General Atlasing Tips

(1) Simply listen more for begging and alarm calls, or other non-singing calling. Most songbirds can be noisy when building nests or feeding young. Most are far more active building and feeding in the first few hours of the day and the last hour or two of the day.

(2) Be guided, not blinded, by safe dates. Safe dates indicate when migrants are absent—not necessarily when nesting begins. For local nesting pairs, breeding activities start well before the earliest safe date. Consult the Yellow Book for nest dates. Do not wait until the first safe date to look for nesting birds, and do not stop looking after the last safe date for fledged young. Confirmed breeding codes outside of safe dates are perfectly acceptable, as are most Probable codes (be cautious with codes S7, P, and C).

(3) One of the easiest ways to Confirm breeding is when adults are carrying nesting material or food to their nest or recently fledged young, so watch an adult for 5-10 minutes as it forages. Most feeding rates by an adult songbird are 6–20 times per hour, and similar rates apply to nest building. Females, in particular, are often easy to spot nest building, since they do not spend time singing. If you find a bird foraging when it could be nesting, you often have to wait less than five minutes before it starts to carry some food or nest material.

(4) A couple of hours right after dawn are usually far more productive than 4–5 hours in the heat of the day; on the other hand, most singing stops in mid-day, so most call notes you hear are more likely to be related to nesting activity or feeding young.

(5) Watch for repeated flights of a silent bird going to or from a particular spot. Many foraging adults use the same general route to and from the nest for an hour or more at a time; this route will change over time.

(6) Look for patches of habitat that are not common in most of that block. Survey extra well. Ask landowners for permission to access such unusual habitats if they are not on public property.

(7) Make a list of some of the target species and habitat patches you want to focus on each day. It is useful to know the list of birds found in a particular block in previous years and compare that list to the list of birds that have been found there so far.

(8) Enter your data as quickly after collecting it as possible. This allows others to know which areas have been atlased and what species have been found. If reviewers have follow-up questions on notable sightings, it is easier to provide information to them when the sighting is fresh in your mind.

(9) Use the eBird comment box freely—that is what is there for! Not only will this help you remember details of notable sightings, but it can be useful for researchers to understand bird behavior. For example, a study by Freeman and Miller in 2018 on why crows attack ravens was only possible because of observers who recorded interactions between crows and ravens in the eBird comment box.

(10) Keep block maps, species lists, a copy of the Field Handbook, Breeding Timeline, and other materials you find useful for atlasing in your car. This way, you are prepared for impromptu atlasing wherever you may be.

(11) If you are atlasing a new location, studying the block in advance can be a huge help. You should identify different habitats and where public lands are. You can also pre-populate a block with personal locations in eBird. To do so, simply begin the checklist submission process, find your location on a map, name the new personal location, then exit the submission process. Your location will remain, but without any checklists associated with it. Even better, develop a schedule to ensure these locations are properly covered.

Atlasing Tips for Selected Species

(Compiled from notes by Jay Sheppard, Fred Fallon, Jim Stasz, Howard County MOS chapter)

Wild Turkey (4/15–9/30) – watch for family groups from early May into late summer.

Chimney Swift (5/15–8/10) – though seen everywhere, swifts are nonetheless a challenge to Confirm and some reported Confirmations are probably overconfident. The chimneys being used must be accessible to the atlaser, and that excludes most of those actually being used. Entry or exit may not be sufficient evidence of nesting since unmated swifts roost in chimneys, sometimes in small groups or even singly or in pairs.

The behavior to watch for is repeated entry and exit by single birds during the day, several times per hour. During nest building, the birds may be seen carrying small twigs in either bill or feet. If a swift is seen plucking a twig from a tree as it passes over, that too is Confirmation. From indoors, their exit makes a distinct *whoosh* as the vibrating air resonates in the chimney. After the young are hatched a loud, high-pitched chatter ensues as the adult enters, then quiets as the young receive the regurgitated food, then follows the *whoosh* as the adult flies out. The exit is so rapid that it is easily missed when viewed from outside. These sounds are usually quite evident from within the room to which the chimney opens and require no special effort to detect. Take-offs and landings continue all day from sunrise to after sunset.

Chimney Swift young are cared for in the nest for nearly four weeks, so there is plenty of time to detect them after nesting season starts. Nests may be active as late as

the first half of August. Fledglings on the wing are indistinguishable from adults. It is said that at the time the young emerge (first half of August), the adults are undergoing molt and so show a gap or two in the wings, whereas the young will not show such gaps, but this is a dubious basis for Confirmation. Group size is not diagnostic; as soon as the young are air-borne, swifts begin congregating in loose, constantly reforming flocks. Code FL is not a valid Confirmation code for swifts—it is nesting itself that must be observed.

