# WHAT'S HATCHING?

*Official Newsletter of the Maryland & DC Breeding Bird Atlas 3*

**ISSUE NO 1 | FEB 2020**

Photo credit: Jim Brighton

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Have a story or a picture for the newsletter? We'd love to hear about it!

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## BIRD OF THE MONTH

One of our earliest nesters, Great Horned Owls are hard-core mammal munchers who make less-than-desirable neighbors.

## TIPS AND TRICKS

Learn when to use the Atlas 'portal', why we need an Atlas portal, and how to move checklists between portals.

## FROM THE FIELD

Maryland and DC have the Atlas itch! Why be at Dave's New Year's party when you can be shivering in the dark listening for owls? No doubt about it, we made the right call on that one. Sorry, Dave.

Bald Eagle was the first species Confirmed breeding during the Atlas. Not wasting any time, Jim Stasz reported two adults occupying a nest on January 1 in the North Beach CE block (Calvert County). While the safe dates for Bald Eagles don't begin until April 15, many pairs are already nesting by January. Safe dates are a guide for when you can be reasonably confident that migrants are absent. Many Bald Eagles overwinter here, but will breed elsewhere. This means an eagle seen before April 15 may or may not be breeding, while after April 15 an adult eagle seen is likely to be breeding.

Photo credit: Bill Hubick

"It is now the responsibility of every citizen to seek ways to further reduce our cumulative impact on avian populations."

*- Chandler Robbins*

An Atlas is ultimately an effort to contribute to bird conservation, and there are actions we can take in addition to collecting data such as keeping cats indoors, making windows bird-friendly, and planting native plants. *Learn more at 3billionbirds.org.*

## HOW TO ATLAS

**01**

Read the Handbook—so much info here!

**02**

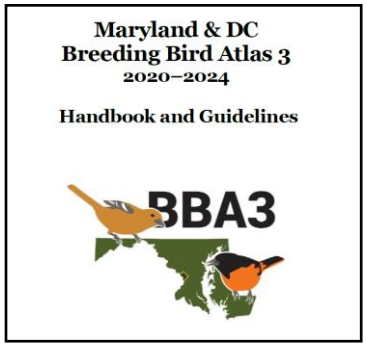
Identify the birds you find.

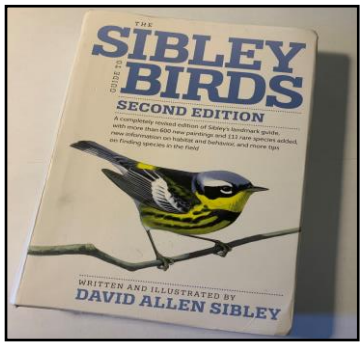
**03**

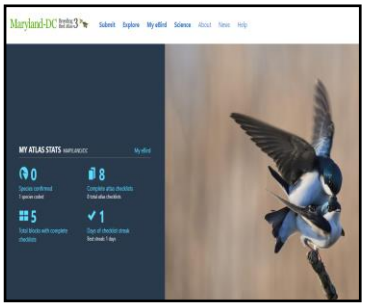
Watch the birds' behavior and decide which breeding code fits best, if any.

**04**

Submit your observations to the Atlas eBird (ebird.org/atlasmddc).



# From the Coordinator

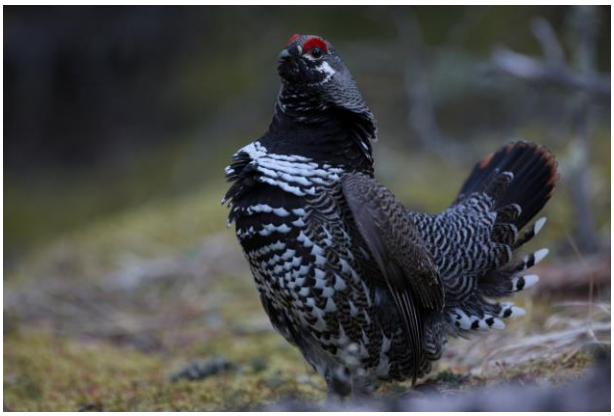
***"Who the heck is this coordinator guy, anyways? I heard he's from Canada..." – overheard regularly***

