

# Atlas Corner: Atlas Essentials

By Julie Hart, NY BBA III Project Coordinator

We are all feeling the pressures of the current pandemic. At the time of this writing, birding remains one of the few safe activities we can engage in outside the home. Fortunately for us, the birds are returning from the south and our resident birds are already starting their nesting activities. If you want to use atlasing to help you get through these difficult times, here is a run-down of the Atlas Essentials.



*Bank and Barn Swallows: Take a cue from these swallows and be sure to practice social distancing while atlasing. Photo © Ian Davies/Macaulay Library*

The three B's of Atlas Essentials are Blocks, Behaviors, and eBird. **Respect block boundaries while observing breeding behaviors and submit your data through the atlas portal in eBird.**

## Block Boundaries

Data collection for the atlas centers on blocks. New York is a large state, so we make the project more manageable by breaking it down into smaller blocks. Within each block, atlasers record all the birds and breeding behaviors they observe. The important thing to keep in mind is to **record data for each block separately**. If your usual birding route crosses a block boundary, you should split it up into

two lists. In order to help you determine where block boundaries are, the atlas portal of the eBird website and mobile app display the block boundaries. There are also maps available to download on the website, and if you use a GPS app, there are files you can install that will show you block boundaries in the field.

You can submit data for any block in the state, but if you have a choice, **target priority blocks**. Priority blocks were selected to cover one-third of the state in a systematic manner. If we can adequately cover all the priority blocks, we will have a good representation of where birds are distributed across the state.

Determining adequate coverage requires tracking the amount of effort that atlasers spend in any given block and how their time is spent. Each block needs to be adequately surveyed over the five years of the project; if a block receives adequate coverage in 2020, it does not need to be atlased again in future years. The guidelines for determining adequate coverage include visiting all major habitats throughout the breeding season, spending time during the day and at night, finding a high percentage of species in a block, and documenting confirmed breeding for half the species.

## Breeding Behaviors

Breeding behaviors are at the heart of atlasing. Breeding bird atlases strive to document the birds that are attempting to nest in a given area. It's not practical (or safe) to search for nests, so we rely on behavioral cues to determine if a bird is nesting. Each behavior represents a different stage in the breeding cycle, ranging from singing and courtship to nest building and feeding fledglings. Behaviors fall in four categories: observed, possible, probable, and confirmed. The stronger the evidence, the higher the category. Each behavior indicates that the bird is using the habitat to help raise young.



*Henslow's Sparrow: Breeding behaviors range from singing, as this rare Henslow's Sparrow is doing, to nests with young. Photo © Ian Davies/Macaulay Library*

## Princeton University Press Offer for NYSOA Members

Dear Friends at the New York State Ornithological Association,

I'm enclosing a 30% discount code (**BIRD30**), *effective immediately*, with my sincere hopes that Princeton's birding books might help to brighten the days of your members during this difficult time.

**This discount covers all of our birding books and bird-watching products.**

The 30% discount covers birding field guides, photographic guides, reference works, and products (such as illustrated birding checklists, calendars, and flash cards). To do some armchair shopping (and birding), visit PUP's website at [https://press.princeton.edu/books?subjects\[\]=22671](https://press.princeton.edu/books?subjects[]=22671) and enter code **BIRD30**.

Be well,

**Barbara Tonetti**  
Reference Marketing Manager  
Princeton University Press  
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One of the goals of the atlas is to better understand breeding phenology in New York State. Breeding phenology relates to the timing of breeding. The more checklists you submit with codes, the better we will be able to fill in our gaps in understanding.

**Please submit codes each time you observe breeding behaviors.** eBird is only designed to accept one breeding code per species, so we ask that you submit the highest or strongest code you observe during a checklist. If you have already reported a Gray Catbird carrying nesting material in a block, but later see a catbird feeding fledglings, use the FY code for feeding young so we can track breeding stages throughout the season. Some species, such as catbirds, have multiple broods per season, and eBird allows us to track their complete nesting cycle. If you see a breeding behavior, even if it seems early or late in the year, report it. The one caveat is the usage of the H or habitat code. Please only use the habitat code if you see the bird in the suitable nesting habitat and it is within their expected breeding season. Using the H code only in these situations gives it value over the observed category.

### eBird and the Atlas Portal

All atlas data should be entered via the atlas portal on eBird. The portal is designed to display atlas data at the block level and show results in a user-friendly format in real time. By using the portal, you are indicating that you are aware of the atlas project, stay within block boundaries, and understand breeding behaviors. For many of us that become addicted to atlasing, we will be atlasing nonstop to a greater or lesser extent for the next five years. If that sounds like you, **use the atlas portal for all your checklists.**

The portal is accessed one of two ways. If you enter data using the eBird mobile app, change the portal to "New York Breeding Bird Atlas" in the application settings on your mobile device. See the atlas website for detailed instructions. If you prefer to enter data online through a web browser, go to <https://ebird.org/atlasny>. You need to type in the "/atlasny" at the end of the basic eBird URL. This brings you to the atlas website and any checklists you submit from this page will go into the atlas portal.

Now that you have the basics down, fly on over to the atlas website for more details on the Atlas Essentials. And as we head into the busy spring and summer birding months, please be safe and have fun!



*Female Red Crossbill hanging from a cone in North Hudson, Essex Co.*

*Photo © Joan Collins*