

Preface

This book offers the first quantitative long-term historical analysis of the migratory, winter, and breeding avifaunas of any New York City natural area or park—Van Cortlandt Park and the Northwest Bronx—and spans the century and a half from 1872 to 2016. Only Manhattan's Central and Brooklyn's Prospect Parks have published even lightly annotated cumulative species lists, but they were last updated in 1967. Much has happened to the birdlife of New York City in the last 50 years.

Westchester County did not relinquish the Northwest Bronx to New York City until 1874. It was then heavily wooded with a low, dispersed human population except along the Broadway corridor. Consequently, its birdlife had remained rich and largely undisturbed. It came to the public's attention when in 1888 the City of New York took over the ancestral acreage of the Van Cortlandt family and created a large new park named for them. But apart from collecting and observations by two early ornithologists, Eugene Bicknell and Jonathan Dwight, its avifauna and that of adjacent Riverdale to its west had not been studied. As the city grew and its population expanded outward, attention gradually began to be focused on the birdlife of this gem of an area in the only one of the five New York City boroughs (counties) actually on the mainland of New York State. From 1872 to the present, coverage has been continuous and episodically intense, so it is an appropriate time for an analysis of its 150 years of ornithological information.

When we began gathering data for this book in the early 1960s, we had already known from our own fieldwork back to the early 1900s

(Kieran) how complex the avifauna of the Northwest Bronx was, but not until later did we appreciate, for example, that the cumulative total of recorded Van Cortlandt Park bird species equaled those of Central Park and Prospect Park, respectively, despite the fact that their annual observer-hours had long exceeded those of Van Cortlandt by perhaps 50:1. Another eventual discovery was that Van Cortlandt's cumulative and current numbers of breeding species were nearly twice those of each of the other two parks and that of all the species that had ever bred in either Central or Prospect, only a single one had never bred with certainty in Van Cortlandt. This species richness we attribute to the physiographic diversity of Van Cortlandt and that it has always been largely a natural, not manufactured, park with strong ecological connectivity to adjacent Westchester County.

Our study area could never have been limited to just Van Cortlandt Park but had to embrace Woodlawn Cemetery, Jerome Reservoir, and Hillview Reservoir because they shared Van Cortlandt's avifauna daily, being contiguous with it (Woodlawn and Jerome) or only a few streets away (Hillview); the four had long been treated as a unit. We soon realized that the Jerome Swamp area immediately east of Jerome Reservoir also belonged, as did Jerome Meadows (the site of Jerome Reservoir) and the tidal Tibbett's Brook marshes from Van Cortlandt Park to the Harlem River/Spuyten Duyvil Creek known as Kingsbridge Meadows, even though these three were long gone. We briefly considered incorporating adjacent wooded Riverdale but chose instead to refer to it as needed to complement our study area

analyses. And because they had not been updated since the 1960s, we ultimately elected to give the current and historical statuses of the 301 study area species across the Bronx, in Central and Prospect Parks, in New York City, and in the New York City area.

This book will enable students of urban birds to answer such questions as the following:

- Which bird species and in what numbers have been occurring in the Northwest Bronx since 1872?
- Why has this area long been so bird-rich?
- Which species and in what numbers currently breed in Van Cortlandt Park?
- Which breeding species have been lost and which gained in Van Cortlandt over the last 150 years, and why?
- What has been the 150-year history of all study area nonbreeding species?
- Which species have been restricted to Jerome Reservoir, Hillview Reservoir, Woodlawn Cemetery, Kingsbridge Meadows, Jerome Meadows, or Jerome Swamp?
- How has fresh- and saltwater wetland loss in the Northwest Bronx affected its birdlife?
- What has been the normal winter bird complement for the study area?
- How has this changed over the last 150 years, and why?
- Which migrants have declined, increased, or are arriving earlier than in years past?
- How do the breeding and nonbreeding avifaunas of mainland Van Cortlandt Park compare with those of island-based and densely urban Central and Prospect Parks?
- What urban park management conclusions can be drawn from such comparisons?
- What do they tell us about the resilience of urban forests, the value of New York City reservoirs to native waterbirds, and birds' need for open, undisturbed grasslands?

A wide array of readers will find this book timely and topical, among them New York City and other urban naturalists and observers; students of urban ecology, wildlife management, and conservation; landscape, restoration, and connectivity ecologists; undergraduate and graduate students in many disciplines; primary and secondary school students; urban environmental center users; and ordinary citizens concerned about the importance of urban natural and man-made areas to native birds. The baseline information it provides is unequalled for any other New York City natural area and will serve as a template for fresh studies there and elsewhere.