of the Andes mountains, Dr. Ridgely was attempting to create tape recordings of the local bird life. A strange call came from the underbrush, and while it was unrecognizable to members of the group, it was presumed to be a variation on a call from a more common bird. The loud coo, repeated over and over, was later heard a second time when, in one heart-stopping moment, "out came crashing this big bird." Everyone in the group, all experienced birders, instantaneously knew this was a bird never before seen or described by science.

The bird's mate also appeared and both were observed for nearly 45 minutes. Copious notes were taken, knowing verification of the bird would be needed. Dr. Ridgely noted dryly that he did have a camera, "which was 1 1/2 hours away, back at the hotel." Photos were subsequently obtained, though the newly described bird did manage to escape a photographic enclosure after having been captured by mist nets. The bird, the Jocotoco Antpitta, was named after its locally given name, where villagers had known the mysterious bird for many years.

However, the identification and scientific naming of the Jocotoco Antpitta was not the conclusion of the story. Dr. Ridgely recognized the need to protect this bird from deforestation, and this led to the formation of the Jocotoco Foundation in 1998. Through the purchase of land from local farmers, several hundred acres were initially protected. This effort has expanded and there are now six

reserves in Ecuador protecting over 15,000 acres. One of the greatest outreach tools for the Foundation has been the placement of hummingbird feeders at its research stations. Local citizens, who had never really observed the surrounding bird life, have been mesmerized, and are now gaining a greater appreciation for the natural resources where they live and work.

The morning concluded with the presentation of the Mabel Osgood Wright award to Jay Kaplan. Through his work at the Roaring Brook Nature Center, Jay has taught thousands of children about nature through birds, and these are the youngsters who will grow into tomorrow's birders and environmental leaders. Jay has been active with COA (and is a past President), Hartford Audubon, and the Canton Conservation Commission and Land Trust. More information on this year's presentation of the Mabel Osgood Wright award can be found in COA's most recent Connecticut Warbler. Congratulations Jay on a well-deserved award!

After lunch, the afternoon began with a talk by Jenny Dickson of the Connecticut Department of Environmental Protection. Ms. Dickson reviewed current planning efforts of the DEP as it prepares a new State Wildlife Conservation Plan. This is being done in conjunction with other state plans across the country, and is designed to ensure conservation of the species of greatest need, and to keep common species common. Specific habitats are also being addressed, with traprock ridges, coastal marshes and beaches, and headwaters and streams identified as important natural communities. Through its planning, the DEP will be eligible to receive federal funding for conservation of wildlife, fisheries and forests through the State Wildlife Grant program of the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service. The DEP has been in touch with many partner groups as part of this effort and is to be commended in putting together a new, statewide plan for wildlife.

Bill Evans was the next speaker, and Mr. Evans spoke on *Nocturnal Flight Calls of Migratory Birds - The New Century Ahead*. In the Spring of 1985, when he was camping in Minnesota and became fascinated by the calls of 100 or more Black-billed Cuckoos flying in the darkness

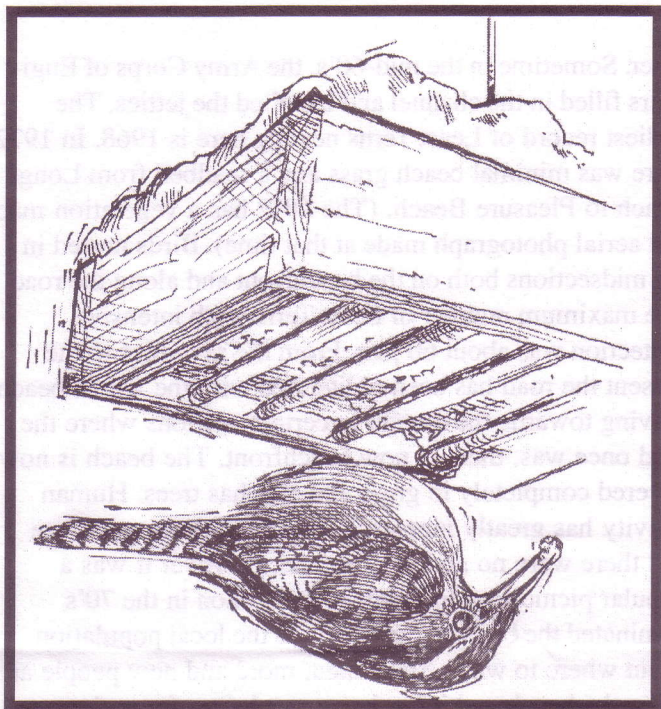
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## Carolina Wren (*Thryothorus ludovicianus*)

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During the winter, its searching for animal food becomes even more difficult. Finding dormant insects and their eggs are always a possibility, but to get them, it takes much more time and effort. This energy needed to find less abundant and available food takes its toll on the wrens' calorie reserves, a dangerous situation when daylight hours are less, and the night temperatures are often cold, sometimes extremely so.