It's true! I'm from Saskatchewan, the heart of the Canadian prairies. It's a beautiful landscape with a mouth-watering list of birds. Where else can you get Boreal and Great Gray Owls, Spruce and Ruffed Grouse, LeConte's and Baird's Sparrows, Franklin's and California Gulls, Piping and Black-bellied Plovers, Upland and Semipalmated Sandpipers, Blackburnian and Cape May Warblers, Red Knots and Red-necked Phalaropes, Lark Buntings and Lark Sparrows… all on the same day! Indeed, these are all species I have seen on the same day of birding in Saskatchewan. The subtlety of the windswept landscape tinkling with unseen birdsong grips you tightly and leaves you forever affected. I can't hide my love for this underappreciated region—and yet I left. It leads any curious observer to an obvious question: why? It's a fair question; I had a job I loved working for the Nature Conservancy of Canada, the birding was fabulous, and there was even free health care! The answer, in short, is that I absolutely love atlases, and when I saw the Atlas Coordinator position advertised, I simply couldn't resist. I had birded in the region a fair bit, and, as lovely as the prairies are, the thought of living with both mountains and the coast just a few hours away was enticing. And Maryland is no slouch when it comes to birding or biodiversity either! I was excited to work on the Atlas project and to explore a new region. But what I didn't fully anticipate is how wonderfully friendly the Maryland and DC birding community would be. Wherever I have gone, I have been welcomed with open arms and dynamic enthusiasm. I was excited before I arrived, but that excitement has been charged with the electric passion of a community bursting with the pride of a conservation legacy unlike anywhere else. There's no where else I would rather be. Welcome to the Atlas, Maryland-DC.

--Gabriel

Photo credit: George Jett

I have been welcomed with open arms and dynamic enthusiasm



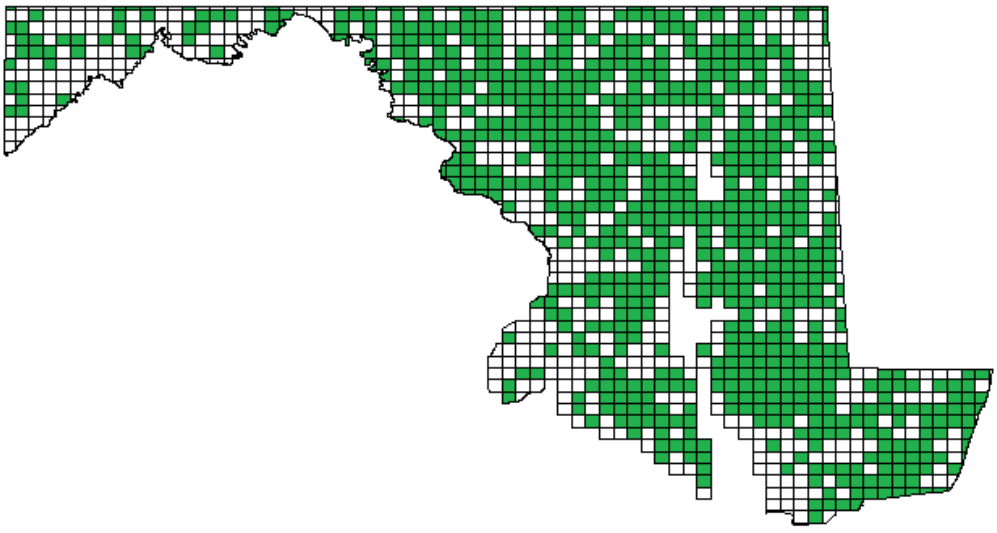
**bird of the month:**

# GREAT HORNED OWL

Photo credit: Mark Johnson

Great Horned Owls have the most extensive North American range of any owl, are found across the continent, and do not migrate. In any given region, they are one of the earliest nesters and can successfully incubate their eggs at temperatures below -25 degrees F. Part of the reason they have such a widespread range is their ability to change their body temperature in response to ambient temperatures. When it's cold, this decreases their metabolic requirements (like a hibernating bat), and their moisture requirements (less evaporation). A long-lived species, they can be as old as 30 years in the wild. You won't be able to distinguish the sexes by plumage, but if you listen carefully, males tend to have deeper hoots—despite being about 25% smaller than females. Females also take care of incubation, so an owl on a nest is almost certainly a female.

You'll find Great Horned Owls in deciduous, coniferous, or mixed forests, but the owls' home range nearly always includes open areas that are adjacent to the forest. Golf courses, orchards, and agricultural areas near wooded areas are good places to look. Great Horned Owls hunt from a perch, and have an effective hunting range of 300 ft. About 90% of the prey Great Horned Owls eat is mammals. Rabbits, mice, and voles make up most of their prey, but larger animals such as skunks, raccoons, or cats are also taken—a good reason to keep your cat indoors. The remaining 10% of their diet is mostly birds. They eat primarily waterfowl—especially coots—but they also take birds that roost in the open, like pigeons or starlings, or birds that forage at night, such as nightjars or



Great Horned Owl distribution map from the Maryland & DC Breeding Bird Atlas 2.

