

Atlas Corner: Owls

In the last issue I presented the Confirmed breeding codes. This was part 1 of a two-part series, but since the breeding season is over, I am going to postpone part 2 on the Possible and Probable codes until spring 2020. Instead, I thought it would be best to present additional details on how to atlas. The atlas kicks off in January 2020, which is right around the corner, and some of you may want to get out right away and record breeding Great Horned Owls or crossbills!

Fly on Over to the Atlas Website

The atlas website is full of useful information to help you get started atlasing. You'll find information on why we are conducting a third atlas, how to atlas and submit data, block maps, a full listing of upcoming events, and the latest news. You'll also find online tutorials to help you get started using eBird and a list of recommended books and apps to boost your bird identification skills and increase your understanding of bird behaviors and natural history. Starting January 2020, this is where you will be able to sign up for blocks and view data submitted to the project. Bookmark the website at ebird.org/atlasny.

Navigate Atlas Blocks

The atlas is designed to provide a statewide view of where each species breeds. In order to make this monumental task more manageable, we break the state up into smaller blocks and ask people to thoroughly survey each block. The tricky thing is to make sure that you stay within block boundaries when you are in the field. The traditional way to do this is to bring a printed map of the block in the field with you. You can download block maps from the website. If you use a smartphone or tablet in the field, you can download the map to your device and refer to it in the field. A more precise way to know your location within a block is to use a GPS or mapping app on your smartphone. You can download the block boundaries to your device from the website and import them into the app you prefer to use. Google Earth is free and popular, but you should use whatever program you are most comfortable with.

The PDF maps include public spaces like national wildlife refuges, state parks, state forests, and wildlife management areas. You will probably want to target these areas first since in most cases you don't need to get special permission to access the land. For some lands we will work to arrange special access for atlasers, but it is ultimately your responsibility to make sure that you are not trespassing. To aid in this process, we will be providing introductory letters you can take to landowners to request access, including a thank you letter and a placard to place on your windshield while you are surveying. If you discover that much of an atlas block is on private land and



Red Phase Eastern Screech-owl: Owls and other nocturnal birds require extra effort during the atlas. Photo © Ian Davies

you are unsuccessful in gaining permission from the landowner, please [contact me](#) or your local regional coordinator.

Check out the blocks and maps on the website: <https://ebird.org/atlasny/about/atlas-blocks>

January Atlasing

January is cold and snowy. Many of us are busy doing Christmas Bird Counts. The last thing on our mind is trying to find breeding birds. But some birds will be settling into their cozy nests even in the middle of winter!

Three species come to mind, Great Horned Owl and Red and White-winged Crossbills. Great Horned Owls were documented incubating eggs as early as January 22 during the previous two atlases. This means that they began courtship and nest building perhaps as early as December! Crossbills, on the other hand, will breed year-round. They are nomadic and move around from one area with lots of cones to another. If they find a particularly high number of cones, they settle in to breed. While it doesn't look like this winter will be a good finch invasion year, there are a lot of cones in the Adirondacks and Red Crossbills are currently breeding. It's possible they will stick around this winter for a second brood.

Who among you is going to report the first confirmed nesting record for the atlas and what species will it be? The Calendar of Early Breeders gives some idea of the birds you are likely to find in the early months of 2020. By early breeding, I mean species that breed before the heat of the summer when most songbirds are busy raising young. You'll notice that all the owls that live in NY are likely to be nesting by the end of April. Owls and other nocturnal species are notoriously underreported in atlas projects, so let's get out there early to look for them!

Finding Owls

Owls are nocturnal birds and it's easiest to find out which patch of habitat they call home by listening for them at night. You'll want to head out on a calm night during the peak breeding time for each species (see the Breeding Season Table for Owls) and target their preferred habitats (see the Owl Habitat Preferences chart). If you have limited time, aim for the first part of April, which falls in the breeding period for all the owls except Great Horned. Owls tend to call more frequently in the first half of the night, so try to be out between 30 minutes after sunset and midnight. Stop along roads or trails every half mile and listen quietly for 5 minutes. *We do not recommend using playback.* Playback disrupts courtship, foraging and nesting activities, and increases the risk of predation. If you don't hear any birds with passive listening, move on to another stop and try again. Owl calls serve the same territorial and advertising purposes as songs from songbirds, so record them with the S code on your eBird checklist.

The easiest way to upgrade the S code is to return a week later to the same places you heard owls on your first visit. If you hear a bird calling from the same place a week or more apart, use the S7 code to raise the species from a Possible to a Probable breeder. *We do not recommend seeking out the birds or their nests.* You may be able to upgrade the code further if you learn to distinguish the calls of males, females, and young birds. Use your favorite free app like Merlin or Audubon to familiarize yourself with owl calls. Use the P code when you hear a pair of birds duetting and the C code for non-vocal courtship sounds. Later in the season, the young birds become very vocal and you stand a good chance of upgrading to FL (recently fledged young) or NY (nest with young) if you recognize owlet calls.

