

Important Bird Areas Program

Bird Blitz 2009: Allegany and Garrett County Grasslands

The George's Creek coal basin is located between Dan's Mountain in Allegany County and Big Savage Mountain in Garrett County and stretches south from the Mason-Dixon Line to Luke, Maryland. This area has been heavily mined since the 1820s, but as a result of the 1977 Surface Mining Control and Reclamation act, numerous mined sites along the Allegany/Garrett County line have been reclaimed as grasslands. Together with other agricultural fields, some of which participate in the Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program (CREP), these reclaimed surface mines form a complex of grasslands with adjacent shrubland and early successional habitat in an otherwise heavily forested landscape. The majority of sites within this grassland complex were surveyed through Bird Blitz during the summer of 2009. Given that these grasslands are entirely privately owned, this coverage was achieved through the development of working relationships with landowners who generously permitted access to their lands for Bird Blitz. All totaled, 11 surveys were conducted by 6 volunteers and Audubon staff covering a distance of approximately 25 km of transects during nearly 20 survey hours (Table 1).

The results of these surveys are summarized below in Table 2, with highlighted species representing those which matched or exceeded their state-level IBA thresholds. It is important to note that Bird Blitz survey totals represent minimum population estimates of breeding pairs. Actual populations are higher because not all available habitat was covered and because some birds along a route may not be counted (if they were silent and/or hidden while observers passed by). There were 5 at-risk species recorded in the Allegany and Garrett County grasslands complex, with three species exceeding their state-level IBA thresholds. Golden-winged Warbler exceeded its state-level threshold of 5 pairs, and Grasshopper Sparrow exceeded its state-level threshold of 60 pairs. Henslow's Sparrow not only exceeded its state-level threshold of 5 pairs, but also exceeded its global IBA threshold of 20 pairs. Moreover, the total for Henslow's Sparrow was three times its global threshold. These results indicate that the Allegany and Garrett County grasslands complex likely has significance for Henslow's Sparrow at the global scale. Also, Bird Blitz survey results show that the area likely supports a relatively high diversity of grassland species with 8 species recorded out of 13 possible in the Appalachian Mountains region of Maryland (Table 2).

Thanks to all the volunteers who conducted Bird Blitz surveys at this site: Danny Bystrak, J.B. Churchill, Bill Hubick, Joanna and Mikey Lutmerding, and Susan Sires. These data will greatly assist our review of this area as a potential IBA later this year.

Table 1. Bird Blitz 2009 survey effort for the Allegany and Garrett County Grasslands candidate IBA.

Participants	Surveys	Distance (km)	Time (hr)
7	11	24.9	19.7

Table 2. Bird Blitz 2009 results for the Allegany and Garrett County Grasslands candidate IBA.

Primary Targets – At-risk Species	Total	Assemblage
Northern Harrier	4	GRASS
Willow Flycatcher	2	SHRUB
Golden-winged Warbler	8	SHRUB
Grasshopper Sparrow	85	GRASS
Henslow's Sparrow	60	GRASS
Secondary Target Species	Total	Assemblage
Red-shouldered Hawk	1	FIDS
American Kestrel	8	GRASS
Common Raven	2	FIDS
Brown Thrasher	3	SHRUB
Chestnut-sided Warbler	1	SHRUB
Eastern Towhee	14	SHRUB
Field Sparrow	49	SHRUB
Vesper Sparrow	5	GRASS
Savannah Sparrow	22	GRASS
Eastern Meadowlark	69	GRASS
Bobolink	86	GRASS

Prepared by:

David Yeany II

IBA Program Coordinator, Audubon MD-DC

2437 Eastern Avenue, Baltimore, MD 21224

Phone: 814-221-4361 Email: dyeany@audubon.org