WHAT'S HATCHING?

Official Newsletter of the Maryland & DC Breeding Bird Atlas 3

ISSUE NO 4 | MAY 2020

Photo credit: Jonathan Irons

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BIRD OF THE MONTH

More easily heard than seen, the skulky Kentucky Warbler's song is one you should become familiar with.

FROM THE FIELD

Joe S. tells us how he found Maryland's easternmost Common Raven nest, and Simon B. explains his approach to finding owls!

OUT OF THE ARCHIVE

New!

Read about how Harry Armistead found Maryland's first Green-winged Teal nest in 1971—and his post-script on how things have changed in the five decades since.

On March 14, Kurt Schwarz snapped a picture of a Common Raven on a cell tower in Columbia in the Savage NW block, and Joanne Solem noticed the sticks—a nest! Two raven chicks successfully fledged from the nest, confirmed on May 19 by John Harris. While this isn't the first time ravens have nested in Howard County (a nest under the Rocky Gorge Dam has alternated between the Howard and Prince George's County line), it is a great example of the continued eastward expansion of ravens in Maryland.

Photo credit: John Harris

"Birdwatching is something that we do for enjoyment, so if you enjoy it, you are already a good birder. If you enjoy it a lot, you are a *great* birder."

- Kenn Kaufman

Atlasing contributes valuable information that helps us understand and protect birds better—and it's just a great time! Share the excitement of your finds on the Atlas Facebook Discussion Group; just search @mddcbba3 on Facebook.

UPCOMING EVENTS

** * * PLEASE NOTE * * **

Since upcoming events have been postponed, we've been going digital! Check out the Training links at ebird.org/atlasmddc/about/training. You can also find information about events at ebird.org/atlasmddc/about/events.

From the Coordinator

Local patches are the place to be these days, it seems.

Remember the days when we could just go atlasing wherever we wanted? I look back at past-Gabriel with more than a tinge of jealousy... he didn't know how good he had it! Since early March, my partner, Jordan, and I have stuck to atlasing a small greenspace across the street from our apartment. While I am undeniably eager to explore other places—there are so many great places in Maryland and DC—the opportunity to really get to know one small place, and the birds that use that area, has been refreshing.

Our 'patch' has about 10 acres of forest, a mitigation pond, and lawn surrounded by apartment complexes—a fairly standard suburban setup. Despite its ordinary appearance, it still manages to host an impressive array of breeding species. We have coded 34 breeding species here, and 18 of those are Confirmed. We largely have the COVID quarantine to thank for that high proportion of Confirmations.

Our regular morning walks here have also given us the opportunity to observe nest success—or failure, more often than not. For example, a clutch of ten Wood Ducks dwindled to four before the mother vanished; there are now only two 'teenagers' left. Between a hedge and a maple tree, there have been no fewer than four robin nests, none of which have fledged young (though the fourth nest is currently in progress). In fact, of the sixteen robin nests we have found, only one has successfully fledged young. The mockingbirds have fared better; both nests fledged young. And of course, the starlings have had little trouble propagating more starlings; the insatiable light brown juveniles are everywhere, begging their parents for more food.

Photo credit: Gabriel Foley

Our ability to travel freely may have been restricted recently, but that doesn't mean that we can't continue to enjoy birds and make significant contributions to the Atlas. The best way to observe breeding behavior is to watch an individual bird for a while, and, for better or worse, the current situation is conducive to exactly that strategy. Regardless of where you live, there are likely birds breeding somewhere close by, even if those birds are pigeons, starlings, and House Sparrows.

Whatever your situation may be these days, I hope you stay healthy and the birds bring you joy.

--Gabriel

bird of the month:

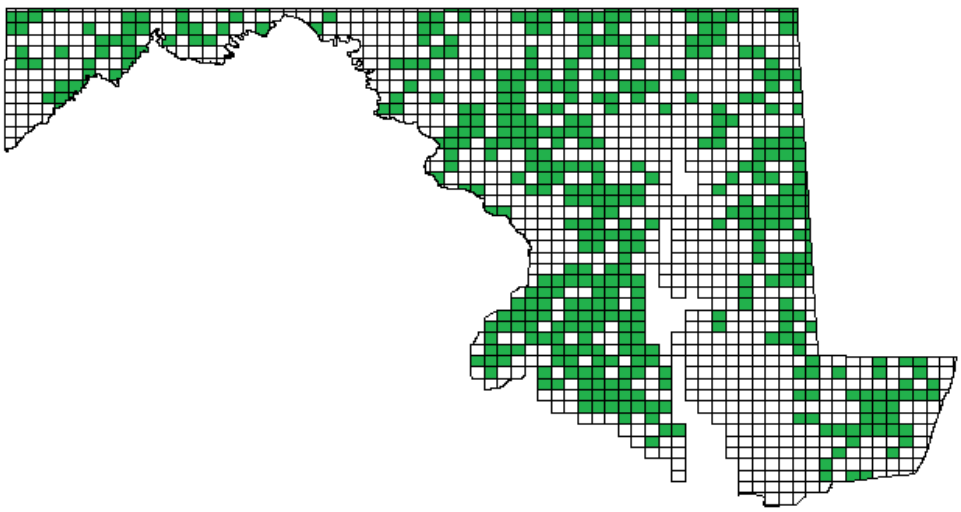
KENTUCKY WARBLER

Photo credit: Jonathan Irons

From deep within the forest's dank undergrowth, a sweet, rich song rolls out. If you aren't paying attention, you might mistake it for a Carolina Wren, but the phrases are more upslurred, steadier, and lack the distinctive syllables apparent in the wren's song. It's worth learning the Kentucky Warbler's song. Even though their plumage is difficult to confuse with any other species—the combination of yellow spectacles over a black mask is unique to them—the thickly vegetated haunts they prefer make getting a clear look challenging. Conversely, they are frequent singers and easily detected by ear, particularly early in the season.

Each May, males arrive at the same location they nested at the previous year and begin advertising their site through song. Females select their mate—not the same male they had the previous year—and the two begin to chase each other, hopping and flying in small circles, chipping actively. This pair formation sequence often attracts other Kentucky Warblers, and it's not uncommon to see other nearby Kentucky Warblers join in the chase. The pair copulates within a day or two, and the female begins building her nest shortly after that. She is efficient, and the entire structure is completed by the next day, with most of the work being done in the morning. She begins laying her eggs as soon as the nest is complete; the male occupies himself during this time by actively guarding her.

He has good reason to be concerned about her activities when he isn't guarding—although, to be fair, the times he isn't guarding is generally because he is in the neighbor's territory, trying to do the same thing he is attempting to prevent. Kentucky Warblers have a high rate of fertilizations that occur outside of the pair bond; around a third of young are



Kentucky Warbler distribution map from the Maryland & DC Breeding Bird Atlas 2.

KENTUCKY WARBLER

Code S7 is an important code, but be cautious during migration.

Kentucky Warblers are more easily heard than seen, and hearing its song from the same location a week later qualifies it for code S7 (the same bird singing for seven or more days)—a Probable code!

But this code must be applied to the same individual you heard singing a week prior, not just the same species. Determining whether the bird is the same individual can be tricky, especially during migration, so it's best to be conservative.

In most cases, code S7 should be used after a species has finished migrating. After migration wraps up (around May 25 for Kentucky Warblers), you can use code S7 more freely. During migration (so, for Kentucky Warblers, this means before May 25), you should only use code S7 in locations where you are intimately familiar with each of your local birds, like your backyard, when you are sure it is the same individual singing.

sired by someone outside the pair. In fact, obtaining these extra-pair copulations appears to be such an important part of their reproductive strategy that they rarely nest without other Kentucky Warblers nearby.

Kentucky Warblers are found in bottomland hardwoods with dense understory, and it's even better if there is a stream nearby. They do like an occasional opening in the forest, such as tree-fall gaps or even small trails. But the biggest predictor for whether Kentucky Warblers will occupy any given forest is patch size—the larger the


Photo credit: George Jett

better. Despite an average territory size of 5.4 acres, Kentucky Warblers prefer forests larger than 1,200 acres. This requirement for large patches appears to be a result of wanting other nesting pairs nearby and the associated opportunity for extra-pair copulations.

