

Atlas Corner: How to Confirm Birds

By Julie Hart, Atlas Project Coordinator (July 2021)

Introduction

If this is your first atlas, you might be wondering what ‘confirming’ a bird as breeding means, or how to get a confirmation. You’re in the right place, and at the right time of year.

June to August is the best time of year to confirm breeding birds. There are young to be fed, fluffy fledglings flopping around, and some birds even building new nests for their second or even third broods of the year. Check out our tips below and have fun with it!

Check every beak

Look at every bird and check their beak. Some of the most frequently used codes are carrying nesting material (CN) and carrying food (CF), which are almost always carried in the bill (sometimes in the feet). Also look for eggshells or slimy, white blobs called fecal sacs (like baby bird diapers), which are coded with FS. Even singing birds can be found with objects in their bill (some species have a specially structured syrinx that lets them switch from using one side or the other so they don’t have to stop to take a breath or drop what they are carrying), so just because a bird is singing doesn’t mean you should disregard it. It pays to first check the beak anytime you see a bird from April through August.



Lincoln's Sparrow carrying food. Photo © Daniel Schlaepfer

The easiest way to confirm birds is to check every beak!

Keep an ear out for strange sounds

While atlasing requires a switch in your birding style to slow down and watch individual birds, tuning in to strange



Lincoln's Sparrow Fledgling. Photo © Daniel Schlaepfer

sounds helps you get more confirmations. Persistently singing adult males may not give away any confirmed breeding behaviors, but they do clue you in to a female or nest nearby. Adults make soft calls to communicate with each other and with nestlings, nestlings and juveniles make all sorts of begging calls, and later on the juveniles will start practicing their songs. Come late June and early July, the soundscape is full of high-pitched nestling calls (not to be confused with Cedar Waxwings!). You may not know what species is making the sound, but if you look for the source and wait for an adult to make an appearance, you’re almost guaranteed to get a confirmation. If you hear begging get really fast and then stop, you know a nestling or fledgling just got fed!

Alarm calls are another group of sounds that become much more common in the summer breeding season. If you hear a Red-eyed Vireo giving its harsh *myaah* alarm call along with a group of chickadees giving loud *chick-a-dee-dee-dee-dee* calls ([listen to example](#)), you know there is a nest predator nearby, usually a crow, jay, hawk, or owl. If you hear a Blue Jay mixed in with the mobbing, you know it’s a larger predator, most likely a hawk or owl. You can use these mobbing frenzies to your advantage to tip you off to a hawk or owl nearby. Sometimes you can even get a few species added to the block that you didn’t know were nesting nearby (like a skulking Scarlet Tanager). And don’t forget to check every beak, because a few birds may come in to investigate what all the fuss is about with nesting material or food still in their bill.

One of the most common refrains from new atlasers after the first year of the Atlas was, surprisingly, how much better they became at birding by ear. The [Merlin](#) and [Audubon](#) apps and the [Xeno-Canto](#) website are good resources for learning some of the more common baby bird sounds and adult alarm calls.

Watch suspicious birds

There should really be another breeding code for “suspicious birds.” If you run across a silent Blue Jay,



Palm Warbler carrying food. Photo © Julie Hart

you *know* it's up to something! You may not be as familiar with the habits of other species, but any time you see a bird moving around quietly in the vegetation, particularly a female, it's worth watching it for a few minutes to see if it picks up some nesting material or food, or perhaps visits a nest.

Most of our normal birding focuses on identifying species, based mostly on what we hear singing. But singing males often just do that, they sing from a tall perch and defend their territory. That's great and all, but it only gets you to possible (S) or at best probable (S7 or M) breeding. Some males don't even help out in nest building, incubating, or raising young (that's where understanding nesting habits comes in). In many species, you want to find the female and they are often quiet or only give soft chip notes. Use the singing birds to your advantage; look in the area nearby for a bird moving around quietly, which will often turn out to be the female busily taking care of nesting activities.

While there is no breeding behavior code for suspicious birds, with a little bit of patience you can usually turn that observation into a confirmation.

Understand nesting habitat and habits

Use your birding experience to help you figure out what birds to be on the lookout for in different habitats. Then go one step further. Read up on the biology of species of interest. Find out where they build their nest (on the ground or high up in the canopy, deciduous or coniferous trees, grasses or shrubs), the type of nest they have (cavity, cup, or depression), and the materials they use to make their nest (mud, sticks, or pebbles). Knowing a little bit of this kind of information will go a long way in helping you know where to focus your attention when you are in the field.

