



# Winging It

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## Birding the Boreal

BY JEFF WELLS

Remember the story in Kenn Kaufman's *Kingbird Highway* of the time he watched tens of thousands of Yellow-rumped Warblers descend from the sky on the Outer Banks of North Carolina? You can thank North America's Boreal Forest region for experiences like that. That's because over 60 million Yellow-rumped Warblers are estimated to breed in the boreal. Last year's massive influx of Great Gray Owls and Northern Hawk Owls into an area stretching from Minnesota to southern Quebec, the largest in North American ornithological history and totaling thousands of birds, was also made possible by the boreal. So were the 80,000 Surf Scoters counted wintering in San Francisco Bay, the 10,000 Bonaparte's Gulls at Niagara, and the 54 Northern Shrikes counted on the Padilla Bay Christmas Bird Count in the winter of 1995-96.

The Boreal Forest region as defined by many ecologists encompasses over 1.5 billion acres stretching from interior Alaska across Canada to Newfoundland. This region contains the largest intact forest ecosystems left in North America and 25 percent of the world's untouched forest. The southern half of the region is an area of vast forests of varying composition, while the northern half is characterized by stunted trees and scrubby vegetation typically termed "taiga."

Within the boreal's forested matrix there are 1.5 million lakes and ponds, endless rivers and streams, who-knows-how-many bogs and alder thickets, plus aspen woodlands and meadows, alpine and marine shore tundra, and countless other habitat types.

The abundance of birdlife from the boreal represents to modern birders what the Passenger Pigeon and Eskimo Curlew represented to the market hunters of the late 1800s and early 1900s: a seemingly infinite and inexhaustible supply of resources. A century ago, the hunters took the abundance of these birds for granted; occasional cries of alarm over the excessive and destructive harvests were met with disdain or apathy. After all, market hunting provided jobs for people in rural communities and cheap food for the major cities. But as we know now, the harvest of these species was of long-term benefit to no one: all too soon, the birds that had provided those jobs and that cheap food were gone.

Today, does anyone really think that boreal birds like Ruby-crowned Kinglets or Palm Warblers or Yellow-bellied Sapsuckers or Buffleheads or Common Mergansers could ever stop being common?

### *The "Boreals"*

By now, you may have realized that my concept of what constitutes a boreal bird is pretty different from yours. When we birders talk about looking for "boreals," we think of Black-backed Woodpeckers, Gray Jays, Boreal Chickadees,

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## North America's Boreal Region



The Boreal Forest of North America. Map © Global Forest Watch Canada.

Spruce Grouse. And for U.S. birders, our next thought is of Maine, northern New York, Minnesota, or the upper elevations of the Rockies. But just as the Rio Grand Valley represents only the very tip of the extensive neotropical distribution of species like Hooked-billed Kite, Pauraque, Ringed Kingfisher, Clay-colored Robin, or Tropical Parula, so too do the northern tier of states and the high elevations of the Rockies represent just the southernmost extent of the vastly larger ranges occupied by typical “boreal” birds in Canada and Alaska.

Of course, the Boreal Forest region does support the bulk of the total populations of birds that most of us have grown up thinking of as boreal. Over 80 percent of the populations of Black-backed Woodpecker, Gray Jay, Boreal Chickadee, and Spruce Grouse are estimated to breed in the boreal. But the boreal also hosts more than 80 percent of some other birds that you might not so readily describe as boreal, species such as Surf Scoter, Bufflehead, Common Goldeneye, Red-necked Grebe, Solitary Sandpiper, Short-billed Dowitcher, Bonaparte’s Gull, Alder Flycatcher, Tennessee Warbler, White-throated Sparrow, Dark-eyed Junco,

and Rusty Blackbird. In fact, 50 percent or more of the total North American breeding populations of no fewer than 96 species breed within the Boreal Forest region.

A recent surge in research on waterfowl breeding in the boreal has begun to open a window into where some of these birds spend the winter. Satellite tags placed on Surf Scoters wintering in San Francisco Bay have tracked birds to breeding areas in Alaska, Yukon, and the Northwest Territories, while Black and Surf Scoters that winter on Chesapeake Bay have been traced back to breeding areas in Quebec and Manitoba. Satellite tracking has also shown that Harlequin Ducks wintering in the northeastern U.S. originate from breeding areas in Quebec, Labrador, Newfoundland, and New Brunswick. Lesser Scaup wintering on the Great Lakes have now been tracked to breeding areas in Saskatchewan, Manitoba, and Ontario.

