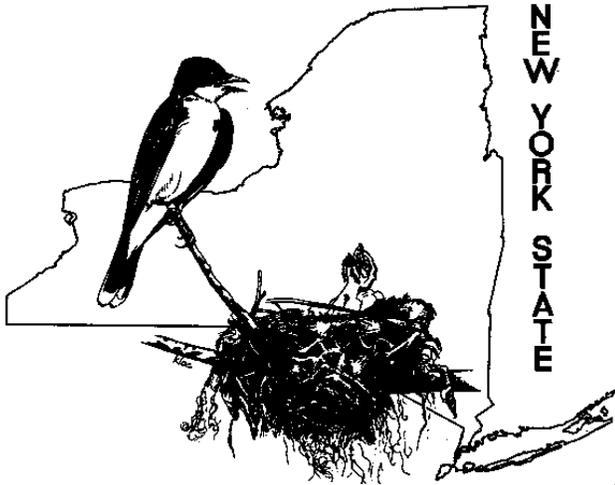


A Project Of the
**FEDERATION OF NEW YORK STATE
BIRD CLUBS**

in cooperation with
New York State Department of Environmental
Conservation
Cornell University Laboratory of Ornithology
National Audubon Society
New York State Museum



**BREEDING BIRD ATLAS
NEWSLETTER**

NUMBER 4

JANUARY 1982

HAWKS-How To Find Them

While you are looking for owls this winter, remember that hawks are early nesters too and your work to find their nests should begin now while the leaves are off the trees.

Drive the roads and walk through the wooded areas in your block and mark the locations of all old hawk and crow nests on your map. It is sometimes hard to relocate a nest later so you may want to mark the nest tree in some inconspicuous way. Nests used the previous breeding season may have prey remains under it, but unless you have other clues as to the previous occupant don't be hasty in using the UN code. Stick nest users are very interchangeable.

Return to check the nests sometime during the months of April, May, and June to see if they are occupied. Hawks commonly exhibit conspicuous territorial behavior when their nests are approached, especially prior to egg laying. They will circle above or scream and dive at you, and are capable of inflicting injury, so be cautious. During incubation, most hawks will be less conspicuous, but after hatching activity in creases, the birds will again be fairly obvious around the nest. Keep in mind that early in the breeding season, disturbance at the nest site has the greatest negative impact.

Some birds, particularly ones that frequent open areas if observed long enough will give away their nest location. This is particularly true of Marsh Hawks and American Kestrels,, but also Red-tailed Hawks. Pay attention to mobbing crows. They can locate a hawk or owl a lot easier than you.

Looking For Hawk Signs

In a previous issue we discussed ways to distinguish hawk signs from owl signs, but here's a short review:

Hawks

Owls

WHITEWASH

Ejected away from perch. Ejected beneath perch.
Splashes in streaks/spots. Forms puddles.

Hawks

PELLETS

Spongy.

Lacks bone fragments.

Compact.

Contains bone fragments.

Fresh sign in an area means a hawk is in residence and a nest may be nearby. Hawks, particularly accipiters, use a butcher block; that is, a stump or log on which prey is plucked before it is brought to the nest. If you find a butcher block, look for a nest.

Where and When To Find Nesting Hawks

Goshawk: See James A. Spencer's article, *Locating*

Goshawks, (page 3)

Egg dates: 4/20-5/15

Incubation: 36-41 days

Sharp-shinned Hawk: Nest in groves of coniferous woods especially medium sized white pines or spruce. Territorial behavior around the nest makes these birds conspicuous, and a butcher block indicates a nest nearby. Look for a nest that is large in proportion to the size of the bird.

Egg dates: 4/16-6/21

Incubation: 21-35 days

Cooper's Hawk: Nests in same area year after year, but usually locates nest in a new tree each time. Nesting habitat can be in either deciduous or coniferous woods. Male provides food to the female in courtship and during incubation. Early in the breeding season, the male and female begin their day perched in a tree calling.

Egg dates: 4/20-6/16

Incubation: 21-36 days

Red-tailed Hawk: Soaring flights initiate courtship for this raptor. Nesting habitat can be either in deciduous, coniferous, or mixed woods usually near open or semiopen areas. If not appropriated by a Great-horned Owl, the same nest will be used year after year.