The next step is to start learning if the females or males do most of the nest building, incubating, or caring for the young ([see information for some common species](#)). Once you know that male Red-winged Blackbirds and Baltimore Orioles don't help build the nest, you'll know not to spend as much time watching them. On the other hand, when it's

fledgling time, you'll be looking for male Northern Cardinals, Eastern Bluebirds, and Rose-breasted Grosbeaks feeding fledglings while the female starts incubating another brood. [All About Birds](#) and the [Audubon app](#) are good resources to start delving into this type of information.

Becoming familiar with nesting habits is a more advanced skill that takes time and experience to build. Getting outside and watching birds is a great way to add to your ever-building knowledge base—and appreciation—of birds!

Understand seasonal patterns

There are different species breeding at different times of year, but there are some general patterns that can help guide your atlasng.

1. Residents often breed before migrants. Residents get a head start because they are already here and on territory. If you look at the [Guide to early nesters](#), you'll see that most of these species are residents. This is why we recommend a visit to priority blocks in April. There are also some species that breed really late in the year, others that have two or even three broods, and some that can nest year-round! Check out the Breeding Timeline for more details.
2. Species within a region are usually well synchronized. Once you know that Yellow-bellied Sapsuckers have nests with (loud and noisy) young in one block, you can hit neighboring blocks that same week and you are likely to document several more sapsucker nests. It helps to regularly keep tabs on the local breeders so that you know the optimal time to look for each species.
3. Understand how your likelihood of confirming breeding changes throughout the breeding cycle. The guidelines below are geared toward migrant songbirds, but they can be applied generally to most birds.
 - **Territory establishment and courtship (Moderate).** It's unlikely you will confirm any breeding during this time, but you can rack up the species list in a block with all the singing, territorial displays, and courtship rituals. (Codes frequently used: S/S7/M, P, T/A, C)
 - **Nest building (Easy).** Nest building usually starts about a week after females return from migration. It's easier to track the birds to their nest at this time (as opposed to during the nestling period)

because the trees aren't fully leafed out. (Codes frequently used: N, B, CN, NB)

- **Egg-laying (Hard).** The female only visits the nest to lay eggs. She is likely still courting and copulating with her mate so you can get Probable breeding. (Codes frequently used: P, C, N)
- **Incubation (Hard).** The male picks up singing while the females effectively disappear because they are sitting silently on the nest. Females may give a unique call (often to communicate with their mates) as they leave the nest. Males guard the nest in some species. Male singing starts to slow down. (Codes frequently used: N, ON, NE)
- **Nestling period (Easy).** Both parents bring food to the nestlings and remove fecal sacs. Young birds make a lot of high-pitched begging sounds. Males are pretty quiet. (Codes frequently used: DD, CF, NY)
- **Fledgling period (Moderate).** Both parents feed the young, but the young are moving around; young make lots of begging sounds; males may sing again to help the young learn their song; in some species with multiple broods, the females start another nest and leave the males to finish caring for the first group of fledglings. (Codes frequently used: DD, CF, FY, FL)



Palm Warbler Fledgling. Photo © Daniel Schlaepfer

Final Tip: Refer to these tips the next 3 years!

This article is helpful throughout the breeding season, which is generally January through August. This year you should keep a special watch out through the autumn for both Red and White-winged Crossbills, which appear to be sticking around for another breeding season to take advantage of large cone crops.

New Editor Opportunity for *New York Birders*

NYSOA is seeking a new Editor for this newsletter. After 7 years as Editor of *New York Birders*, and 25 years editing newsletters for other organizations, Joan Collins is taking a break. If you enjoy the creative endeavor of producing a newsletter and communicating important news and events to the birders of New York State, or know someone who would be interested, please contact Joan Collins at Newsletter1@NYBirds.org. Joan will work with the new Editor to ensure a smooth transition.

24th Annual Montezuma Muckrace September 10-11, 2021 7 p.m. to 7 p.m.

The Montezuma Muckrace, organized by the Friends of the Montezuma Wetlands Complex, is a 24-hour birding competition that raises funds for bird conservation projects and environmental education programs throughout the Complex. For more information, including 2021 Montezuma Muckrace registration and sponsorship details, visit the Friends of the Montezuma Wetlands Complex website at <https://friendsofmontezuma.org/projects-programs/muckrace/>.



8th Annual Seatuck Long Island Birding Challenge Saturday, September 25, 2021



The Seatuck Long Island Birding Challenge is Long Island's only island-wide birding competition. It helps promote bird watching, wildlife conservation and open space preservation across the region – and raises important funding to support Seatuck's wildlife conservation work. The event is open to all levels of experience, from expert birders to complete novices. Fall migration provides large numbers of birds and a great diversity of species. To register visit: seatuck.org/birding-challenge/