



NYSOA

New York Birders

New York State

Ornithological Association, Inc.

For the Birders and Birds of the Empire State Since 1948

Volume 49 Number 1 (203) January 2020

New York's Breeding Bird Atlas III Begins!

NY BBA III Kick-off Party!

Join us in celebrating the start of the third Breeding Bird Atlas! Plan to visit the Rogers Environmental Center in Sherburne (central New York) June 6 for a day of atlas activities. Additional field trips are planned for the evening of June 5th and morning of the 7th. Members of the Atlas team will lead atlas walks to share their tips for the field and how to record observations using eBird. Pick up some tips on atlasing for difficult species and learn how your observations contribute to the conservation of birds and habitats in the state. Anyone with an interest in learning more about the Atlas is welcome and encouraged to come. More details to follow. Mark your calendar today!



Atlas Corner: Breeding Codes Part 2

In the July issue of *New York Birders*, I focused on the breeding codes that fall in the Confirmed category. The Confirmed codes are used to describe behaviors that provide strong evidence for breeding. But it's not realistic to 'confirm' all the birds breeding in an atlas block, nor do we want you to spend all your time doing so. The goal is for half of the birds in a block to be Confirmed, while the other half will have Possible or Probable codes. So what are these other codes?

Possible Breeding Codes

There are only two codes that fall in the Possible category and they are used to indicate the presence of a species in the block in the appropriate habitat (**H**) and singing birds (**S**). Both of these codes should only be used if the bird is in appropriate nesting habitat (you may have to look this up online or in a field guide) and only during the breeding season (look this up on the Breeding Guideline Bar Chart). With both codes, it's a good idea to return to the site a few weeks later to see if you can bump up the code for that species to the Probable or Confirmed categories. It's likely

(Continued on page 3)

In This Issue...

- 1 NY BBA III Kick-off Party
- 1 Atlas Corner: Breeding Codes Part 2
- 2 From the President
- 2 NY BBA III Regional Coordinator Retreat
- 2 2020 Board Meeting Dates
- 4 Highlights of the Nov. 2, 2020 NYSOA Board Mtg.
- 5 Winter Weekend in Adirondacks
- 5 County & State Listing: Awaiting Your Report!
- 6 Conservation Column: It's All About Habitat
- 7 Shawn Billerman—Appointed to NYSARC
- 7 2020 Checklist Booklet Available
- 8 NYSOA Speakers Bureau
- 9 Mark Your Calenders: NYSOA 2020 Annual Mtg.
- 10 Kid's-Eye View: Liberty Marsh & Winding Waters Trail
- 10 From the Editor
- 11 Poetry: The Owl by Edward Thomas

From the President

I hope you're staying cozy and warm in your winter birding outfits and that you experience what my husband's aunt called "traveling mercies" as you're out and about looking for our state's wonderful winter birds.

Lots of us complain about the weather, but when flocks of Snow Buntings, the occasional Snowy Owl, Rough-legged Hawks, crossbills, and other winter specialties are around, the cold, snow, and ice aren't so daunting. Please join NYSOA February 22 and 23 for a special field trip led by Joan Collins and Mary Beth Warburton. You can find information about this event in this issue.

As I write this article, I'm preparing for this year's Christmas Count. I'm in charge of coordinating an urban sector in Rochester, which includes downtown, where there has been a crow roost numbering 20,000+ birds. For years it was in the same place, right in front of the theater where *A Christmas Carol's* audience took great offense at the "Christmas presents" the crows gave. The city inaugurated a dispersal effort, and so for the last several years, finding the roost has been a challenge. A small group of us scout prior to the count, chasing crows and hoping we can track them so we can discover the roost.

Every year, this search reminds me of a special NYSOA moment. Many years ago, Lillian and Donald Stokes were the keynote speakers at the Annual Meeting, and they spoke about crows. Lillian hopped around demonstrating crow behavior, and she and Donald recounted one of their escapades following flying crows to their roost. This story intrigued me, and years later, I can be like Lillian. What an honor! Who knows what memories await those of us who will attend this year's meeting in Syracuse, October 2-4? Mark your calendars and look for registration to begin this spring.

Of course, the annual Christmas Counts are just one way we document the birds of New York State. We have reports in our journal, *The Kingbird*, and our New York State Avian Records Committee reviews sightings to make sure our record of species found in the state is accurate. This year we can undertake a special contribution: collecting data on the distribution of breeding birds as we participate in the NY Breeding Bird Atlas III project. It's your observations that will bring this five-year project to fruition. Visit ebird.org/atlasny to get started, and please consider donating.