Egg dates: 3/8-5/16

Incubation: 23-28 days

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ATLASING IN REGION 2 -Genesee

Geographically, Region 2 occupies parts of the Ontario Lake Plains, the Finger Lakes Hills, the Ontario Drumlins, and the Cattaraugus Hills. This gives rise to a wide variety of terrain from the flat farms, orchards, and marshes bordering Lake Ontario to the west of Rochester, to similar farms, orchards, and woodlots amid the drumlins east of the city, then rising southward to the Finger Lakes area with its forested hills cut with steep-sided gullies and separated by lakes and marshes. The region also contains many streams with the major river, the Genesee, slicing from southwest to north, with a spectacular gorge in Letchworth State Park and a smaller version in Rochester.

The breeding avifauna of the region reflects the diversity of habitat accompanying these terrain features. Historically, about 174 species have been recorded as breeding in the region. Among these we find 18 raptors, 30 warblers and vireos, and 22 fringillids, with most other families also well represented. In these first two years of atlas work 167 species have been reported: 8 possible, 24 probable, and 135 confirmed. Among the more surprising species were: Common Merganser, Bobwhite, Hermit and Swainson's thrushes, Ruby-crowned Kinglet, Baybreasted Warbler, and Dickcissel. Wilson's Warbler was recorded well into June in suitable habitat, but may be purged later as a late migrant.

There is historical evidence of long interest in the observation of birdlife in this region. The 1981 Rochester Christmas Bird Count will be the 78th. The Conesus-Hemlock (Little Lakes) and Letchworth-Silver Lake counts will be the 30th and 6th, respectively. The Genesee Ornithological Society, later to become a Section of the Rochester Academy of Science, was founded in 1938. A second major bird club, the Rochester Birding Association, was formed in 1974. In the literature one can find reference to substantial field work extending well back into the previous century. Among the archives of the GOS we find detailed notes of observations back into the 1920's and beyond, then a few isolated studies in the 1940's and early 1950's. Unfortunately, serious study, particularly of breeding birds, has apparently always been the work of a few dedicated observers in this region and has been virtually non-existent in any form since the mid-1950's.

Looking to our atlas task, we find Region 2 the second smallest with only 88 map squares or 352 blocks. Coverage is somewhat complicated by the fact that all of the regional organizations and most of the active birders are located in or near Rochester. This is immediately obvious in looking at a map of square assignments; there are large blank areas south near Dansville, along the western border, and throughout Wayne County to the east. The most discouraging element of the atlas effort to date has been that of the approximately 600 dues-paying members of the local bird clubs, only 40 have volunteered to date to take any part in this project. Most encouraging has been the response of people at large who have read of the project, requested information, and contributed substantially to the success to date. Among these we find the region's premiere atlaser, Doug Bassett, naturalist at Letchworth State Park, who has covered 16

blocks to date, averaging 87.8 species per block, including 114 in one block. Also buoying have been the enthusiastic phone calls and notes from a number of people telling of their interest and excitement in pursuing this new approach to summer birding.



Robert G. Spahn
Region 2 Coordinator

Robert G. Spahn is a native of Dubuque, IA, who has been birding since the age of 7. He graduated from Loras College with a degree in Physics, adding a M.S. in that field at the University of Kansas. Since 1966 he has been employed by the Eastman Kodak Company in Rochester, where he is Project Development Engineer in the Kodak Apparatus Division. Spahn confesses to a lapse in birding interest when he entered college, with golf occupying most of his spare time. His serious pursuit of birds as well as birdies resumed about a decade ago, shortly after he joined the Genesee Ornithological Society. He has since served the G.O.S. as chairman of the Field Trip and Statistics Committees. Readers of *The Kingbird* know him as the Genesee Region 2 editor, a post he has held since 1977. Several times he has contributed the season highlights report to the same Federation journal. Spahn's avian interests began with listing as youth, but have now grown to include population data, patterns of migration and information on breeding birds in a region know for its many active field observers, Bob Spahn is considered one of the best.

