Prothonotary Warbler

Protonotaria citrea

These exquisite warblers normally reside in wooded swamps where standing water remains throughout the breeding season. These particular wetland habitats are currently very scarce within Ohio; hence, most Prothonotaries occupy the wooded borders of ponds and reservoirs, quiet backwaters along large rivers, floodplain forests, and the shrubby margins of wetlands.

As is true for most occupants of wetlands, Prothonotary Warblers are locally distributed summer residents within Ohio. The Atlas Project produced records from 62 priority blocks, 27 special areas, and 16 other locations within 49 counties. These records were scattered across the state, although pairs were scarcest in the intensively farmed northwestern and west–central counties and along the unglaciated Allegheny Plateau. Their representation in priority blocks varied from a high of 19.6% in the Illinoian Till Plain to a low of 5.5% in the Till Plain, another indication of their fairly uniform statewide distribution.

The largest breeding population currently resides within the extensive marshes bordering Killbuck Creek in portions of Wayne, Holmes, and Coshocton counties. The size of this population has never been precisely estimated, but probably exceeds 100 pairs. Other sizable populations are found along the Little Miami River in Warren and Hamilton counties; within the western Lake Erie marshes of Lucas, Ottawa, Sandusky, and Erie counties; and locally along the Scioto River south of Columbus. Precise estimates are unavailable for these populations, although recent sightings indicate as many as 40–75 pairs may be found in these areas. The remaining locations generally host isolated pairs or small concentrations of 5–12 pairs. Based on these records, the statewide population may total as many as 500–750 pairs.

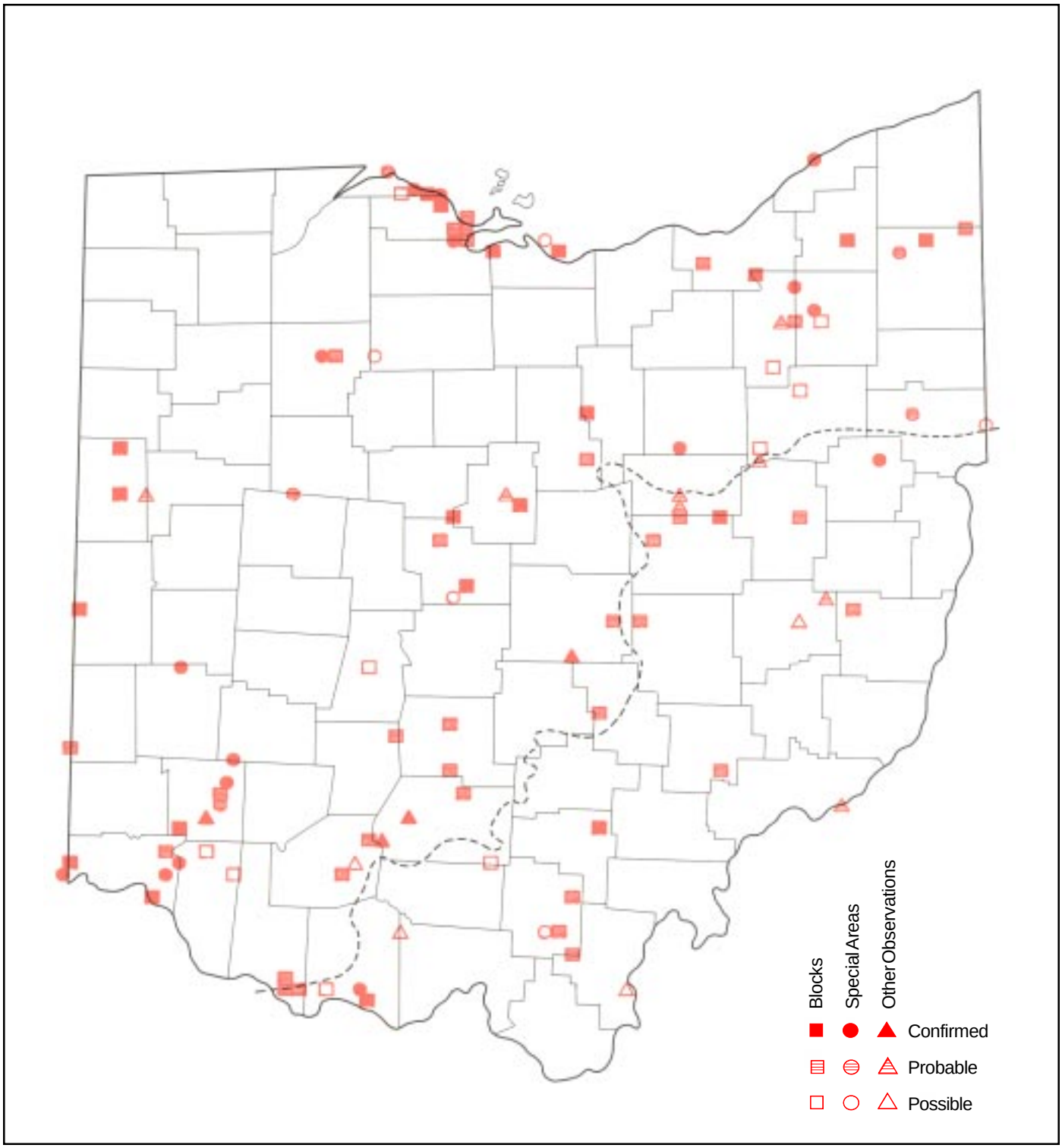
The distribution of breeding Prothonotary Warblers has changed substantially during the 20th century. Hicks (1935) provided the first summary of their range, citing records from 29 counties south through Montgomery, Pickaway, Muskingum, Guernsey, and the Buckeye Lake area plus isolated records from Washington County. The largest populations totalled 15–50+ pairs at Lake St. Mary's, Indian Lake, Buckeye Lake, Lake Loramie (Shelby County), and the Muskingum River near Ellis Dam (Muskingum County). However, their numbers were declining at many of these sites during the 1930s, a trend that continued into the 1950s (Clark and Sipe 1970, Trautman 1940). Habitat destruction was responsible for these declines, especially along the "canal lakes" where their current populations are fractions of their former abundance.