Kentucky Warbler nests are well hidden; in fact, only two were found in the last atlas. The small nest, roughly 3 in x 2.5 in, is usually constructed at the base of a fern or a small shrub. Coarse grasses are woven together into an open cup, and the base nearly always has a few oak leaves incorporated. For lining, the female gathers fine grasses and rootlets. She lays 3–6 (but usually four) white, brown-splotched eggs and incubates these for 11–13 days. Kentucky Warblers are frequent hosts to Brown-headed Cowbirds, but both warbler and cowbird chicks will fledge together successfully. Both warbler parents bring insects, caterpillars, and spiders to the chicks. After 8–9 days, the chicks fledge but cannot fly strongly for another four days. This is the best time to get a Confirmation code; most Confirmations in the second atlas were of recently fledged young. The parents split the brood between themselves and, provided they do not initiate a second nest, will continue to care for them for another month or so. If the chicks are self-sufficient by mid-June, the parents will ignore their current brood, which will remain on their parents' territory, and begin the nesting process anew for a second nest. By late August, Kentucky Warblers have largely departed Maryland for the Central American forests they spend most of their lives in.

Maryland is no exception to the Kentucky Warbler's range-wide population decline. Between the first and second atlas, their distribution declined by 38%. The reasons for their decline aren't well understood, but it's generally accepted to be habitat related. Their dependence on dense undergrowth is particularly affected by the over-abundance of white-tailed deer, whose browsing on that undergrowth eventually leads to unsuitable habitat.

Fading from these long-term declines, Kentucky Warblers are certainly a species to watch this atlas. Download the species list for your block and check to see if they were found there in the last Atlas. If they were, make a special effort to find that ringing *churree-churree-churree* echoing through the undergrowth.


Photo credit: George Jett

Author: Gabriel Foley

References

McDonald, M.V. (2020). Kentucky Warbler (*Geothlypis formosa*), 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.kenwar.01

ATLASER SPOTLIGHT

Bob Lauer is a retired research scientist from Frederick who enjoys birding, art history, fly-fishing, and motor sport.

How did you become interested in birds?

I have always enjoyed nature and the outdoors; I honestly can't remember ever not being interested in birds. I became a more serious birder after I finished graduate school. Then, when we moved to New Mexico with its greater number of and different species of birds than the East, I became, not only a more serious birder, but an avid birder as well. The fact that the Bosque del Apache NWR was only an hour and a half away contributed significantly to that enthusiasm.

What bird do you particularly like?

I am particularly fond of the Cooper's Hawk. I admire their speed and agility.

What bird do you think reflects your personality best?

I would like to think that it is the Cooper's Hawk.

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

My iPhone. I can't leave home without it, and it's important for keeping eBird records and bird identification.

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

David Wallace, a good friend and an amazing birder.

Have you been involved with any other atlases?

No, I haven't.

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

I hate to generalize, but basically climate change and habitat loss are the driving forces behind all conservation efforts.

Where is your favorite place to atlas?

Baker Park in Frederick.

What do you think is the best thing about atlasing?

It has made me much more focused on observing bird behavior.

TheCornellLab NestWatch

Want to submit more information about the nests you find?

Check out Nestwatch.org

Photo credit: Gabriel Foley

BLOCK PARTY

Smithsburg SE, Washington County

The Smithsburg SE block lies along the northern part of the Washington and Frederick County line north of I-70. This is a rural area and much of it has an elevation of 1,000 ft and higher (up to 1,700 ft). Birding in the block can easily be accomplished 'from the car' along picturesque country roads traversing a mix of mature forest and farmland habitats. A birding hike through forests would also work well on the approximately 5.5 miles of the Appalachian Trail that runs through the block. Multiple Appalachian Trail access points include a parking lot along Wolfsville Road and pull-over spots where the Trail crosses Route 77/Foxville Road, and Route 491/Raven Rock Road, allowing atlasers to easily tailor a hike to their time and distance preferences. The Ridenour Swamp Wildlife Management Area is located off Ridenour Road in the southeastern part of the block and offers public access to a few acres of open fields, forest and swamp (there are no parking areas, but the road is wide enough to pull over safely). For an easy stroll rather than a hike, Warner Hollow Road on the western side of the block parallels a stream for much of its length (with multiple pullover spots along the route), and overlooks a de-watered reservoir with a small pond and surrounding brushy habitat.

