



A Project of the
FEDERATION OF NEW YORK STATE BIRD CLUBS
and

NYS DEPARTMENT OF ENVIRONMENTAL CONSERVATION
in cooperation with

New York Cooperative Fish & Wildlife Research Unit
Cornell University Department of Natural Resources
Cornell University Laboratory of Ornithology
National Audubon Society of New York

NEW YORK STATE BREEDING BIRD ATLAS 2000 NEWSLETTER

NUMBER ONE

MAY 2000

A Different Way to Watch Birds

by Valerie Freer

Those who participated in our first Atlas during the early 1980's already know how much fun, and how rewarding, atlasing is. Those who have not worked on an Atlas before are about to discover a different way to watch birds as we begin Breeding Bird Atlas 2000.

Atlasing provides an opportunity to do a different kind of birding than you may have done in the past. Atlasing is relaxing, fascinating, non-competitive, and highly rewarding; this is "Birding With a Purpose!" Unlike Big Days, Bird-a-thons, Christmas Counts, migration counts, feeder counts and other birding events, there is no pressure to finish in a particular time period, and there is no counting. You can atlas by yourself or with others.

Your task while atlasing is to find a bird and observe its behavior. Is there a mate with it? Is it displaying, or chasing other males? Is it gathering nesting material, or carrying food to a hidden nest full of young? Patience and careful observation are required for successful atlasing, rather than speed in identification, or stamina in chasing birds.

Atlas blocks are assigned through Regional Coordinators. Once you have your assignment, look over the map for your block, and select a place to go birding. Take your binoculars, bird book, Atlas Field Card and Handbook for Workers. Find any bird, identify it, and check the Handbook for Workers to see if it is the breeding season for that species. Then just watch the bird. If it is a Robin pulling a worm on your lawn in May, you can

record an "X" in the "Possible Breeding" category for Robin. If you watch for a little longer, you may see it vigorously chasing other Robins. Now you have upgraded Robin to "Probable Breeding" by observing territoriality, code T. (The codes are described in the Handbook for Workers.) With further observation you may see the bird carrying food for its young, and now you can record "FY" in the "Confirmed Breeding" category. Congratulations! You have confirmed breeding for one species. No further observations on Robins are necessary, although if you later see young in a nest, you can upgrade the code to "NY." The goal of your atlasing is to record the highest level of breeding for as many species as possible in your block(s).

Can you work on the Atlas if you are a beginning birder? Absolutely! Atlasing is an excellent way to improve your birding skills. There is nothing that says you have to know all of the birds in your block when you begin. You just have to be willing make careful identifications and ask for help if you are uncertain. If you keep at it, you will soon leave your beginner status behind! All atlasers, even very good birders, will learn new things while they are atlasing. During the first Atlas I remember being surprised that I was learning distinctive food begging sounds of the young of some common birds; these were not on my bird song tapes and CDs! I expect to re-learn those during Atlas 2000, and I hope to learn many new ones. Please join us in this great project and see how much YOU can learn.

Atlas 2000 Website

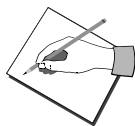
One of the great differences between the first Breeding Bird Atlas and Atlas 2000 is the availability of the internet. We have set up a website at <http://www.dec.state.ny.us/website/dfwmr/wildlife/bba/index.html>.

At this site you'll be able to print a map of the block that you have been assigned, as well as a list of the birds that were reported in that block during the first Atlas. You can also print out a Notable Species Form (when available) and link to other interesting sites such as that of Cornell's Laboratory of Ornithology and the Federation of New York State Bird Clubs, where you'll find the list of Regional Coordinators and how to get in touch with them (or see page 5).

The Atlas 2000 website also features a calendar of events, including training sessions for atlasers, birding trips and various meetings. Have your event listed by e-mailing a note to the address listed below; include the details of the event and a contact number.

Check out the website as soon as you can. If you have any suggestions or comments, they can be sent via e-mail to fwbba@gw.dec.state.ny.us.

Volunteer Registration



All volunteers will be asked to complete a form to register themselves as an Atlaser. We will use this information (name, address, phone, e-mail) to mail you issues of the newsletter, to get in touch with you if we have questions about your forms, and to include your name in the acknowledgements of the final publication (*be sure you register your name as you want it to appear in the book*).

You will assign yourself an ID number that will be put in our database in association with the data that you collect. **You must have an ID number to submit data.** Your ID number will be the first three letters of your last name, your first initial and the last four digits of your Social Security number (hun-k-8351). We chose this format so you can easily remember your number. Please fill out another registration form if you change your name or address; your ID number will remain the same for the duration of the project.