At the same time Prothonotary populations were declining in portions of Ohio, they were expanding elsewhere in the state, particularly within the southern counties. This expansion was largely unreported, except in the Cincinnati area where the first nesting pair was noted in 1947 and additional breeding records were obtained during the early 1950s (Kemsies and Randle 1953). Judging from the Atlas Project records, their breeding range may still be expanding in some counties.

Prothonotary Warblers normally nest in natural cavities and abandoned woodpecker holes within stumps 1–12 feet above water. When suitable cavities are unavailable, pairs have nested in crevices in buildings, minnow buckets, paper sacks, coffee cans, and various other objects located within unused buildings, and in nest boxes (Campbell 1968, Petit and Fleming 1987, Trautman 1940). Nest construction begins during mid–May and continues into the first half of June. The earliest published egg date is May 15, although reports of a nest with young by May 18 indicate some clutches are produced in early May (Trautman 1940). In general, the first clutches are produced between May 20 and June 10 and the young fledge by June 15–July 5 (Trautman 1940, Skaggs 1949). Renesting efforts and second broods are regularly attempted, and may produce clutches into the first half of July and fledglings as late as August 8–15 (Trautman 1940, Williams 1950).

Mike Flynn

Male Prothonotaries are easily identified by their loud ringing songs, and the majority of Atlas Project records pertained to territorial males and other indicators of probable breeding status. Nesting was confirmed within 20 priority blocks. Their nests are easy to locate and 10 of these records were of active nests. There were also reports of adults carrying food for young in 3 blocks, the observations of distraction displays in 3 blocks, and recently fledged young were noted in 2 blocks. The "30" code was used only once, within a block in the Till Plain region. A similar usage of breeding codes was apparent in the special areas and other locations hosting Prothonotary Warblers.



Analysis of Block Data by Physiographic Region

Physiographic Region	Total Blocks Surveyed	Blocks with Data	% with Data	Regional % for Ohio	Ave. # Individ per BBS Route (1982–1987)
Lake Plain	95	8	8.4	12.9	<0.1
Till Plain	271	15	5.5	24.2	–
Ill. Till Plain	46	9	19.6	14.5	–
Glaciated Plateau	140	14	10.0	22.6	–
Unglaciated Plateau	212	16	7.6	25.8	–

Summary of Breeding Status

No. of Blocks in Which Species Recorded		
Total	**62**	**8.1%**
Confirmed	20	32.3%
Probable	32	51.6%
Possible	10	16.1%