While out atlasing during the daytime, listen for upset groups of songbirds and try to find the animal they are mobbing; it often turns out to be an owl. The other way to discover owls during the daytime is to keep an eye out for what looks like white paint dripping down a tree trunk and nearby vegetation. This is concentrated waste called whitewash and signals a roost or nest site. There are often undigestible pellets of regurgitated hair and bones on the ground as well. Even if you don't see a bird, you can usually identify the species from the pellet with the help of a field guide.

It is very important to minimize disturbance to nesting owls. Always keep your distance. Stay as far away as possible and minimize the amount of time you spend in the area. Refrain from spreading the word widely about the nest location. For some of the more sensitive species (Short-eared Owl, Long-eared Owl, and Barn owl), we have hidden all breeding records from public output on eBird. For other species, if you are concerned that entering your data in eBird would put the birds at risk, you can hide your checklist from public view, refrain from entering the observation until after the birds have left the area, or enter the data at a larger scale (for example, make a new personal hotspot in the center of the atlas block). The only thing we ask is that you *unhide* your data at a later date and/or report the details of your observation to the New York Natural Heritage Program (<https://www.nynhp.org/report-rare>).

Expect to hear other species on your nighttime surveys, including Wilson's Snipe, American Woodcock, Killdeer, Common Loon, Black-crowned Night-Heron, Yellow-crowned Night-Heron, Yellow Rail, Black Rail, Northern Mockingbird, Veery, Swainson's Thrush, Hermit Thrush, Wood Thrush, American Robin, Ovenbird, and Yellow-breasted Chat. Be sure to start a new eBird checklist for nocturnal visits (eBird defines this as 20 minutes after sunset to 40 minutes before sunrise) and record everything you can identify. Submit your checklist even if you hear no birds. The atlas wants to know where species are and where they are not. Lastly, and perhaps most importantly, I recommend bringing a thermos of hot tea or cocoa to keep warm!

Owl Habitat Preferences

Species	Habitat
Barn Owl	Open habitats
Eastern Screech-Owl	Open deciduous forests, woodlots, orchards, residential areas
Great Horned Owl	Wide variety from forest to farmland
Barred Owl	Moist woods, wooded swamps, bottomlands
Long-eared Owl	Coniferous and mixed forest
Short-eared Owl	Grasslands
Northern Saw-whet Owl	Mixed moist woods with conifers

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Breeding Season Table for Owls

Species	Information from Literature			Breeding Dates for NY		
	# Broods	Incubation	Nestling Period	Eggs	Nestlings	Fledglings
Barn Owl	1-2	32-34	Fly at 60, indep at 70	all months		
Eastern Screech-Owl	1	21-26	Lv nest at 35	3/23-7/8	4/9-7/15	3/25-9/18
Great Horned Owl	1	30-35	Lv nest at 31-35	1/22-7/24	2/15-7/9	3/25-12/21
Barred Owl	1	21-28	Fly at 6 weeks	3/20-5/4	4/14-7/4	5/4-9/11
Long-eared Owl	1, occ 2	21-30	Lv nest at 23-24	3/21-5/23	5/5-6/24	6/1-8/8
Short-eared Owl	1, occ 2	24-28	Lv nest at 12-17, fly @ 22-27	4/2-5/19	5/7-6/19	6/11-7/13
Northern Saw-whet Owl	1	26-28	Lv nest at 36, occ longer	3/31-6/11	4/21-7/16	5/9-8/29

Calendar of Early Breeders

- **January:** Great Horned Owl, Red Crossbill, 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, Canada Jay, American Crow, Fish Crow, American Robin, House Sparrow.
- **April:** Pied-billed Grebe, Great Blue Heron, Green 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, Wilson’s Snipe, Upland Sandpiper, Great Black-backed Gull, Herring Gull, 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.

Atlas Opportunities

Are you looking to do more for the atlas? We are currently looking to fill several positions. We are looking for Regional Coordinators to galvanize volunteers in the Syracuse and Rochester areas, a Development Director to spearhead fundraising activities, a Campaign Manager for our Sponsor-a-Species program, and an Event Coordinator to help plan an atlas kick-off party next spring or summer. If you are interested in any of these positions, please contact Julie, Project Coordinator, at julie.hart@dec.ny.gov.

Get Your Atlas Swag On!

Head on over to Zazzle.com (<https://www.zazzle.com/store/nybbaiii/products>) to purchase swanky merchandise featuring the striking Pileated Woodpecker atlas logo. While showing your support for the project, 5% of the purchase price will be donated to the atlas!

- Julie Hart