With 106 blocks at least entered thus far, we are beginning to see patterns evident among some species. Most of the passerines and some of the raptors and waterfowl have been covered reasonably in these blocks. Groups needing considerably more attention in the next three years include the forest hawks, marsh birds, owls, and the scarcer warblers. There are only two species really expected and not yet recorded: Prothonotary Warbler and Red Crossbill. Among those not yet confirmed we find as Possible: Pied-billed Grebe, Black-crowned Night Heron, American Coot, Barn, Long-eared, Short-eared, and Saw-whet Owls, and Golden-crowned Kinglet; and as Probable: both bitterns, Pintail, Hooded Merganser, Sharp-shinned Hawk, Sora, Whip-poor-will, Common Nighthawk, Hermit and Swainson's Thrushes, Ruby-crowned

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Locating Goshawks

Finding goshawk nests requires time, strong legs, and the ability to walk through the woods looking up without unfortunate consequences. The chances of locating nests increase considerably if Atlas workers enlist the aid of responsible people who are frequently

in the woods, such as loggers, hikers, and hunters, particularly spring turkey hunters. Educate them a bit to increase their awareness. Request that they report any stick nests, sightings of any large white and gray bird, or attacks by such a bird. Assistance from others can be productive, but develop a questioning attitude to increase the percent of successful leads. From the stand point of both time and success, it is important to tie leg work into a reasonable lead and not just strike off into the woods.

The preferred habitat of the goshawk is a relatively extensive forest: generally not the smaller woodlots typical of many farmland areas. Preferred nesting locations are areas of mixed mature deciduous forests with a scattering of, or groups of, coniferous trees and in some cases minor or fringe association with second growth. A word of caution: Goshawks have become less selective as they extend their range across the state. No area should be dismissed if a lead indicates possible nesting.

Drive around (where possible) a selected wooded area to look for the birds. You may see them hunting edge areas or crossing from one woods to another. A sighting can be particularly meaningful if a bird is carrying food-head in that direction. When driving, note the more mature sections for possible investigation on foot later.

With a lead in hand, or a desirable area in mind, use your Atlas map of that area to locate the more heavily wooded sections, particularly the higher knolls. Efforts to find new nests or check prior nesting areas should start early in the year. February is not too early. Swampy terrain can be most easily checked then on snowshoes. Stick nests can be located quite easily for later observation. Mark them carefully (surveyor's tape or drylon spray paint are often suggested). Even if they are not active, the birds may nest nearby.

From February onward, birds may be heard or seen in the nest area. They may utter a drawn-out and somewhat plaintive **E-you** type of call not unlike the ending portion of the typical Red-shouldered Hawk call, but not as strong and less emphatic. This is a good indicator. As winter moves on it is possible to hear the usual kuk-kuk call, but not generally with any frequency. Listen carefully; this call may be given just once. Another good winter indicator of activity is an accumulation of sticks on the snow at the bottom of a nest tree.

As the season progresses and the female is on eggs, vocalizations decrease and other indications of nesting must be observed. In addition to an accumulation of sticks on the ground, look for a new or built-up appearance of the nest, or adult goshawk feathers or prey remains in the area. If the birds are not at the nest, which happens, you may think the nest is inactive. Be careful: check again if necessary. Unlike some other raptors, the nest is generally not heavily decorated with evergreen, and none may be visible from the ground.

If the female is on eggs she may sit quite tight and it is possible to pass under the nest tree without observing her. Look at the nest carefully. At times she may peek over the top, but the best indicator is her long tail, resembling a piece of bark, protruding from the nest.

During the latter part of the egg stage, as well as when there are young in the nest, the female will call and become more demonstrative. When she locates an intruder, she loudly utters her **kuk-kuk** battle cry, often with a great deal of aggressive enthusiasm. Flying ability is spectacular. She may pass close and may even strike if a person is not alert, and this can happen quite readily. Be alert!



In 1835, Audubon found a Goshawk nest near Niagara Falls, and over the next 117 years only three more breeding localities of this large northern accipiter were found in New York State. Then between 1952-72 over fifty sites were discovered. A southward push had begun. Already during only two years of Atlas field work Goshawks have been confirmed in 32 squares, and noted as possible or probable in over 50 more, as their southward range expansion in North America continues. Most of the reports in Madison County, Region 5, were the result of work done by James Spencer.

When the young become older or have branched (left the nest, but not the area of the nest), the female will often be away. The amount of time she spends away will depend upon the food supply and the number of young in the nest, coupled perhaps with the male's hunting ability. Such a nest can be missed, of course, but young goshawks can be quite noisy. Listen carefully. They may attempt both the **E-you** and **kukuk** calls.

