

WHAT'S HATCHING?

Official Newsletter of the Maryland & DC Breeding Bird Atlas 3

ISSUE NO 2 | MAR 2020



Photo credit: Tim Carney

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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

Listen for the crepuscular aerial performance of the American Woodcock to document their breeding.

TIPS AND TRICKS

Even experienced atlasers sometimes misunderstand safe dates—so what are they, anyways?

FROM THE FIELD

On Feb. 29, over 30 participants raised more than \$500 for the Atlas and collectively saw 139 species. Hear about the teams' *Leap into the Atlas* experiences.

A pair of Canada Geese were reported by Washington DC County Coordinator Dan Rauch on February 3 in the Alexandria CE block, DC. This wouldn't be unusual, except that they were accompanied by two goslings! Since the incubation period for Canada Geese is about 28 days, this pair began incubating shortly after New Year's Day. This represents one of the earliest nest records in Maryland and DC. In the previous atlas, the earliest nest was March 5 and goslings were noted on March 20, while the venerable Yellow Book lists the first egg date as March 31. Excellent find!



Photo credit: Gabriel Foley

"Those who contemplate the beauty of the earth find reserves of strength that will endure as long as life lasts."

- Rachel Carson

March has been a chaotic month with uncertainty ahead. Fortunately, birds can be an escape from the harshness of reality. Take a few moments when you can to appreciate the natural world around you and find the accompanying "reserves of strength".

UPCOMING EVENTS

*** PLEASE NOTE ***

Due to the current COVID-19 outbreak, upcoming events have been postponed or moved online. Please check on the event calendar (ebird.org/atlasmdc/events) for more information regarding a particular event.

From the Coordinator

Finding it difficult to switch back and forth between portals? It's okay to just submit everything to the Atlas portal.



The Atlas portal is how observations get separated from the rest of eBird observations; the portal essentially labels each checklist you submit. All Atlas observations have to be submitted to the Atlas portal. If checklists are submitted to 'general' eBird, the Atlas will never know about that checklist and subsequently not get that important data.

In the Handbook, in the last newsletter, and in other information, I have recommended that folks only submit checklists when they have a breeding code included on the checklist. And, naturally, there was an exception: all nocturnal checklists should also be submitted to the portal, regardless of breeding codes. This resulted in a lot of switching back and forth between portals, and it also uncovered an oversight within the app—changing the portal midway through a checklist doesn't affect that checklist. A user wouldn't know that, unless they happened to check later on their computer.

All of this is confusing, and it's difficult, especially if you aren't comfortable with using a smartphone. So, we decided to simplify and now recommend that atlasers submit all checklists to the Atlas portal, regardless of whether the checklists have breeding codes or not. In fact, this is a step that New York has already taken for their atlas.

The biggest effect this will have on Atlas data is in the amount of effort displayed on eBird for each block. Now, this isn't a problem, since anyone who opts in to using the Atlas portal is inferred to know the Atlas methods and be actively looking for breeding behavior. During analysis, we can filter effort based on dates, times, and breeding codes. The block target for 20-hours of effort was designed to supplement the other block targets; it was included because that is roughly the amount of time needed to find the 70-species target. The breeding code proportion targets help ensure that sufficient time is spent during the right

times of year, throughout the year.

If you aren't sure how to change the eBird portal on your app or on a checklist, you can find instructions and screenshots in the Handbook (ebird.org/atlasmdc/about/handbooks)

So, go ahead, switch to the Atlas portal, and (mostly) forget about it for the next five years. If you leave Maryland or DC, you should switch the portal. But otherwise, it's business as usual.