Atlasing Calendar

(from Newsletter #7 of the First Atlas)

JANUARY: great-horned owl, white-winged crossbill.

FEBRUARY: horned lark.

MARCH: mute swan, Canada goose, wood duck, red-tailed hawk, bald eagle, golden eagle, peregrine falcon, American woodcock, mourning dove, eastern screech owl, barred owl, long-eared owl, northern saw-whet owl, gray jay, American crow, fish crow, American robin, house sparrow, red crossbill.

APRIL: pied-billed grebe, great blue heron, green-backed heron, snowy egret, black-crowned night-heron, yellow-crowned night-heron, American black duck, hooded merganser, northern harrier, osprey, American kestrel, ruffed grouse, ring-necked pheasant, wild turkey, clapper rail, sora, American coot, killdeer, common snipe, upland sandpiper, great black-backed gull, herring gull, common barn owl, short-eared owl, northern flicker, pileated woodpecker, yellow-bellied flycatcher, hairy woodpecker, eastern phoebe, blue jay, common raven, black-capped chickadee, tufted titmouse, white-breasted nuthatch, red-breasted nuthatch, brown creeper, Carolina wren, northern mockingbird, eastern bluebird, European starling, Louisiana waterthrush, red-winged blackbird, common grackle, brown-headed cowbird, northern cardinal, house finch, pine siskin.

Conservation Opportunities for Birders

The Cornell Laboratory of Ornithology is looking for participants for two bird conservation programs. Birds in Forested Landscapes is working to determine the effects of disturbance from recreational development and forest fragmentation on the breeding success of Cooper's and Sharp-shinned hawks and on seven species of thrushes (Wood, Hermit, Swainson's, Bicknell's, Gray-cheeked, and Varied, as well as Veery). You select your own study sites and census birds on at least two visits.

The Golden-winged Warbler Atlas Project is designed to determine the population status and habitat requirements of the Golden-winged and Blue-winged warblers and their hybrids. Participants will be asked to survey and conduct point counts at known and potential breeding sites from May through June.

For more information, contact Brian Mingle at the Lab of Ornithology at (607) 254-2473.

Owls: How to Find Them

(modified from Newsletter #2 of the First Atlas)

Don't expect owls to be waiting for you at the nest. That's too easy! Most owls will be long gone before you arrive at the nest site. Here are some tips on locating those hidden nests.

Recordings of owl calls played in likely habitats should elicit responses from resident owls. Start by playing the tape softly. Play a cadence, then listen for a response. Remember that owls are less likely to respond on windy, snowy, rainy or foggy nights.

You can also locate nests by walking through likely habitats and looking for telltale signs of owls. Your biggest problem will be distinguishing this evidence from that left by hawks. Both hawks and owls pass conspicuous urates, commonly called whitewash. The whitewash of hawks generally splashes in spots and streaks and is ejected out and away from the perch. The whitewash of owls is more solid and forms puddles. It is ejected directly below the perch.

Both hawks and owls regurgitate pellets. Hawk pellets usually contain only fur because their powerful digestive enzymes break down the bone into indistinguishable fragments. Owl pellets, on the other hand, contain large and recognizable skull parts and bones in addition to fur. A section in "A Field Guide to Animal Tracks," one of the Peterson series, gives the size and shape of various raptor pellets.

After owl eggs hatch, you will see pellets, whitewash and food remains below the nest. In most owl species, the male selects a roost tree close to the nest tree. Accumulations of fresh pellets and whitewash beneath a tree signal that a nest is nearby. (Old pellets may indicate a winter roost.)

Barn Owl: This bird nests in silos, barns, abandoned buildings or hollow trees. Look for pellets in your examination of possible nest locations and ask the farmers in your block whether they have owls nesting in any of their buildings. Egg dates: All months, usually April - June. Incubation: 32-34 days.

Eastern Screech-Owl: Look for the small pellets and whitewash of this species. If you find any, inspect all likely-looking tree cavities or hollows nearby. Old apple orchards are especially attractive to this species. Egg dates: Late March to early May. Incubation: 21-26 days.

Great Horned Owl: This species most commonly uses old nests of hawks, particularly those of the Red-tailed Hawk. Nests can be found in almost any wooded area, but more often in coniferous or mixed woods with adjacent open areas for hunting. Egg dates: Late January to mid April. Incubation: 30-35 days.

Barred Owl: The Barred Owl nests in tree cavities or on old stick nests in wet woods, river bottomland and heavily wooded swamps. This species is very secretive, preferring to roost and nest in conifer stands, but pellets and whitewash give away its residency. Egg dates: Late March to early May. Incubation: 21-28 days.