It appears this wren has recently begun to take advantage of a food source that other species have discovered many years ago to survive the harsh Northern winters. These other species, namely the Northern Cardinal, Tufted Titmouse and to a lesser degree, the Red-bellied Woodpecker, have discovered bird feeders. Without feeders, these more traditionally southern birds might never have survived the harsh northern winters.

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overhead, Mr. Evans decided to record night-time calls for the sake of history. The talk began with examples of such calls, ranging from the "easy" (Canada Goose) and "medium" (Brant, Long-tailed Duck) to "harder" (Upland Sandpiper) and "difficult" (Caspian Tern). Clearly, learning nocturnal flight calls represents a new frontier in birding.

In 1994, Mr. Evans joined the Cornell University Bio-acoustics research program, and has since made a cd of 211 passerine flight calls. Beyond the academic pursuit of recording nocturnal calls, the data has also been used for conservation purposes. The work of Mr. Evans has been used by the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service and others to assess the potential effects of wind farms on migrating birds. And while the calls of some species are similar to that of others, geographic location can be an important factor in identification - Bobolinks recorded over Florida

during Spring migration sound similar to Dickcissels recorded over Texas. At [www.oldbird.org](http://www.oldbird.org), you can learn more about monitoring of nocturnal flight calls and how to set up your own recording apparatus.

The final presentation of the day, Terns in Connecticut, was given by COA Director Bruce Stevenson and Jeff Spendelow, a research biologist with the U.S. Geological Survey at its Patuxent Research Center in Maryland. Mr. Stevenson discussed the recent Least Tern report produced by the COA (Connecticut Warbler, January 2004), highlighting the decline of this bird's population in Connecticut with management recommendations for improving breeding success. Limiting access to nesting colonies is essential, as disruption of breeding least terns by predators (including dogs) is a major factor in declining nest success. In addition to excluding predators, education programs for the public and improved signage and outreach materials would be helpful.



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## The Status of Least Terns in Connecticut: An Alternative View

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### **Least Tern Biology**

Least Terns prefer nesting on sandy beaches with minimal vegetation and feed in marshes and close to the coast. Compared to offshore Islands, nest sites are more abundant, smaller in size, and have a greater predation risk. Due to the opposing relationships of storms and succession, the nesting habitat is small in any one area and variable from year to year. This habitat is preferred because it reduces predation. The birds rely on observing predators at a distance and distracting them from finding camouflaged eggs. Their scattered nesting prevents many nests from being located at one time.

Least Terns respond to the variability of nest sites by having a number of nesting sites and moving from site to site as conditions warrant. Therefore any one site may fluctuate from year to year but the population may remain constant. In addition to local fluctuations, there may be a general regional fluctuation as a consequence of major storms such as hurricanes and nor'easters.

In years when nesting sites are of high quality, one would expect high reproductive rates, and in periods of declining site quality lower reproductive rates. The species is adapted to this situation by being long-lived.

### **Banding**

Banding results indicate that the birds of Long Island Sound make up one population. Birds banded in Connecticut were regularly found on Long Island and vice versa. Sand beaches are rare in Long Island Sound and are more common in the west than the east. The major sites include Eaton's Neck and Port Jefferson in Long Island, the mouth of the Housatonic River, Sandy Point, and the mouth of the Connecticut River in Connecticut. Other sites in the state contain few birds and are more transitory. The DEP has a complete list of sites and their use.