We now recommend that atlasers submit all checklists to the portal.



bird of the month:

AMERICAN WOODCOCK

Photo credit: Gabriel Foley

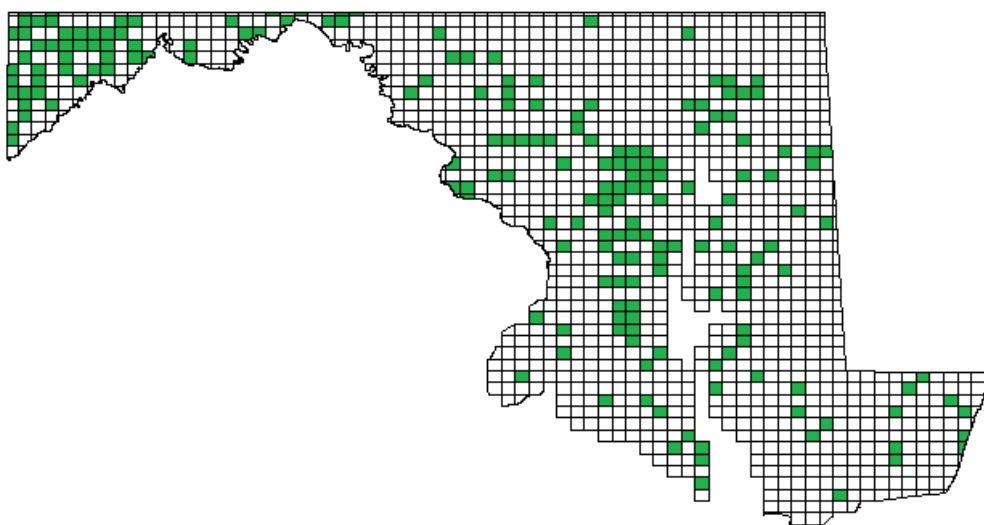
A nighttime stroll through an overgrown field in early spring may coincide with a harsh, nasal *peent* call followed by a soft twittering overhead. In Maryland and DC, male American Woodcocks begin displaying in late winter. He rotates slowly, *peenting* to advertise his location—if you are close enough, you may hear a subdued *tuko* call preceding the *peent*—then he launches into the sky and begins his flight display. The display's whistling sound, audible within 800 ft, is created by three narrow primary feathers located on his wing's outer edges. This captivating 30–60 min performance begins roughly 10–15 minutes after sunset and resumes 45 minutes before sunrise, although the timing is influenced by differences in cloud cover or moonlight. A female woodcock who has been sufficiently

wooed by his performance will approach him to copulate; on average, she will lay her eggs within 125 yards of where the male displayed and within 75 ft of an opening. While the male prefers an open space for his display, she picks a young, well-drained woodland for her nest. Woodcocks are not territorial (except for males on their singing grounds), so other females may nest as close as 25 ft to her. She shapes a shallow depression into the leaf litter and lays four grayish-orange eggs covered in brown blotches. In comparison to her size (5–10 oz), her eggs are small. In fact, the woodcock's ratio of egg to body mass is the smallest of all the shorebirds. Egg-laying begins in March and continues into May, but at least one late February nest has been located in Maryland. Incubation begins once all four eggs are

AMERICAN WOODCOCK

Woodcock displays are your key to recording them in your block.

American Woodcocks are declining across their range. Between the first and second atlases, they were found in 183 fewer blocks—a 48% reduction. As a quiet, well-camouflaged species easiest to detect after dark for only a short season, documenting them requires additional effort. Furthermore, many breeding codes either do not apply to woodcocks or are difficult to observe. For example, pairs only exist while copulating, they don't build nests or carry food, and young are cryptic and difficult to find. The best way to document woodcock breeding is by finding a displaying male and recording it as code C (courtship, display, or copulation), and the best time of year to find displaying males is late February to early April. Even though many of these displaying males could very well be migrants, males do not participate in parental care so their migratory status is much less relevant than for many other species.



American Woodcock distribution map from the Maryland & DC Breeding Bird Atlas 2.

laid and lasts 21 days, during which time the eggshells will thin naturally by 10%, depositing calcium into the developing embryos. All incubation and parental care is done by the female; in fact, males may even display as they migrate north, copulating as they travel. If the female is flushed from her nest, she will begin a distraction display, but woodcocks are sensitive to disturbance while on their nest and may abandon even late in incubation. If their first nesting attempt fails, woodcocks will renest within a week, usually within ten miles of the original site.