It is extremely important, in the early egg stage particularly, that the bird not be kept off the nest if the weather is cold or rainy. While she will frequently sit

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Locating Continued from page 3

tight, as noted, she can also be disturbed enough to leave the nest without calling. Visitations to the nest should be reasonably limited. Abandonment is possible. It is also important that observers protect the nest from raccoon predation. This can easily be done by placing a minimum of 14" of metal flashing around the tree.

Goshawks will utilize the same nest area from one year to the next. They may use the same nest for several years or build a new nest within the same general area. They will nest in both deciduous and coniferous trees and occasionally move from one to the other. Also, they may return to an old nest after not using it for several years. Dead trees, both deciduous and coniferous, have been used. Deciduous trees used have included beech, maple, oak, aspen, and in one case a white ash. Conifers have included white pine, hemlock, and Scotch pine. At times they will be found nesting in reforested conifer plantations.

If they have not used the prior year's nest, the new structure may be within roughly 100-200 yards of the old nest. Circle outward from the old nest to search for the new one. Logging activity within the immediate nest area will force the birds to abandon that specific site. With favorable conditions they will relocate within an adjacent forested area, or even within the same contiguous woods.

Some success in locating nesting goshawks may perhaps be obtained by the use of taped calls, but the writer has not attempted this. Good luck in locating this expanding species.

James Spencer

Owling

Owling, or locating owls, requires a sense of adventure and considerable patience. There are seven species of owls known to breed in New York State and without a special effort by Atlas observers, the entire group could be "under-recorded." We hope that most of our more than one thousand Atlas workers will try owling and help map the ranges of these interesting nocturnal birds. To succeed, we'll have to cooperate and share our ideas and experiences. The following ideas work, but we welcome further suggestions.

Lay some groundwork, first. Don't expect to stop along a country road, play an owl tape, and have a Barred Owl swoop in. This does happen, and it's the goal of owlers, but planning is important if the owl is to show up and pose in the flashlight beam. Decide first, based upon daytime study of a block, where to stop at night. Look for patches of low, wet woods, perhaps with cedars. Consider various woodlots and solid stands of pines. Locate places where upland woods and fields meet. Keep in mind traffic and parking, since both silence and safety are important.

Calling in owls can be done vocally or with a prerecorded tape of owl calls. The first requires familiarity with at least a few calls, but limited experience suggests that it works well. Practice whistling Saw-whet and Screech, or vocally hooting Great Horned, Barred, and Long-eared. Even those who use a tape to call in owls enjoy drawing responses to their vocal imitations once the owls show up. Cassette recorders assure beginners that their calls are correct, and tapes are easy to make and use. In Region 7 a "master tape" was made

and copies are distributed gratis to Atlas workers in return for a new blank tape, so that the project can remain self-sustaining. Each cassette has about a minute of each owl on one side, with rail calls on the reverse.

After deciding upon possible locations and the means of attracting owls, observers should next pick a good night. Humans may prefer warm, moonlit nights, but these conditions don't seem to matter much to owls. The key to success seems to be a quiet night with no wind, and owls seem most responsive after several windy or rainy nights, since silence is important to their hunting success. Spring brings breezes and rain, so when a quiet evening in April occurs, head out to look for owls.

April seems to be a good month. By the time initial searches have been rewarded and an observer begins to feel confident, the best owling season is ending. The toads, frogs, and insects are covering the night with a blanket of sound. Plan to go owling in early spring before this happens.

Plan an owling party with curious friends. Bravery is not as important as patience and a sense of humor in members of the group. Dress warmly, bring strong flashlights and warm beverages, and try to fit the expedition into one car, or at most two.

Stop at a previously selected spot and start giving owl calls. It might be a good idea to begin with the little owls and work up to the larger ones. Try Saw-whet followed by Barred at wet woods, or Screech, Longeared, and then Great Horned where dry woods border fields. Play a series of calls at normal volume and then wait. Try again. Wait. Wait some more. Owers can spend an entire spring rushing from place to place in frustration, or they can wait those extra few minutes in silence and suddenly have an owl answer. Be patient.

Remember, an owler is pretending to be an intruding owl moving into another bird's territory, and that territorial male is going to try to locate the intruder. As long as the interloper calls, the resident male can home in and try to find his rival by sight. Imagine what he sees: some humans huddled over the hood of a car, sharing a thermos of hot coffee. If silence falls on his domain, he'll be more likely to call or fly in to try to locate the interloper, often with his mate joining. Thus the "off" button may be more effective in attracting owls than an increase in volume.