Long-eared Owl: This owl prefers to use the old nests of hawks or crows in coniferous or mixed wooded areas. During the first Atlas, a worker in Region 8 described a Long-eared Owl nest tree as follows: "(the) tree was located in a wet woods of about 15 acres consisting of white pine, hemlock, northern hardwoods. The lot is surrounded by grazed pasture, active hay fields and small woodlots...." This owl is very defensive of the nest and may give away its presence. Egg dates: Late March to early May. Incubation: 21-30 days.

Short-eared Owl: A mere depression in the ground, the nest of the Short-eared Owl can be found in a marsh or meadow. This raptor depends for its livelihood on meadow mice and tends to be where there are irruptive populations of mice. This dependence on a single prey item not only makes the species vulnerable, but also keeps it on the move. Egg dates: Early April to mid May. Incubation: 24-28 days.

Saw-whet Owl: Our smallest owl most often nests in old woodpecker holes, mainly that of the Northern Flicker. Deciduous and coniferous woods, especially wooded swamps, are the preferred habitat. If tiny pellets and whitewash are near a suspected nest tree, rap on the tree and owl may appear at the hole entrance. Egg dates: Late March to mid June. Incubation: 26-28 days.

Remember to always keep disturbance to a minimum. If you find a nest, don't stay in the area for very long. Good luck and happy owling!!

The People Behind the Atlas

Who they are and what they do

Breeding Bird Atlas 2000 is a huge project, ultimately involving thousands of people all across the state. This article will provide a brief overview of some of the people involved in the project and the roles that they play.

Let's begin with the atlasers themselves. These treasured volunteers will spend hours trudging through each of the various habitats in their assigned 5km X 5km blocks to record and document breeding for as many bird species as they can. Atlasers are encouraged to try to document at least 76 species in each block, using designated behavior codes to record them as either Possible, Probable or Confirmed breeders. To reach the goal for the block, breeding should be confirmed for at least 38 of those 76 species. Atlasers keep track of their observations throughout the season on a Field Data Card, transfer the information to an Annual Summary Form in the fall, and pass it along to their Regional Coordinator.

Each of the ten Atlas Regions in the state has one or two Regional Coordinators (see page 5). The Regional Coordinators are responsible for recruiting volunteers and assigning them blocks, as well as providing them with the information and support they need. At the end of the field season, Regional Coordinators review the hundreds of Annual Summary Forms that were produced in their region, carefully checking each one for mistakes and questionable records. The Annual Summary Forms are then sent to me, the Project Coordinator.

As the title of Project Coordinator implies, it is my job to see that the whole Atlas effort runs smoothly. Some of my responsibilities include providing materials and support to the Regional Coordinators, scanning the Annual Summary Forms into the database, and reporting on the progress of the Atlas to the Steering Committee.

Finally, there is the Steering Committee, of which Valerie Freer of the Federation of New York State Bird Clubs is the Chairperson. The rest of the Steering Committee includes two people from the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation, one from the Department of Natural Resources (NY Cooperative Fish & Wildlife Research Unit) at Cornell University, one from the National Audubon Society of New York, one from the Laboratory of Ornithology, and two from the Federation of NYS Bird Clubs.

The Steering Committee was responsible for making the Atlas Project a reality and continues to oversee the functioning of this grand effort.

We have five long years of exciting work ahead of us. Breeding Bird Atlas 2000 just could not happen without the dedication of the people involved at each level. I hope that each of you is looking forward to getting started as much as I am... HAVE FUN!

-Kim Hunsinger

We'd Like Your Input

While we all know that the true heart of a project such as the Breeding Bird Atlas 2000 is its volunteers, the "headquarters" of this project is at the Wildlife Resources Center in Delmar, NY. That is where all of the data will be sent, analyzed and stored. That's also where the Project Coordinator is stationed. This Newsletter will serve as a means of communication between Delmar and the folks that are involved all across the state.

We want to hear from you! If you have an atlasing story to tell or a birding tip to share, please write to us. We'll put your stories in future issues of the Newsletter. Other Atlasers can share your laugh or learn a great tip to improve their own birding skills. There will also be a Question and Answer section in coming issues, so feel free to send along questions as well.