American Woodcock in the snow. Photo credit: Bill Hubick

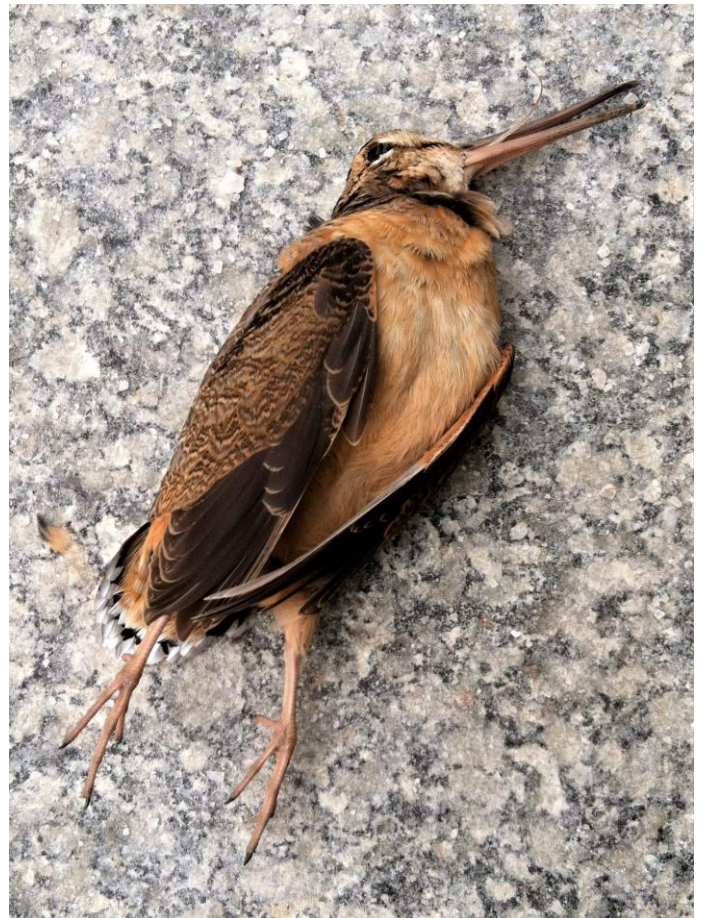
Once the chicks hatch, they leave the nest within a few hours, but on the first day they won't travel much more than 30 ft from the nest. Chicks can swim within 24 hours, can fly within 18 days, and are independent after 31-38 days. The female will feed her chicks even as they near their full size, but the chicks are fully reliant on her for the first week. Like adults, the chicks have a diet composed of roughly 90% earthworms (the rest is seeds). Their long bill has a flexible upper mandible that is specialized for extracting earthworms from the soil. When feeding, they sometimes perform a rhythmic rocking motion. Its function isn't well understood, but it is speculated that vibrations created by the motion may cause earthworms to move, allowing woodcocks to detect them. In the summer, woodcocks spend their day foraging; telltale signs of a feeding site include small holes and white 'splashings', or droppings, on the

ground, and alder shrubs can be an indicator of a good site. These foraging sites tend to be located in young, shrubby forests with moist soils, while summer roosting sites are often in overgrown fields. The chicks will breed the following year and may live for as long as 10 years, but woodcocks only raise one brood per year. American Woodcocks do overwinter in Maryland, but it's unclear whether these residents also nest in Maryland or migrate further north. Males may return annually to the same singing ground, but only as long as the habitat is suitable. Since they prefer early successional openings, singing grounds are often unsuitable within a few years. As the rate of fields transitioning to forests slows, suitable successional habitat for woodcocks is also reduced and has been linked to woodcock population declines.

Author: Gabriel Foley

References

McAuley, D.G., D.M. Keppie, and R.M. Whiting Jr. (2020). American Woodcock (*Scolopax minor*), version 1.0. In *Birds of the World* (A. F. Poole, Editor). Cornell Lab of Ornithology, Ithaca, NY, USA.
<https://doi.org/10.2173/bow.amewoo.01>



American Woodcock orient visually while migrating, increasing their risk of colliding with buildings. Photo credit: Jordan Rutter

ATLASER SPOTLIGHT

Cyndy Parr ([@cydparr](#)), from Ellicott City, Howard County, and her husband Steve are the primary atlasers for the Sykesville SW block in Howard County.



How did you become interested in birds?