Not every stop will produce an owl, and surprising things will happen. Right in the middle of a Great Horned Owl series of calls, a little owl-Screech or Saw

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Some Alas Thoughts

Atlas Project's third year begins soon with the nesting of the Great Horned Owls. Approaching our halfway point

it's time to reflect on some things and to clarify where there is confusion.

Our Objective and Block Coverage Sequence-An early, basic decision was the statement of the Atlas Project objective. It said simply that the project aim is to survey the state completely with coverage of all 5200 blocks. There has been no change in that.

In 1980 we accomplished coverage in some degree of 17% of them. The 1980-1981 percentage has yet to be calculated but a review of the returned data forms indicates a considerable increase.

A misunderstanding by some has led to a belief that only A blocks need to be surveyed, or that they **must** be surveyed before B, C or D. This has never been Atlas policy. To confine coverage to A blocks would produce an incomplete and misleading distribution picture.

To always begin coverage of the squares with the A block would provide uniformity but it is not a sine qua non. The sequence of the blocks is not of primary importance so long as there is eventual full square coverage, including all the types of habitat within it.

Peripheral Coverage-Plotting the extent of survey coverage through 1981 reveals a not surprising or unexpected problem. We are doing well in areas close to population centers, in traditional birding spots, and vacation areas. But in the peripheral parts of the Regions we find large unsurveyed expanses. This is not surprising because it's human to favor the familiar, to go to more accessible places, and to spend as little time and gasoline as possible to reach survey units.

To have a comprehensive, valid survey as near as possible to our complete coverage goal we must include these peripheral areas. In accomplishing this birders will experience the fun and excitement of

Atlasing Continued from page 2

Kinglet, Solitary Vireo, Golden-winged, Parula, Blackthroated Blue, Yellow-rumped, Prairie, and Baybreasted Warblers, Northern Waterthrush, Western Meadowlark, Dickcissel, and Evening Grosbeak. If additional species are recorded, strong candidates are Cattle Egret, King Rail, Wilson's Phalarope, Common Raven, White-eyed Vireo, Worm-eating Warbler, Kentucky Warbler, Yellow-headed Blackbird, Brewer's Blackbird, and Clay-colored Sparrow.

If we are to atlas the entirety of Region 2, we will need the continued dedicated effort of those who have worked so hard during our first two years and a doubling and redoubling of the numbers of participants in the years ahead. The rewards in terms of enjoyment, knowledge, and satisfaction gained by the participants are certainly well worth the- effort expended.

Robert Spahn

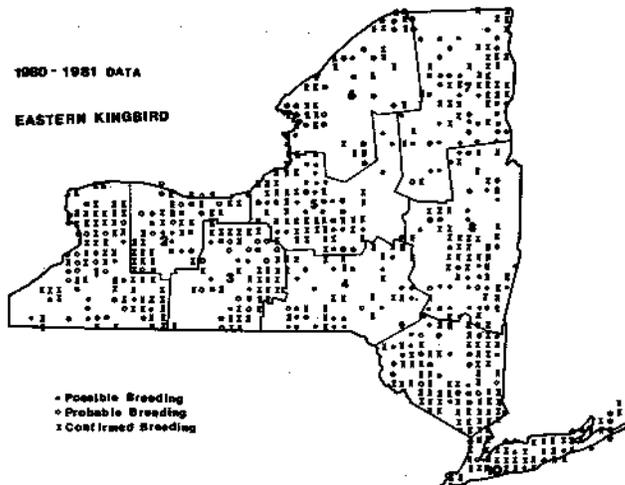
discovery. This is a challenge for the next three years. I urge everyone to begin this year. Waiting until 1984 we risk failure with a patchy result. It can be done by individuals, or groups setting objectives for 2-3 day,

concentrated surveys on safari-like expeditions.

If the groups, with help from their clubs, can meet the expense of such forays it would be a welcome contribution to the Atlas Project. But to this there are limits and we are seeking funds to support such activity. One Region has already secured a grant locally to assist this type of effort.