## GREAT HORNED OWLS

***You'll find Great Horned Owls in deciduous, coniferous, or mixed forests, but the owls' home range nearly always includes open areas that are adjacent to the forest.***

Great Horned Owls, like other nocturnal species, are difficult to detect. Their distribution map is heavily dependent on observers' nocturnal effort. Great Horned Owls begin nesting earlier than most other birds, further compounding detection issues—observers need to be out at the right time in the right season. Especially in more remote areas, this issue can severely hamper detection rates. Although Great Horned Owls do not nest year-round, they do maintain their territories year-round. Regardless of season, if one is hooting it will likely breed nearby once nesting season arrives. Return to these locations, or explore eBird for non-breeding observations, then relocate the owls during the nesting season to provide the Atlas with better evidence of breeding.

other owls. They will also raid other birds' nestlings, especially crows, ravens, and hawks. Great Horned Owls don't drink water; instead, they get moisture from their food.

A pair of Great Horned Owls will duet with each other one–two months prior to egg laying as a form of both courtship and territory defense. They call most during the hour after sunset, sometimes between midnight and 1 am, and again shortly before sunrise.


Great Horned Owl and chick. Photo credit: Stacey Rich Bergman

In a study in the Yukon, Canada, researchers found that about 70% of males responded to playback. Interestingly, only individuals that hold a territory will hoot; owls with no territories (or mates), called 'floaters', are completely silent and live along the boundaries of other owls' territories. Great Horned Owls are monogamous, and apparently faithful to each other—unusual in the avian world. They are also intolerant of any other owl within their home range, although there is one exceptional record of a Great Horned and a Barred Owl with nests in the same tree! Great Horned Owls make use of an enormous variety of nest sites, from cavities to cliff ledges to the ground, but most commonly they take over used nests. They will use crow, raven, heron, or squirrel nests, but most often they use former Red-tailed Hawk nests. This means that most Great Horned Owl  nests will be in the tops of deciduous trees, since that is where red-tails prefer to nest, and that most nest sites are only used once. Great Horned Owls put no effort into maintaining a nest—they may not even line their nest—so most nests have fallen apart by the end of the season. Great Horned Owls lay one to four nearly spherical, dull white eggs, but usually two. Incubation begins immediately after laying the first egg. Additional eggs are laid every two days (although sometimes this can be as long as seven days), and each egg will be successively smaller. The eggs hatch, on average, 33 days later. The male will provide all of the food for the nest; if the female hunts, it's because his provisions are insufficient. The young, which are covered in downy feathers until June, are capable of feeding themselves after 3–4 weeks. At 40 days, they are about 75% the weight of an adult, and will clamber out of the nest, usually sitting on nearby tree limbs. At 45–49 days, they take their first clumsy flights. They will continue to harass their parents with a whiny begging call for eight to ten weeks after fledging, which can be an excellent way to confirm breeding.

*Author: Gabriel Foley*

References

Artuso, C., C.S. Houston, D.G. Smith, and C. Rohner (2013). Great Horned Owl (*Bubo virginianus*), version 2.0. In The Birds of North America (A.F. Poole, Editor). Cornell Lab of Ornithology, Ithaca, NY, USA. https://doi.org/10.2173/bna.372

Great Horned Owl with prey. Photo credit: Jim Brighton

# ATLASER SPOTLIGHT

***Andy Wilson (@AndyWGettysburg), from Frederick, Frederick County, is an Associate Professor of Environmental Studies at Gettysburg College, PA.***

*How did you become interested in birds?*
I was very young, so I can't remember the spark, but the interest was kindled by my parents and a kind elementary school teacher.

*Where is your favorite place to atlas?*
The grasslands in northern Frederick County.

*What bird do you particularly like?*
Common Nighthawk. I'm wowed by seeing migrating flocks over my house each late summer. It's a highlight of my birding calendar.

*If you went atlasing and could only bring binoculars, a field guide, and one other item, which item would you bring?*
A smartphone. I do a lot of birding by ear, so sometimes a phone is more useful than binoculars!

*What bird best reflects your personality?*
I recently took an online quiz, and the suggested answer was Bald Eagle. I wish! I guess the 'bald' bit is spot on.