I grew up in Brevard County, Florida, home to a wonderful variety of habitats and avifauna. Around fifth grade I discovered a Golden Guide to the Birds of North America on our bookshelf, and I began using birds like Roseate Spoonbills as subjects in art class. Once I found a beat-up pair of binoculars in a box I started to teach myself bird identification. I recall the joy of figuring out my first unusual bird—a Northern Flicker.

Where is your favorite place to atlas?

I'm still new at atlasing so I'm open to suggestions! For now, probably my home patch of Gwynn Acres Path, with a second runner-up being the Middle Patuxent Environmental Area.

What bird do you particularly like?

For my doctoral dissertation I studied American Crows, so obviously they are a favorite. It is hard to pick just one though. I'm always happy to see Common Ravens and Yellow-billed Cuckoos, because although it isn't too surprising to hear them, it is always a treat to see them close enough to watch them behaving suspiciously.

If you went atlasing and could only bring binoculars, a field guide, and one other item, what would you bring?

My mobile phone, so I could use eBird and Merlin, and stay in touch with friends and family.

What bird best reflects your personality?

Let's say Barred Owls. They like to perch up high and quietly observe what's happening, but are highly vocal when they want to be. When my kids were growing up, I constantly reminded them who cooked for them.

If you could pick anyone to go atlasing with for a day, who would it be?

Steve Kelling, Senior Director of Information Science at Cornell's Lab of Ornithology and the force behind eBird. We once went on a birding trip in India together and it has been a highlight of my birding career.

Have you been involved with any other atlases?

In the last atlas a friend asked me to confirm breeding of Fish Crows in her block. She knew I had a lot of experience watching crow behavior.



What do you think is the best thing about atlasing?

Atlasing provides motivation to get outside and get to know so many different species in depth in the service of science. I love observing and trying to figure out the bird behavior, but don't get to do it professionally now that my career has taken a different direction.

What do you think the biggest issue in conservation is today?

Global warming is the biggest issue, because it has cascading impacts on everything, especially ecological timing disruptions. I'm volunteering with a group that has developed an app called EarthHero to help people commit to individual action to reduce their carbon footprints. I firmly believe that individual action is a critical step towards engaging society in the larger work of improving how we co-exist with the interdependent web of life on the planet.



Want to provide more information about nests you find while atlasing?

Use [Nestwatch.org](https://nestwatch.org)

BLOCK PARTY

Sudlersville NW, Queen Anne's County



Sudlersville NW is located in the northeastern corner of Queen Anne's County, just south of Millington, Kent County. The block is primarily agricultural, but has two creeks running north to south and buffered by forest. There is public access in the northwest corner at the MDNR Unicorn Lake Hatchery. The hatchery has a 43-acre recreational fishing lake, several culture ponds, and spillway access.

There was essentially no change in the number of total species between the first (83) and second (84) atlases. However, there were more records of Attempted breeding (Confirmed and Probable) in the second atlas (69) than the first (63). Mute Swan was Confirmed in the second atlas, but is unlikely to be found in the block this time due to its widespread elimination. Northern Bobwhite were found in both atlases and is a species that observers should put extra effort into documenting for this atlas.

A Northern Harrier was documented as a Possible nester in the first atlas but was not observed in the second atlas. Eastern Screech-Owl, Great Horned Owl, and Barred Owl were all found in both prior atlases. Yellow-throated Vireo was only found in the first atlas, but it was replaced on the second atlas' list by Warbling Vireo. Bank and Northern Rough-winged Swallows were both found in each previous atlas, but no one was able to locate where the rough-wings might have been nesting; it remained Possible in both atlases. Worm-eating Warbler was documented as Probable in BBA2, Black-and-white Warbler as Possible in BBA1, and Kentucky Warbler was found in both atlases.

Currently, one checklist has been entered for the block and Carolina Chickadee and Carolina Wren are the sole documented breeders. If you find yourself driving along Hwy 301, why not stop in Sudlersville NW, stretch your legs, and submit a checklist?

Author: Gabriel Foley

What is a primary atlaser?

Each block has a set of targets that need to be met by the end of the Atlas. This includes things like a minimum number of species, at least 25% Confirmed breeding codes, and an hour of nocturnal atlasing effort. In previous atlases, atlasers each adopted one or more blocks and were responsible for all sightings within their adopted blocks. But in BBA3, atlasers who have adopted a block—the block's primary atlaser—are only responsible for ensuring the block targets are met by the end of the Atlas. This means anyone can atlas anywhere at any time.