A useful strategy is to have a network of friends and neighbors alerted to the possibility of hearing the distinctive sounds of swifts using their chimneys. The atlaser would then follow up on these candidates to rule out mere roosting and confirm the presence of breeding. It is not necessary—nor sometimes even possible—to view the nest itself. Ten ft is the average distance of the nest from the top of the chimney. The chatter of the young may be too high pitched to hear easily from the ground floor of a multi-story house, so leaving the flue at least partly open during summer may aid detection.

Ruby-throated Hummingbird (5/15–7/20) – learn the chip notes of the hummer. Listen and follow nest-building female as she gathers spider webs and lichens from trees and other vegetation. Spotting the female picking up spider web is Confirmation in itself. The nest is a tiny cup astride a horizontal branch—so well camouflaged it seems part of the branch—and usually within a few hundred yards of water.

Killdeer (4/20–6/25) – nests on flat roofs, along edges of gravel parking lots, driveways and roadsides, and in the middle of barren fields.

American Woodcock (4/15–8/31) – may nest before March 1 in mild winters. Residents return very early (February). Watch for displaying males in March and follow up after April 1 for continued displays. Most males stop peenting by April. Brood often seen at dawn on paths through woods or old fields. Also look for tell-tale clusters of holes in wet ground spotted with white-wash.

Herons – presence of immatures at ponds does not indicate local nesting. Adults and young may wander far after breeding. An actual nest must be found for Confirmation.

Green Heron (5/1–7/15) – often nests 8–20 ft. high in the thickest vegetation around ponds or along streams (*e.g.*, willows, vines). Young can be very vocal when being fed. Nests of sticks are flat and frail, perhaps 15–22 in. across.

Black Vulture (5/1–7/31) – courtship and territory-defense displays start in March or a little earlier. Look for birds sitting on or soaring around abandoned farm buildings.

Turkey Vulture (5/15–8/20) – courtship and territory defense displays start in March or a little later. Look for birds sitting on or soaring around abandoned farm buildings.

Accipiters – from late May onwards, any accipiter calling or screaming in a frantic way as you walk through the woods is defending its nesting territory. As you get closer to the nest, they often dive at you.

Red-shouldered Hawk (5/10–8/20) – territorial displays (*e.g.*, calling and legs dangling) start in late winter on warm days. Nest building usually starts by the end of March. Note birds carrying sticks. Pairs can be defensive when you walk near their nest. Nests may be quite near houses or roadside. Start looking well before leaf-out or safe date.

Broad-winged Hawk (6/15–8/10) – mature forest, often upland but not always. Tough bird to find. Watch for territorial hawk displays and calling over tops of forest. Courtship is well after leaf-out. May carry snakes to young. Uncommon and local but should be sought. Learn distinctive call from recordings.

Red-tailed Hawk (5/10–8/20) – territorial displays (*e.g.*, calling and legs dangling) start in late winter on warm days. Nest building usually starts by the end of March. Note birds carrying sticks. Pairs can be defensive when you walk near their nest. Nests may be quite near houses or roadside. Start looking well before leaf-out or safe date.

Owls – recently fledged young are vociferous, especially at dusk and dawn. Listen for high-pitched whines or similar noises.

Great Horned Owl (12/15–8/15) – most commonly uses old Red-tailed Hawk nests. Watch for old hawk nests in Fall and Winter. Tops of large stumps are also favored. Usually found in uplands, but does nest in floodplains. Woodlot for nesting may be small and isolated from other woods. Barred Owl uses cavities, not stick nests.

Belted Kingfisher (4/10–7/20) – nests in vertical banks along streams. Kingfisher nests are arched about 3 in. high, with a flat bottom and two distinct ruts at the bottom. Occasionally, nests are excavated in mud banks not bordered by water (*e.g.*, quarries, construction sites). Kingfishers may carry small minnows for a half-mile along a stream course.

Acadian Flycatcher (5/25–8/5) – nests almost exclusively over water, even if it is only a small vernal pool. The nest is often on a horizontal branch of a maple tree, perhaps 5–15 ft. over water. Nest may look like flotsam from a previous flood and is always festooned with hanging strings of moss. Not usually very neat and compact like vireo nests. Sometimes the eggs or young may be seen through the bottom. Old nests may be spotted in winter or early spring, when often just a distinctive small, flat ring remains.

Willow Flycatcher (6/10–7/20) – late migrant; note extreme safe date. Prefers wet or

damp areas with shrubs. Nest may not be near water.