You can reach the Project Coordinator, Kim Hunsinger, by phone at (518) 478-3061, by e-mail at fwbba@gw.dec.state.ny.us or by regular mail at:

***Breeding Bird Atlas 2000
Wildlife Resources Center
108 Game Farm Road
Delmar, NY 12054***

"Firsts" of Atlas 2000

Atlasers have wasted no time in getting out in the field to begin searching for breeding birds. Steve Kahl reported that he heard a Great Horned Owl calling at 7:00am on January 1, 2000 while on the Montezuma National Wildlife Refuge Christmas Bird Count.

We have also gotten word of our first confirmed breeding! Chet Vincent reported a Great Horned Owl on a nest in block 5961A in Dutchess County (BBA Region 9) on January 23.

We're looking forward to many more firsts. Keep us updated and keep up the good work!

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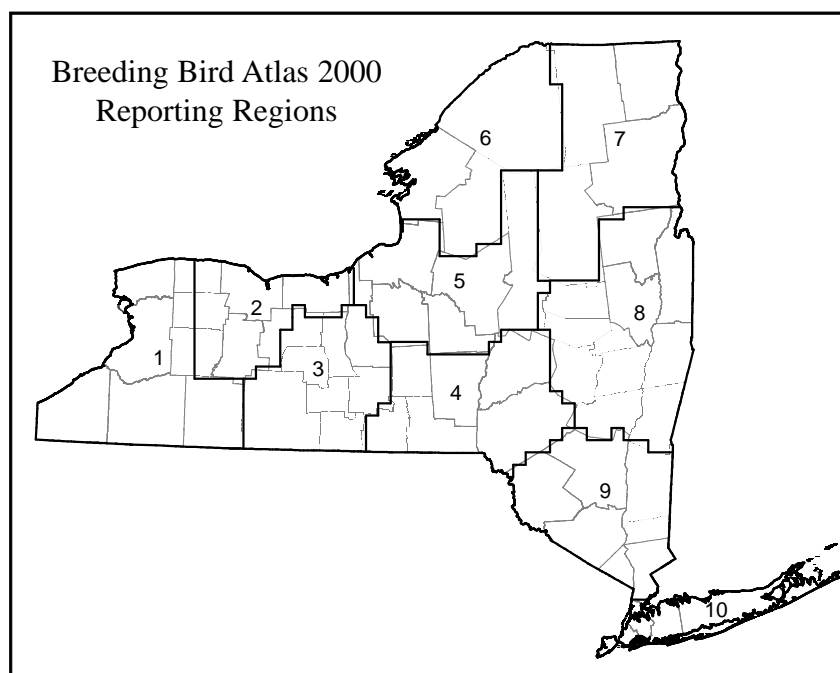
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First Atlas Publication Still Available

After six years of gathering data, New York State completed it's first Breeding Bird Atlas in 1985 and published it in 1988. The Atlas of Breeding Birds in New York State, edited by Robert F. Andrie and Janet R. Carroll provides breeding information and a distribution map for each bird species that breeds in New York State. As a volunteer for Atlas 2000, you might be interested in having your own copy of this useful book. The species accounts provide habitat information and distribution maps for each bird.

The Atlas of Breeding Birds in New York State is still available from several sources. The publisher, Cornell University Press, sells the book on it's website (www.cornellpress.cornell.edu) for \$45.00. The map overlays are also available. To make your searching easier, use the ISBN#: 0-8014-1691-4.

You can also order the book for \$42.50 from www.borders.com or www.amazon.com. The big deal can be found at www.BarnesandNoble.com, though, if you move quickly. They have it in stock now for the original price of \$29.75. What a bargain!



Atlas Newsletter Editor
Kimberley C. Hunsinger

We Want You!

(...and your friends, too.)

The Breeding Bird Atlas is off to a fabulous start, with hundreds of Atlasers already signed up to survey blocks in every region in the state. This project is a huge undertaking; there are more than 5,300 blocks in the state that need to be surveyed! Over 4,300 people participated in the first Atlas, logging a total of more than 200,000 hours of surveying time from 1980 to 1985.

We need your help, not only as Atlasers, but also as recruiters. If you know someone who is a birder, make sure they know about the Atlas project and encourage them to participate. Atlassing is a great way to learn more about birds, so beginners are more than welcome as well.

A brochure describing the project and how to participate is available. Please contact the Project Coordinator (see page 4) or your Regional Coordinator (see page 5) if you would like a stack of brochures to distribute. Extra copies of this newsletter are also available.

Our Regional Coordinators will provide training workshops for any group that is interested in learning about the Atlas. At these workshops, the Regional Coordinators explain the role of volunteers in the Atlas, show slides of birds illustrating the various breeding codes, allow people to sign up for blocks, and distribute field cards and instruction handbooks. Give your RC a call today!

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