Adopted blocks help County Coordinators know which blocks are 'guaranteed' to meet the block targets and which blocks might require additional effort. If you explore the Atlaser Block Tool (ebird.org/atlasmdc/about/atlaser-tool), you will notice that blocks near large population centers are mostly adopted, but—unsurprisingly—blocks further from these population centers are less likely to be adopted. To help out these coordinators, consider adopting a block located further from where you live. You never know what you'll discover going to these places you might not otherwise visit!



Photo credit: Jordan Rutter

TIPS AND TRICKS

Safe dates typically start in the spring and end in the fall. They are a range of dates that indicate when migrants are no longer present. For example, the safe dates for Eastern Bluebirds are from May 1 to August 31; if you see a bluebird between those dates you are (generally) 'safe' to assume that the bluebird you are looking at is there to nest. By May 1, bluebird migration through Maryland and DC is finished and most bluebirds are nesting. But many bluebirds here begin nesting much earlier than May 1. This means that before May 1, you don't know if an individual bluebird you see is migrating or nesting. If you see evidence of breeding, like a bluebird visiting a nest box (code N) or carrying nesting material (code CN), then you know the bird is nesting and can record your observation with the appropriate breeding code. Likewise, if you don't see good evidence of breeding, then you shouldn't include a breeding code. Codes like a bird in the right

habitat (code H) or a singing bird (code S) don't tell very much about a bird's intention to nest and are best used after the safe dates.

Nesting does happen within the safe dates, but it also happens outside safe dates. This means it is important to be aware of the behavior of each species you observe. Safe dates are intended to be used as soft guidelines, not hard rules, for documenting breeding behavior. Make careful observations, include comments about what you see, and ask questions.

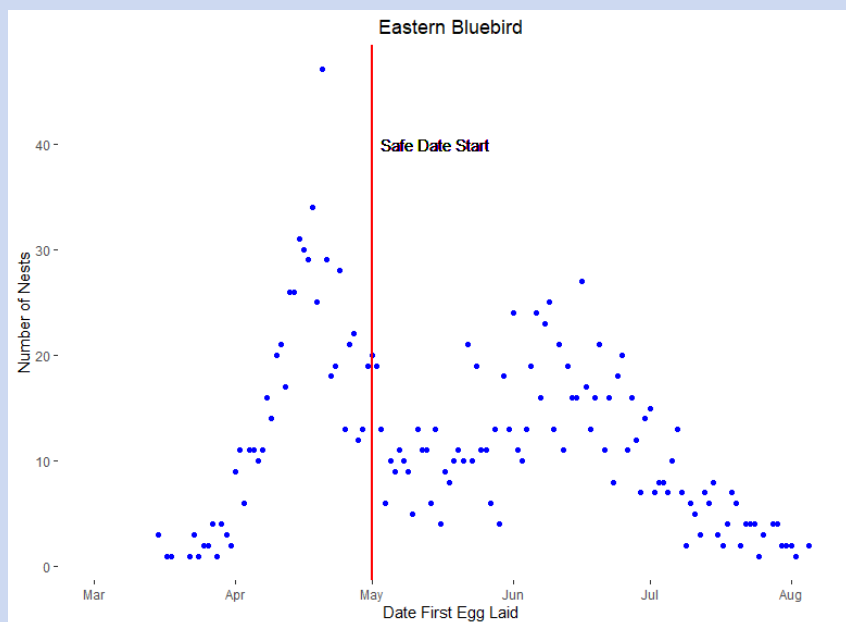
If you want to learn more about Maryland nesting dates for species, you can use the Yellow Book. Written in 1996 by Marshal Iliff, Bob Ringler, and Jim Stasz, it is an excellent resource to learn which counties birds can be expected to nest in, when the first and last egg dates are, and how abundance changes across the year. You can download this resource from the Maryland Ornithological Society's

website, mdbirds.org/publications/the-yellowbook. If you want to learn more about a particular species, Cornell's website allaboutbirds.org is a good overview with information about life history, identification, and sounds. If you are looking for a more detailed source and don't mind paying a subscription fee, Cornell's Birds of the World (birdsoftheworld.org; formerly Birds of North America) is an outstanding resource.