I hope your association with NYSOA is as rewarding as I've found mine. Be sure you've paid your dues for 2020, and think about renewing your membership at a higher level. Good birding! *Shirley Shaw, President*

NY Breeding Bird Atlas III Regional Coordinator Retreat



This past fall, a retreat was held in the Albany area for NY Breeding Bird Atlas III Regional Coordinators. Attendees pictured above:

Back row from left:
Zach Schwartz-Weinstein
Mike Scheibel
Brendan Fogarty
Jeff Bolsinger
Tom Wheeler

Front row from left:
Gale VerHague
Molly Adams
Matt Medler
Wendy Tocci
Julie Hart

Absent:
Sue Barth
Andrea Patterson
Dave Nicosia
Anne Swaim

NYSOA Board Meeting Dates for 2020

February 1, 2020—Conference Call

April 4, 2020—Montezuma Audubon Center

July 11, 2020—Albany Pine Bush Preserve
Discovery Center

November 14, 2020—Albany Pine Bush Preserve
Discovery Center (tentative location)

the bird is on territory but maybe you are there at the wrong time of day or too early in the season.

There are some notable caveats to these codes, which are spelled out in the Volunteer Handbook and Breeding Code sheets on the atlas website. For some species, you'll need to learn the difference between calls and songs. For example, the "chick-a-dee-dee" of a Black-capped Chickadee is their call (you would use the **H** code), while "fee-bee" is their song (**S**). Some groups of birds don't technically have songs, but they are used in the same way as the songs of passerines. You can use the **S** code for owl calls, rail vocalizations, woodpecker drumming, and woodcock peenting. In some species, such as Northern Cardinal and Bicknell's Thrush, females sing and it's impossible to tell the sexes apart vocally. Since both sexes are singing for the same purpose, to advertise their presence in their territory, you can use the **S** code for these species.

Probable Breeding Codes

The Probable codes are a stronger indication of breeding, but fall short of seeing the actual nest or nestlings, which are reserved for the Confirmed category. One of the easier codes in this category is the **S7** code for birds that you observe singing in the same location on two separate visits at least a week apart. This is a stronger indication that the bird is on territory and will stick around to breed than the possible **S** code. Similarly, if you observe 7 males of the same species within your block in appropriate habitat (**M**), it's very likely that at least one of them (probably more) are breeding. Pairs of birds (**P**) are also stronger than just a single male and so are also Probable.



*Clapper Rail vocalizing in a saltmarsh (S)
Photo © Ian Davies*

Courtship displays and copulation (**C**) are a clear indication that the pair is getting ready to nest in the area. A fascinating bonus of atlasing is the wide array of courtship behaviors you witness. If you haven't spent much time watching bird behaviors, you'll quickly find yourself looking up weird postures and movements to determine if they are used for courtship or aggression. Sometimes there is little difference between the two!



Common Tern agitated by an intruder (A) Photo © Ian Davies

The two most confused atlas codes are territorial defense (**T**) and agitated behavior (**A**). These codes are basically varying degrees of agonistic behaviors aimed at intruders. Usually territorial disputes are between individuals of the same species, but there are a few exceptions involving birds of another species that competes for the same resources. Agitated behavior involves a higher degree of anxiety and aggression, often against brood parasites, nest predators, and humans. Agitated behavior includes direct attacks on you, the observer, such as by terns and hawks. If you are in doubt about which code to use, use your best judgment and include comments for that species in your checklist.

There are two additional codes reserved for species that are suspected of breeding in an area, but for which we can't confirm it. There are times when we strongly suspect that a bird is nesting in a particularly dense shrub or disappears into a cavity and doesn't come out for a while. You might see the bird or pair repeatedly enter a site, but no active nest building or carrying food. These are the types of situations you would use the visiting probable nest site (**N**) code. The other code is reserved for wren and woodpecker nest building (**B**). Wrens build multiple "dummy" nests, but only end up using one of them. Since you can't tell if or where exactly they are nesting, use the **B** code. Woodpeckers use cavities to roost in and for nesting. Use the **B** code when you observe a woodpecker excavating a cavity, since you can't tell if it will be used for roosting or nesting. For both the **N** and **B** codes, it can be worthwhile to visit the site again in a couple weeks to see if you hear any nestlings or see the parents carrying food into the suspected nest.

Now you are familiar with all the breeding codes! If you forget any or want a cheat sheet to take in the field, download a breeding code sheet from the website (<https://ebird.org/atlasny/about/breeding-codes>). When in doubt about which code to use, include comments in your checklist and post a question to the Atlas Discussion Group on Facebook. Lastly, have fun learning about all the nuanced breeding behaviors of birds! - Julie Hart