Eastern Phoebe (5/1–8/31) – well known for building nests on human-made structures such as bridges, porches, or door lintels, but will also nest well inside such structures as sheds, barns, and abandoned houses. Atlasers should investigate the interiors as well as exteriors of buildings where phoebes are present but the nest is not obvious.

Great-crested Flycatcher (5/25–7/31) – calls close to or even while in nest, especially when feeding young or mate. The nest is often in the hole left by a broken-off branch.

Eastern Kingbird (5/25–7/5) – kingbirds tend to build their bulky nests near the tops of trees, often alongside a pond or waterway, and these aggressive birds make no attempt to conceal their comings and goings. This species also nests on power-line towers, an especially easy place to locate a nest. For example, in BBA2 a walk along a transmission line through PWRC's North Tract found kingbirds defending nearly every other tower.

The nests are located atop a cross-member, tucked against some intersecting vertical component, and perhaps in a somewhat shaded corner. They tend to be rather high up (40–80 ft.), but not so high as to preclude seeing the young—or at least the parents tending them. The female can be followed flying directly to the nest, relying as she does on the regal self-assuredness of her mate to repel any predators.

Vireos – pairs often become very agitated when an observer is near their nest; learn these agitated calls. All nests are in a 'Y' fork of a small branch, hang suspended, and are a compact small structure. Vireo nests are unique—orioles are four times larger, and Acadian Flycatcher is not compact and neat. Nests may be 2–30 ft. high. Look for used nests after the leaves fall or the start of the next season.

Horned Lark (4/10–9/5) – may nest as early as March 1. Look for activity in last year's crop fields or on sod farms with lots of bare soil and a few sprigs of vegetation. Might nest in old corn stubble, but more likely with less overall height to vegetation. You may need a scope to sit back and watch birds from some distance away as they carry food. Young fledge in only 6–7 days—they are a quick nester! Fledglings may be seen running on plowed fields after parents.

Swallows – recently fledged young very often line up on a fence or powerline to be fed. Any group of 3–5 swallows sitting close together from early May to late June are possible fledglings.

Northern Rough-winged Swallow (5/25–6/20) – nests in vertical banks along streams. May also nest in drain pipes, culverts, and especially the under-carriages of large, stationary semi-trailers. Check for these at the loading docks in industrial parks.

Purple Martin (6/1–6/25) – check martin houses in wide open areas, not back under trees, and talk to landowners with martin houses. Watch for feeding birds in the air and

then check martin houses in immediate area.

Tree Swallow (5/25–6/25) – check bluebird boxes. Nesting may start by April 15-20 and goes until the end of June.

White-breasted Nuthatch (5/10–8/15) – favors mature woods with decaying trees. Nests in natural cavities (often with a knothole entrance) or old woodpecker holes. Once the female begins incubation, which may be as early as 4/10, the male makes frequent trips to feed her, uttering a soft "yank" calls as he arrives.

Blue-gray Gnatcatcher (5/15–7/31) – gnatcatchers are another bird that start nesting long before their safe date. Nests can be found as early as 4/15. The nest appears to be a knot on top of a horizontal branch. Tent caterpillar silk is a component, used to cement the nest to the branch and blend one into the other. Pairs are noisy as they build and can sometimes lead you to the nest.

Veery (6/10–8/10) – deep, mature woodland with dense understory and more often on north-facing slopes. Listen for its distinctive singing at dawn and dusk, and its alarm note the rest of the day. Nest building may start in mid-May. Its distribution is sharply limited by the fall line.

American Goldfinch (6/15–8/31) – look for their distinctive nest after trees are bare. Fledged goldfinches also have a distinctive call that should be learned.

Eastern Towhee (5/20–8/31) – note the juvenile's striped, sparrow-like plumage with more white in the wings than sometimes depicted.

Orchard Oriole (6/1–7/5) – two or more pairs may nest in the same or adjacent trees and very often in the same tree as an Eastern Kingbird. Check old orchards or fields with scattered fruit trees up to 25 ft tall. Note the narrow safe dates. Not always as noisy or obvious as Baltimore Oriole.

Baltimore Oriole (6/1–7/25) – watch sycamores over streams, roads, paths, or lawns for nests. They are noisy when nest building or feeding young.

Warblers **–** nesting birds are territorial. You could use recordings to locate territories during safe dates, but if you do so, use them sparingly and, ideally, in less birded areas. Breeding birds return early and may begin nesting 10-15 days before safe dates start, so don't wait until the safe date to start looking.

Blue Grosbeak (6/5–8/10) – can fledge young as late as Labor Day. Beware that a second-year male resembles the female.