Author: Gabriel Foley



Photo credit: Bill Hubick



Safe dates: soft guide, not hard rule

Safe dates indicate that migrants are not present, but nesting regularly begins before the safe date.

For example, most Eastern Bluebirds have already laid their eggs by the start of safe dates, as you can see in this figure.

Be aware of bird behavior regardless of the safe date, and don't be afraid to include Probable or Confirmed breeding codes on your observations.

Download safe dates with the Handbook from ebird.org/atlasmdcc/about/handbooks

FROM THE FIELD I

Our Leap Big Day was a major success! Even with the howling wind we were able to tick 123 bird species. Tom Feild, Dan Small, John Hubbell, and I started the day at Deal Island WMA. Our first bird of the day was a peenting American Woodcock. Within the first hour we had observed rarities like American White Pelican, Eurasian Wigeon, Snowy Egret, and the best bird of the day, a group of five American Avocets found by Gabriel Foley.

The number of waterfowl along Riley Roberts Road (Deal Island WMA) is stunning!

From the marshes of Somerset County we headed across the peninsula to EA Vaughn WMA in southern Worcester County. Here we explored the large sparrow flocks that are always present. We ticked specialties like Saltmarsh Sparrow, two Sedge Wrens, a couple House Wrens, and two Common Yellowthroats!

At Truitt's Landing we saw the Common Teal that had been found earlier in the day by Matt Anthony. The Green-winged Teal flock at Truitt's Landing is almost 1,000 birds! Quite impressive.

On the way to Ocean City we made a brief stop along the Pocomoke River at Porter's Crossing. While trying to make a Barred Owl call, we found an adult Red-headed Woodpecker on the southwest side of the crossing. This was my favorite bird of the day. Yellow-bellied Sapsucker, Brown Creeper, Hairy Woodpecker, Eastern Phoebe, and White-breasted Nuthatch were other new species that we found along the river. By the time we got to Ocean City the wind

was howling. We quickly observed the small flock of Common Eiders that are wintering at the inlet. Both loons, and most of the sea duck species (minus White-winged Scoter) were observed. A lone Iceland Gull and two Laughing Gulls were also ticked.

We decided to drive north to Route 90 and see if the wintering Trumpeter Swan was still present on Isle of Wight. Luckily, we spotted the beast in a small pond right at the foot of the bridge on the north side of Route 90. Lucky!

We began working east with a quick stop along Naylor Mill Road in Salisbury. Three Lesser Black-backed Gulls were observed along with our first American Coots.

Working west, we made a brief stop in Linkwood for the small flock of Common Mergansers that winter on Higgins Millpond. We then made our way to Blackwater, ticking a Merlin

along Maple Dam Road, south of Cambridge. Along the Blackwater NWR Wildlife Loop, John Hubbell found a Ross's Goose among the tight flock of Snow Geese. We did not have any luck finding a Cackling Goose or the reported Greater White-fronted Geese, but singing Pine Warblers were a happy bonus, along with Chipping Sparrows and calling Brown-headed Nuthatches.

From Blackwater we drove to the Cambridge waterfront and quickly ticked our remaining duck species. Redhead, Canvasback, Lesser Scaup, and Common Goldeneye were all observed.

It was getting late in the day. Our options for new species were slowly dwindling. We decided to make a quick stop at Pickering Creek to see if we could find a White-crowned Sparrow or Fox Sparrow. We walked around the scrubby goodness of Pickering Creek, but totally struck out on finding any of our needed birds. A Cackling Goose that Dan picked out of a Canada Goose flock along St. Michael's Road was a welcomed surprise!

Our last new bird of the day was ticked at CBEC in Grasonville, where we had calling Virginia Rails.

We then made our way to Jailbreak Brewing Company for the Tally. It was a super awesome day, and it was nice to be able to support the Breeding Bird Atlas. Gabriel Foley did a great job with the tally, and it was fun to hang out with the other Big Day teams after a long day in the field.