An estimated one to three billion birds migrate to and from the boreal every spring and every fall. Perhaps as many as a third of those birds spend their winter in the U.S., providing backyard bird-feeding enthusiasts with flocks of White-throated Sparrows,

Golden-crowned Sparrows, and Dark-eyed Junco—and ensuring that the phrase “just another Yellow-rump” still graces the field conversation of birders everywhere. Another two billion boreal birds continue south to winter in Mexico, Central America, the Caribbean, and South America. In the Greater Antilles, Cape May Warblers become one of the most ubiquitous winter birds when the estimated 3.2 million birds that make up the entire global population of this species descend in fall from the boreal. In the lowland forests of eastern Ecuador, Black-poll Warblers become one of the most frequently encountered birds when the 21 million members of that species arrive in South America. Half of the “chinking” Northern Waterthrushes, an estimated 6.5 million birds, that can be heard in steamy mangrove swamps from Mexico and the Caribbean south to northern South America have come from the boreal.

### Countering the Threat

The Boreal Forest region, that great bird nursery that we take so much for granted, is about to see some major changes. Less than ten percent of Canada’s boreal region is protected, and industrial development is rapidly creeping north. Even now there are plans underway to build an 800-mile gas pipeline through the pristine wilderness of the Mackenzie Valley to fuel development of the Alberta Oil Sands. These deposits underlie approximately 35 million acres in northeastern Alberta, and are estimated to hold oil reserves second only to those of Saudi Arabia. An analysis in 2006 by Global Forest Watch Canada estimated that oil and gas extraction activities already affected 114 million acres throughout Canada’s boreal region.

Oil and gas development is only one of many threats on the horizon that may change the boreal forever. Since 1975, over 60 million acres of forest has been logged in Canada, and in recent years the annual harvest rate has been estimated at 2.5 million acres. More than 30 percent of the entire boreal region and most of the commercially viable forests of the southern boreal have been allocated to forestry companies; some leases to logging companies cover areas larger than the entire state of New York. Large hydropower projects developed in the 1970s and 1980s have flooded massive areas, especially in eastern parts of the region: for example, five reservoirs in the La Grande River region of central Quebec flooded 2.8 million acres of terrestrial habitat.



Black-and-white Warbler.  
Photo © John Kormendy.



Lesser Yellowlegs. Photo © Ducks Unlimited Canada.

Serious as these threats are, the Boreal Forest of North America still has some of the world’s largest blocks of relatively pristine habitat. In fact, over 60 percent of boreal forest habitat remains in blocks of at least 120,000 acres. Recognizing one of the last great conservation opportunities of our generation, a coalition of non-profit organizations, First Nations, and industry representatives has put forth a plan for the Canadian boreal forest, the Boreal Conservation Framework. Two of the Framework’s key recommendations are to increase protected areas to cover 50 percent of the region, and to put sustainable-development practices into place for the remaining 650 million acres, which would remain open to industrial development.

Birders can play an important role here. The industrial development of the boreal forest is driven largely by the American desire for cheap energy, paper, wood, and other resources; most people don’t know that the U.S. gets more oil and gas from Canada than from any other country, including Saudi Arabia. Most of the logging in the Canadian Boreal is also for the U.S. market, with huge amounts of virgin forest being cut down to provide paper for quickly discarded products like mail-order catalogs, tissues, and paper towels.

We’re right to point our fingers at the commercial market hunters who drove the Passenger Pigeon and the Eskimo Curlew to extinction, or the logging companies that made packing crates out of the trees of the Singer Tract. But are things so different today? Those of us in the U.S. benefit from the unsustainable development of the very place that produces the abundance of birds that we expect to see again each

spring and fall. Fortunately, though, there are many ways that birders can help to ensure the long-term conservation of the boreal. Start by making sure that all the paper products you buy are made from recycled material. Participate in letter-writing campaigns to governments and corporations to urge them to adopt policies that are sustainable. Whatever you do, just get involved for the sake of your favorite boreal bird. Visit the Boreal Songbird Initiative website at [www.borealbirds.org](http://www.borealbirds.org) to find out about more ways to participate in one of the last great conservation opportunities of our generation.

*A leading bird expert and conservation biologist, Dr. Jeff Wells is the Senior Scientist for the Boreal Songbird Initiative.*