The mouth of the Housatonic River had traditionally been the most frequently used nesting area. In the early 60's Long Beach was separate from Pleasure Beach and the channel had to be waded at low tide to go from one to the

other. Sometime in the mid-60's, the Army Corps of Engineers filled in the channel and installed the jetties. The earliest record of Least Terns nesting here is 1968. In 1972 there was minimal beach grass and a roadbed from Long Beach to Pleasure Beach. (The DEP has a vegetation map and aerial photograph made at that time). Birds nested in the midsections both on the beachfront and along the road. The maximum number of Least Terns with intensive protection was about 60 pair. From the seventies to the present the road has been obliterated with the whole beach moving towards the marsh. In certain sections where the road once was, there is now beachfront. The beach is now covered completely in grass and also has trees. Human activity has greatly increased. Beach walkers were rare and there were no nude sunbathers, however it was a popular picnic area for boaters. Protection in the 70's eliminated the boaters and educated the local population about where to walk. Since then, more and new people are using the beach and it has become a haven for nude sunbathers. In the early 90's the bridge to Pleasure Beach was destroyed. This caused two problems; it increased foot traffic from Long Beach by the cottage residents, and caused a part of the (tern) population to move to Pleasure Beach to nest. The Pleasure Beach site was better for the birds, but they became spread out making protection more difficult. In 1997 I counted people walking down the beach on weekends during the breeding season. Birds were being flushed from the nest on average of every 20 mm.

Milford Point was never used very much by Least Terns. In the 70's a few pair nested on the beach along the riverside of the point. The sand bar at the time was small and frequently was covered by water. In the 80's the sand bar grew to support some nesting birds. In the 90's the point was purchased and given federal protection by the Fish and Wildlife Service. In an effort to enhance the area for Piping Plovers and Least Terns, they added fill and graded the point. Birds used the fill site for several years until vegetation grew in. The sand bar has also continued to grow to the point where it is now connected to the mainland. This increased the foot traffic to the birds nesting there.

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Sandy Pt. wasn't very much used until the early 80's when a storm deposited large amounts of sand and several hundred pair started nesting at the north end of the point. It became one of the largest colonies on the east coast. Over time the vegetation has increased and the bar has been eroding away. During the period of peak usage, Fred Sibley and I laid out 4x4m grid with metal pipes. A walk along the beach today will find metal pipes standing below the tide line. Indicating former nesting areas. Conversely active protections and fencing has made the people using the area accept the presence of the birds so there are fewer human disturbances.

### **Causes of Population Fluctuations.**

The heart of COA's report is the observed decline in the terns from 1986 to the present. On the surface it looks alarming but further investigation indicates it may not be so. The underlying assumption of the report is that the abundance in the mid-80's is normal for the state. The population at Sandy Pt. is an order of magnitude greater than any other site. Therefore what happened there has pretty much driven the analysis, when in fact Sandy Pt. was an anomaly with a population size that could not be sustained. The decline was due mainly to a combination of succession and erosion since it has been one of the most protected sites. I feel that the birds are currently on the low side of the normal range of variation, which is a cause for concern but not alarm.

Overall the decline in the state can be attributed to the lack of any major storm event to recondition the beaches in the past 10 years. Human activity certainly has its affect on nesting, but the birds are more resilient than people realize. The fact that birds still use Long Beach is proof of that. When I was communicating with people in other parts of the country they were continually amazed at the amount of disturbances the birds sustain and still thrived.

I have found predation to be sporadic and local. No two sites are the same and no site is the same from year to year. One year it's rats on Long Beach and another herons at Sandy Pt. Identifying predation and its cause takes a lot of continuous observation. Also, if egg loss occurs before

July birds will readily re-nest to the point where one pair produced three clutches. They will also re-nest if young are missing at an early age.

The key fact to consider is that the average age of a Least Tern is about 10 years. To sustain a population, one out of 10 young hatched needs to make it to maturity. Therefore a maximum of about 20 years of continuous nesting failure will cause a critical problem. Since there is no continuous nesting failure one could double the number to about 40 years.

### **Management**

Populations fluctuate; there is no equilibrium number and no carrying capacity. Some years the populations will be large and others small with no interference by humans. The concern is that when the population is small the number of nest sites used is small and the sites used only during peak times get converted to other uses and are no longer available for nesting. If nesting sites are protected and remain available even in low periods, the population will eventually rebound.

If we can hold the line on human activity the population will naturally rebound. The only sure way to protect the birds is to have one person at each site every day. It takes only one person when backs are turned to destroy a whole colony. Fencing is helpful but needs regular maintenance. A broken and dilapidated fence signals a lack of commitment and its unimportance.

Currently the DEP hires one person yearly assisted by volunteers from the Fish and Wildlife Service, Connecticut Audubon Society and the Nature Conservancy to protect the terns and Piping Plovers.

COA makes five recommendations for the management of Least Terns. Some of them have already been implemented, some of them are impractical, and some of them are unnecessary.