Author: Jim Brighton



Photo credit: Jordan Rutter



marylandbiodiversity.com

If you are atlasing in early spring, you'll likely come across flowering plants. The Maryland Biodiversity Project tracks where plants occur across Maryland. Contribute sightings at marylandbiodiversity.com.

FROM THE FIELD II



Following the presentation, the team began their count at Buddy Attick Park where they documented 30 different species, including Hooded Mergansers, a Red-tailed Hawk, and a Ruby-crowned Kinglet. Temperatures were cold and the wind was blustery, keeping many birds hunkered down and out of sight as the team traveled around Greenbelt Lake. Several team members, undeterred by the weather, continued the count at Lake Artemesia where they counted 22 different species. The waterfowl were the main attractions at the lake, with large numbers of Hooded Mergansers, Buffleheads, Ring-necked Ducks, Pied-billed Grebes, and the exciting appearance of an American Coot.

The City of Greenbelt participated in the *Leap Into BBA3* event by sponsoring a team of local birders and enthusiasts. The City generously covered the \$10 registration fee of the participants and offered \$0.29 per individual bird found by the team, donated to the Maryland Ornithological Society to help fund the Atlas project. Fourteen community members volunteered to join the team led by Public Works Environmental Coordinator, Kevin Carpenter-Driscoll. Their day began at 10 AM with coffee and light snacks at the Public Works building, where team members were given a brief presentation on the history of the Breeding Bird Atlas, what birds volunteers could expect to see, bird identification methods, and some useful birding apps for smartphones.



Overall, the day was a great success. The team counted close to 300 individual birds, equaling \$87.00 donated by the City. Combined with the registration fees, the City donated over \$220 to the Maryland Ornithological Society. These community science programs are extremely important and require active engagement from communities. The community here in Greenbelt is doing their part to aid these studies, and having fun while doing it.

Author: Kevin Carpenter-Driscoll



The Atlas would like to give a Tundra Swan-sized thank-you to all of the participants and sponsors for the *Leap into the Atlas* event. Special thanks go to donors The City of Greenbelt and Ed Vigezzi, who each generously sponsored birding teams. Thank you all for your support!



FROM THE FIELD III

For several weeks Matt Anthony, James Fox and I pored over eBird data in hopes of mounting a successful Leap Day Big Day for the MD-DC BBA3 kick-off. While Matt cut his teeth on Maryland birding and I had been on several winter trips during my teenage years with the Northern Virginia Audubon Teen Bird Club, none of us had actively birded Maryland's Eastern Shore in recent years. Due to our lack of recent experience, we relied heavily on eBird reports and Google Maps (to gauge travel time) to scout out the day. This approach was a fun challenge for us leading up to the trip, however we knew full well that our paucity of knowledge about the nuances of birding our planned itinerary risked running into frustrating inefficiencies along the way...

We had spent the night in northern Virginia, which meant a jarring wake-up time of 12:30 AM was in order to be in time for rails and owls on Maryland's Eastern Shore. Despite our lack of intimate knowledge of the locations and individual target species along our route, our birding began auspiciously quickly ticking off Barred Owl and Eastern Screech-Owl. Soon thereafter at Truitt's Landing we heard Clapper and Virginia Rails within a few short minutes of turning off the car. At this point we were feeling optimistic about our prospects for an impressive list and the adrenaline really started pumping. However, a mix of that adrenaline, darkness, and lack of familiarity with the site would soon have us singing a different tune.

If you've ever driven to the end of

Truitt's Landing Rd, you have likely picked up on the particulars of turning around on the last few feet of hard packed sand and shells at the end of the road. If you have never been, there is a short descent into an intertidal salt marsh, an angle of descent so steep that headlights don't illuminate the forthcoming impossibly deep, frigid, unconsolidated salt-marsh muck. Given that I, the driver, had never been to Truitt's before and was laser focused on arriving at our next location ahead of schedule, I drove my Subaru Forester right into the mud. Unlike any mud I've ever been stuck in before, there was zero forward or reverse motion, no matter the gear or the number of people pushing. After 20 minutes of frantic digging, cursing, and spinning wheels, it was painfully obvious that we needed backup. While waiting for the tow truck operator to slowly rouse himself, there was nothing we could do but wait—and go birding. Over the following two hours, we were treated to an excellent morning of winter birding. As the Milky Way Galaxy began to fade from the night sky we started to pick up on the whir of ducks passing low overhead. The pre-dawn glow brightened and we began to pick out silhouettes of hundreds of ducks as they bombed in from over Brockatonton Bay. A handful were Mallards or American Black Ducks, but the vast majority were Green-winged Teal—and there were hundreds of them. We also found a few other potentially tough species for the day, including a hooting Great Horned Owl and gobbling Wild Turkeys. The sun was soon fully up and the hundreds of