*If you could pick anyone to go atlasing with for a day, who would it be?*
My brother, Pete. We grew up birding together, but he lives in England so we don't get the opportunity. Can I have "any two"? That would include my sister-in-law Dawn—she was organizer and editor of the 3rd British and Irish bird atlas.

*Have you been involved with any other atlases?*
I was editor for the 2nd Pennsylvania atlas, I helped set up a Norfolk County bird atlas in England 20 years ago, and I have helped with data analysis for the 2nd West Virginia and Ohio atlases.

*What do you think is the best thing about atlasing?*
Atlasing gets you to slow down and observe bird behavior.

*What do you think the biggest issue in conservation is today?*
Habitat loss, especially in tropical biodiversity hotspots. We all need to think more carefully about our diets...there are potentially big wins for conservation and the climate from modest changes.

## UPCOMING EVENTS

Feb 19 – Atlas talk: Cecil County Bird Club; 19:00–20:30, Cecil County Public Library, Elkton.

Feb 20 – Atlas talk: Caroline County Bird Club; 19:30–21:00, Caroline County Public Library, Denton.

Feb 27 – Atlas talk: Baltimore atlasers; 19:00–20:00, Irvine Nature Center, Owings Mills. *Contact baltimore@mdbirds.org to register.*

Feb 29 – Leap Into the Atlas! Big Day event; social at 19:00, Jailbreak Brewing Company, Laurel.

Mar 10 – Atlas talk: Patuxent Bird Club; 19:00–21:00, College Park Airport, College Park.

Mar 11 – Atlas talk: Dorchester Community Meeting; 19:00-20:00, Dorchester County Public Library, Cambridge.

Mar 22 – Atlas training: Harford Bird Club; 13:30–15:00, Churchville Presbyterian Church, Churchville.

Mar 23 – Atlas talk: Tri-county Bird Club; 19:00–21:00, MAC Education Center, Salisbury.

*Want to learn more? Visit the event calendar at ebird.org/atlasmddc/events.*

# BLOCK PARTY

## Rockville NE, Montgomery County

Rockville NE is directly north of the town of Rockville in Montgomery County. The largely suburban block has an impressive amount of greenspace with public access—ideal for atlasing. Several small parks are scattered across the block, but Rock Creek Park and the associated Lake Needwood fill 1,800 acres of the block's northeastern corner. The park has an extensive set of trails, and in the summer you can find Black-billed Cuckoos, Yellow-breasted Chats, and Blue Grosbeaks. The city-owned Redgate Golf Course, just south of Lake Needwood, was closed in December 2018. Now, the overgrown course hosts the block's first Confirmed nester, a Great Horned Owl. According to eBird, the nest was first spotted on January 23. Depending on when she started incubation, the eggs will hatch no later than late February.

In the first atlas, BBA1, Rockville NE had 88 species that attempted breeding (Probable or Confirmed status) within the block. But in BBA2, that number dropped by twenty to 73 species. Notable losses include Northern Bobwhite and Ring-necked Pheasant, Common Nighthawk, Eastern Screech Owl, Horned Lark, Sedge Wren, Worm-eating Warbler, and Kentucky Warbler. The only species that was found in BBA2 that was not found in BBA1 was Tree Swallow, a species that showed a massive expansion across the region in BBA2.

If you've never had the chance to explore Rock Creek Park, why not head out for a hike there this summer?

*Author: Gabriel Foley*

Great Horned Owl incubating eggs at the former Redgate Golf Course. Photo credit: Jordan Rutter

### What is a block?

Maryland and DC are covered by a grid of 1,302 3 x 3 mile blocks. Observers record the birds that they find in each of these blocks and how likely the bird is to be breeding there. Many of these blocks are adopted by a primary atlaser, but anyone can atlas anywhere at anytime—the primary atlaser just ensures the block's atlasing targets will be met by the end of the Atlas. Atlas blocks form the basic unit of measurement for mapping each bird species and they help ensure the entire region is covered by observers. Blocks that are closer to populated areas tend to have more observers looking for birds more often than remote blocks. To have the best quality data for the entire region, we need to have the same minimum amount of effort in each block. Otherwise, we risk having misleading species maps. There are a lot of blocks to cover in remote areas, so—while you absolutely can still atlas as much as you want close to home—if you have a chance, take the opportunity to atlas a block with less effort recorded for it. Exploring new places means you never know what surprises you might find!

# TIPS AND TRICKS

The 'Atlas portal' is one of those jargony catchphrases you've heard thrown around a lot, but it's meaning is unclear, at best. When you submit a checklist to eBird, it goes into a gigantic database. But for the Atlas, we only want checklists from folks who understand the data collection methods—for instance, that you have to start a new checklist when you cross a block boundary. Someone unfamiliar with the Atlas probably isn't going to know this, so we can't just accept any old checklist.