Gordon M. Meade, M. D.
Chairman, Atlas Project

The Eastern Kingbird, symbol of the Federation of New York State Bird Clubs, is a ubiquitous breeder in the state, only missing from the more mountainous areas. This map in addition to showing its distribution gives a picture of gross Atlas coverage. The map indicates breeding in a square and does not reflect the many blocks within these



squares not yet covered.

Owling Continued from page 4

whet-may fly by to investigate. Or a Barred Owl tape might be answered by a Long-eared. An area devoid of owls one night can seem like a congress of Great Horned the next (or the reverse may prove true). Later in the spring a Saw-whet tape may be answered by the **bzeep** of a woodcock, a tree frog, or the plaintive piping notes of a White-throated Sparrow. If owling were predictable, it wouldn't be as much fun. Much of the joy of owling is its very unpredictability. Eventual success means a "Possible-X" or perhaps a "Probable-P." A second night can upgrade that owl species to a "Probable-S."

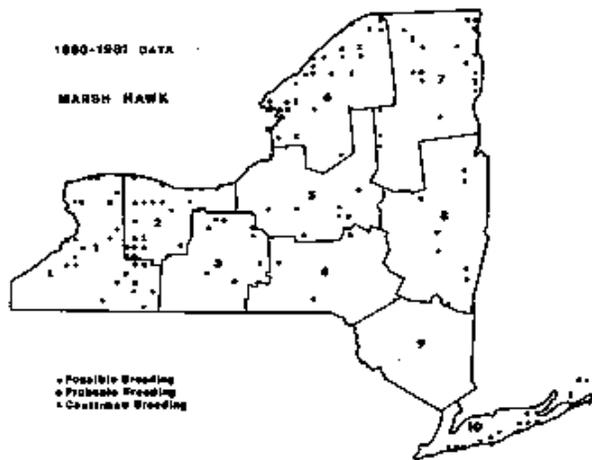
During 1982, Atlas field work will reach the mid-point. If we're to succeed in mapping the ranges of our seven owl species as thoroughly as other bird observers must cooperate in an intensive search for these nocturnal raptors this spring and summer. Good owling!

John M. C. Peterson

Thanks to all those who responded to the "Help" article in our last issue.

Hawks Continued from page 1

Marsh Hawk: Wetland marshes, wet meadows, grassy fields, bogs and barrier beaches are the breeding habitats of this ground nesting raptor. To confirm this species (and as you can see by the distribution map, not many workers have) there are two possibilities-one is to observe the birds carrying food; the other is to locate the nest. The male Marsh Hawk provides food to the female during incubation and early hatch. Most often the transfer is made on the wing. Two weeks after hatching, however, the female does most of the hunting for her young and can be observed bringing food back to her offspring. Locating the nest requires careful observation. The first problem is to locate an adult bird, then to watch and follow it. Sooner or later you will see a bird dropping into the grass, hopefully at a nest. Keep your eye on the spot where the bird landed and approach the area cautiously. You may be rewarded by finding a nest. If



you spot a female preening in a tree during your morning atlasing, pause to watch her. She is probably taking a break from her incubating duties and will return

to the nest before very long.

Egg dates: 4/20-6/25

Incubation: 21-36 days

Red-shouldered Hawk: Nests in wet deciduous or mixed woods, particularly where interspersed with marshes and wet meadows. Try playing tape recorded vocalizations of this species in its preferred habitat, early in the breeding season. Courtship begins in March when the birds are very territorial and vociferous. The nest tree is often a birch, in many cases yellow or black.

Egg dates: 3/25-5/26

Incubation: 23-25 days

Broad-winged Hawk: The Broad-winged Hawk requires large, contiguous tracts of woodlands for nesting. It is very secretive around the nest which will be located somewhere in the denser parts of the forest but within reasonable proximity of water and an opening. Courtship consists of soaring flights and whistle-type vocalizations.

Egg dates: 4/27-6/26

Incubation: 23-28 days

American Kestrel: These falcons nest in woodpecker holes, tree cavities or nest boxes. They prefer open or semi-open areas and can be easily observed because of their habit of sitting on roadside perches. Nests can usually be found one quarter to one half mile from the observed birds.

Egg dates: 4/5-6/29

Incubation: 29-30 days

Mailing List

Do you have a birding friend who is helping you with your Atlas blocks but who is not on our newsletter mailing list? Please send his or her name and address to your Regional Coordinator.

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