Green-winged Teal we had seen around dawn were congregated in a relatively small area south of Truitt's Landing Rd. At this point, I was eager to regain lost pride wherever possible so I decided to take a crack at finding Eurasian (Green-winged) Teal and after 10 minutes I had one in the scope. By ABA big day rules, only full species are countable and since the AOS has not yet split Eurasian from Green-winged Teal, this Eurasian vagrant unfortunately didn't count for much.

Not long thereafter, the tow truck arrived and yanked out the old Subaru, but not without knocking the wheels out of alignment. This handicapped us later in the day by causing a substantial wobble above 54 miles per hour, slowing down our commute time between stops.

Despite our new handicap, the rest of the day went off without any major hitches. Strong winds made for difficult passerine birding and as a result we had some easy misses like White-breasted Nuthatch and Winter Wren. However, there were still many highlights, including massive Snow Goose and Tundra Swan flocks at Blackwater NWR and point-blank views of several species duck species (including my lifer Mallard x American Wigeon hybrid) at Oakley Street.

Biting wind and darkness eventually forced us to make the wobbly, 53 mph drive to Jailbreak, where warm mac and cheese and a cold beer capped off an awesome 106-species day.

Author: Nick Newberry

FROM THE FIELD IV

We had spent hours carefully planning out our attempt to find as many species as possible on February 29. We even had a clever team name: *A Matter of a Pinion*. I was happy with our strategy—until I texted the competition about it. When Jim Brighton replied with, “Hmmm. Are you sure about that?” I was not inspired with confidence. But I also wasn’t convinced sabotage was above him. He had been very clear that he was not going to allow a Canadian to see more species than his team. I needed a second opinion from someone sufficiently removed from the scuffle. I called Kathy Calvert, and we discussed strategies for finding each of my target birds. When the dust settled, I felt ready to take Jim and team on.

Our first stop was Deal Island in Somerset County—which may or may not have had a lot to do with hearing about Jim’s plan. Not so coincidentally, Jim’s crew also showed up. We exchanged the

greetings of competitors who are reserving their friendship for after the competition, and set about finding birds at the southern end of Riley Roberts Rd. We heard a Clapper Rail, and Team Brighton helped us get on an American Bittern they found. We stuck around for a few minutes after they left to explore further up the road, then headed in the same direction. As we neared their location, a flock of five American Avocets flew by. We pulled up to their truck, and told them about the unusual sighting. Brighton’s crew jumped into their truck and drove off to find them, leaving us to enjoy the quiet peace of the early morning marsh. The rumble of their truck had scarcely faded away when the avocets landed in front of us. I fumbled for my phone. I typed a quick message to Jim and told him the avocets were back. By then, the avocets had walked behind some vegetation, preventing a picture. Minutes ticked by, and the avocets lifted off the marsh and flew out of sight. Gravel crunched behind us, and

the Brighton truck flew into the lot. The team piled out, scopes at the ready.

“Sorry, they flew off right before you got here,” I said. “They went way off behind those willows.”

Quiet stares were the team’s only reply.

“Anyways, we are going to get rolling,” I said, climbing back into our car. As we backed out, I rolled down the window, gave a thumbs-up and a smile and said, “I hope you find them.”

Over the course of the day, we managed to find 106 species. Our two teams met up shortly after sunset and I learned that—unsurprisingly—we did not come even close to seeing more species than Jim and crew. With 123 species, they had definitively asserted their birding expertise. But our team had so many snacks, so much laughter, and enjoyed ourselves so much, it sure seems like the real winner was simply *A Matter of a Pinion*.

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.



Five American Avocets in Somerset County were a highlight of the day. Photo credit: Jim Brighton