An Atlas label on each checklist would be handy for knowing which checklists were submitted by atlasers, and which were submitted by non-atlasers. If a checklist had this Atlas label attached, then we know an atlaser submitted it and it can go into the Atlas database.

The 'Atlas portal' is how that label gets applied. If you submit a checklist through the Atlas portal, then the checklist receives a label that says 'MD-DC Breeding Bird Atlas 3', and we can accept it into our database.

Now that you know why we need the Atlas portal, when should you use it? Anytime that you have a breeding code on a checklist, you should submit the checklist through the Atlas portal. If you don't have a breeding code, you should submit it through general eBird. Normal checklist 'rules' still apply; you should report all the birds you were able to identify, even if they don't have a breeding code. If you are atlasing at night, you should submit the checklist through the portal, even if you don't have a breeding code, and even if you didn't detect any species. It's important to know how much effort folks have put into looking for nocturnal species; for example, if Joe goes looking for owls but he doesn't find any so he doesn't submit a checklist, how is Sally supposed to know that Joe went out looking? She may go out the next night, thinking that no one has spent any time looking for owls in that block.

It's easy to change the portal if you need to later (although you can only do that from a computer). Simply go to 'Manage My Checklists', click on the appropriate checklist, then click 'Checklist Tools' in the top right. A drop-down menu will appear, and you can select 'Change portal' from the menu. Then, click on the desired portal and select 'Save'. If you'd like screenshots to guide you through this, you can find them in the Handbook appendices.

*Author: Gabriel Foley*


## Are you up for the challenge??

On February 29, get outside and find some birds, then join everyone at 7:00 PM at Jailbreak Brewing Company (they have a full menu!) in Laurel, Howard County.

We'll have fun with finding 'winners' (who found the most ducks? Who had the most birds in their yard? Who saw the most species?), but the real goal is supporting the Atlas, meeting your fellow atlasers, and enjoying some fresh air.

Register with a minimum $10 donation to the Atlas, round up your birding pals and make a team (who will claim Best Team Name?), or sponsor another team and cheer them on!

For details, check out the website ebird.org/atlasmddc

# FROM THE FIELD

I didn't get a whole lot of sleep on New Year's Eve, but not for the typical, age 20-something reasons. Midnight was the official start of the Maryland & DC Breeding Bird Atlas 3, and I couldn't wait. I had plans with my partner, Jordan, and her dad, Keith, to get up early and go listen for owls. I thought it would be appropriate if the Atlas Coordinator submitted the project's first checklist, something I naively thought I could do at 4:30 AM on January 1.

We parked the car at the first of our planned stops, and I excitedly switched my portal over to the Atlas portal—any nocturnal checklist counts toward the Atlas—and we started listening. I played a recording of a Great Horned Owl. Keith perked up halfway through.

"Did you hear that?!" he said, "an owl, in the distance!"

I rewound the recording, and hit play. We heard Keith's owl again faintly, but the sound was coming through the speakers. Keith grumbled something uncomplimentary about owls, and we kept listening. We waited about ten minutes, then moved to the next location.


Keith Rutter, Jordan Rutter, and Gabriel Foley were eager to find some owls for the Atlas! Photo credit: Gabriel Foley

None of the locations held any owls for us, but it was still exciting to be submitting checklists. As the gray light of dawn appeared, I changed the portal back to general eBird. Now that it was daylight, I would only submit checklists with a breeding code to the Atlas portal. Somewhere to our left, a raven croaked. Our first bird of 2020! The three of us high-fived quietly, our grins communicating our excitement to one another.

When we got back home, I logged into eBird to see whether my checklist had been first. I burst out laughing. I hadn't stood a chance. Not only were other checklists entered, some during the New Year's fireworks display, but Bald Eagle had already been Confirmed.

One thing was clear: with levels of enthusiasm like this, the Atlas couldn't be anything but a massive success.

*Author: Gabriel Foley*

*Do you have a story you'd like to have featured in What's Hatching? We'd love to hear it! Contact the editor at mddcbba3@mdbirds.org.*

MarylandBiodiversityProject
marylandbiodiversity.com

When you're out atlasing, it helps to know the plants and insects as well. The Maryland Biodiversity Project is a fabulous way to learn about the region's flora and fauna, and you can contribute sightings to it as well! Check out marylandbiodiversity.com to learn more.