In Immediate Action, recommendations include fencing all

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sites, eliminating human activity, predator removal, education and contact with other states for suggestions. The DEP already has a program of signs, education and volunteer development. It is also in contact with the other states in the area and the federal government. Coastal sites are next to impossible to keep people away. There is the problem of access below the mean high tide line. Plus, people feel they have a traditional right of use. Pets are already banned from the beaches. The use of fences is dependent upon the geography of the site. They need regular inspection and maintenance. Fences also work to the detriment of the colony in the long term by stabilizing sand encouraging the encroachment of grass and eliminating grass destruction due to foot traffic. Predation is difficult to document and eliminate. Usually once it is identified it is too late.

Longer Term Actions include habitat improvement and creation, and more protection. Habitat manipulation is fraught with many pitfalls. All habitat manipulations I have observed and practiced work for only one season, two at most. Beaches are shifting habitats and the plants are adapted to quick vegetative colonization. The raking of beaches or the deposition of fill encourages colonization. The removal of vegetation is contrary to accepted beach management practices where grass is planted to stabilize beaches. The adding and removal of fill is under many state and federal regulations requiring a lot of paperwork, impact statements and meetings.

Improving protection in particular and management in general requires a lot more money and manpower than currently allotted. The use of volunteers takes about as much work as hiring someone. They need to be trained and continually motivated. New people need to be continually recruited.

Additional analysis of key nesting sites is suggested. All the sites have been under observation since 1985. With scarce resources, the most productive sites have received the most attention. The idiosyncratic nature of each site is well known, additional analysis is not needed.

A Least Tern Management Group is suggested to develop a long term and site-by-site management plans to restore the

species in the state. This would be useful if the species was in crisis. I feel that there is no crisis just normal fluctuations. There is a management plan in place to guard against a crisis. Any group formed should be to support and supplement the DEP in terms of manpower and financing.

Formal scientific studies are suggested to get more information on management practices, predation, and other environmental factors. After 30 years of working with the terns, I feel that most of the information required for management is known. Other environmental factors such as quantity and contamination of food supply need to be addressed on a larger scale than Connecticut since birds use the whole of Long Island Sound and sites outside the Sound are needed as a control.

### Conclusion

The declining Least Tern population in Connecticut is likely the result of habitat degradation due to the lack of storms to recondition nest sites. Human activity is likely responsible for suppressing reproductive success making recovery more difficult. Predation is a transitory effect to which the birds are adapted.

The observed decline is likely part of a natural population fluctuation. Provided human activities are controlled, the population will rebound when environmental condition becomes favorable again. The fact that the birds of Connecticut are a part of a larger Long Island Sound population means that a decline on a very large scale is necessary to eliminate the species from the state. The best way people may improve the presence of Least Terns is to volunteer for the DEP's Protection Program and be extra eyes and ears.

**The Newsletter of the Connecticut Ornithological Association is published quarterly in February, May, September, and December. Please submit materials for the next issue by August 15, 2004 to Manny and Teri Merisotis at [manny@merisotis.com](mailto:manny@merisotis.com) or at 93 Ripley Hill Rd., Coventry, CT 06238**



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## Carolina Wren (*Thryothorus ludovicianus*)

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Bird feeder offerings can sometimes mean the difference between death and survival, especially for birds dependent on animal foods. Carolina Wrens do seem to be picky though, preferring suet, but occasionally consuming some seeds, corn, and fruit.

When the snows become deep, and cover many of their sources for food searching, this wren has again found a man made source to exploit.

With the ever expanding human population happening just about everywhere, especially in traditionally sparse areas, has come more homes. With these homes have come many more bird feeders. But to this wren, who prefers to find its food on or near the ground, feeders are not always the preferred source to search. Instead, the many snowless areas caused by human habitation have become the areas of choice.

Searching snowless covered areas such as under decks, wood piles, parked campers, and raised sheds afford this wren many crevices and nooks to find dormant insects and spider eggs. Even vertical areas such as roof eaves, light fixtures and under picnic benches all become potential hiding places for food.

It has taken several generations for this wren to adapt to this new source for finding food, but they are beginning to show some success at doing it. The same was true with its other southern relatives, but they too have succeeded at evolving into a new niche for survival.

Perhaps human expansion is not all bad when it comes to wildlife survival. Many species decline, but a few do adapt. Of the few that do, the Carolina Wren is now among them.

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