There was a decrease in the total number of species recorded between BBA1 (91) and BBA2 (84), a decrease accompanied by lower Possible and Confirmed observations in BBA2. Red-shouldered Hawk was only found in BBA1 and observers may consider putting some extra effort into documenting this species for BBA3. Despite suitable habitat remaining, other species only observed in BBA1 include Ring-Necked Pheasant, Ruffed Grouse, Green Heron, Willow Flycatcher, Black-capped Chickadee, Grasshopper Sparrow, and Chestnut-sided Warbler. While there are no eBird reports of Black-capped Chickadee in this area within the past 10 years, there are recent reports from nearby in Pennsylvania, so keep an eye and ear out! This block also has good habitat for Wild Turkey, yet the previous atlases only observed Possible breeding behavior; perhaps someone will see a hen with chicks this time. Currently, there are two Confirmed species (Tufted Titmouse and Eastern Bluebird) and one Probable species (Belted Kingfisher) for BBA3 in this block.

Photo credit: Jordan Rutter

If you are looking for some varied, higher-elevation habitats to atlas in once we are permitted to venture away from home again, consider spending a few hours in Smithsburg SE. After your hard atlasing work, the charming town of Smithsburg provides a nice place for a break. Enjoy some classic comfort food at Dixie Eatery or ice cream at Misty Meadows Farm creamery.

Authors: Heather McSharry and Mark Abdy

TIPS AND TRICKS

The details of atlasing seem to find a way to obfuscate the simplicity of atlasing, much like the word 'obfuscate' did to this sentence. A simple thing—just observe and record bird behavior—becomes complex and challenging. There is so much to learn! You have to know the breeding codes, link behavior to habitat and time of year, and incorporate technology that seems to actively sabotage your efforts to participate. Unlike my use of 'obfuscate' however, the details of atlasing serve a vital function, coordinating millions of observations into a comprehensive image of how our local birdlife has changed since the last atlas.

In the midst of all these details, however, some of the most basic requirements for contributing atlas data can be overlooked. One of these requirements is that observers remain within block boundaries. In past atlases, each observer had a card with a species list for that block; breeding codes were added beside each species as the season progressed. The card was an implicit, ever-present reminder that you were atlasing a single block with definite boundaries. Now, the implicit focus has shifted away from the block and towards the nebulous checklist. The name of the block, its boundaries, and its species list are no longer constant companions on your hunt for breeding behavior. Instead, they're something you see when you explore submitted data from the comfort of your big-screen computer.

The checklists you submit provide precise information on how long you atlased, where you atlased, and what you observed during that particular excursion. It's a tremendous improvement in data collection. But it relies on you, the atlaser, remembering the simple refrain, "Don't cross block boundaries". Unlike species identification or breeding code use, there's no effective way for a reviewer to know if you crossed a block boundary. The app may record your track, but that track is only visible to you—the Atlas does not have access to your track, and we cannot see where you went, only how far you went.

Of course, to stay within block boundaries you must know where the boundaries are. Several tools are available for this; you can download mapping files for your GPS or Google Earth on the website, or you can get a PDF map of each block through the block explorer tool. It's useful to use these to familiarize yourself with a new block before atlasing. While you are atlasing, the easiest way to check your location relative to block boundaries is to tap the elapsed time or distance on an active checklist (provided you use the eBird app). A map with block boundaries will appear, and a dot will show your current location.

If you mistakenly submit a checklist that crosses block boundaries, move that checklist out of the Atlas portal and into core eBird (there are screenshots and instructions in the Handbook appendices). The observations from that checklist won't count for the Atlas, of course, but it's important that the data submitted to the Atlas are accurate and follow the requirements.

There is a lot of information available to Atlas participants, but as you absorb the more 'advanced' information, don't forget about the fundamental requirements, and stay within block boundaries.

Author: Gabriel Foley

AN AMATEUR'S GUIDE TO OWLING

The world is a big place, and the idea of venturing out at night to find owls is an intimidating proposition. There are many reasons that owling is one of the least practiced forms of birding, but one of the highest on the list has to be the sense that it is difficult, with a low chance of success. Owls are hard to find! Why stay up late, or wake up early, only to walk around in the dark and cold while hoping to stumble across an owl?

I certainly felt that way myself, but since I had adopted some Baltimore blocks for the Maryland & DC Breeding Bird Atlas 3, I resolved to at least give it a try. And I'm happy to report that owling is a tremendously rewarding addition to the birding experience, with a completely unique perspective on these rarely-seen nocturnal species.

Of the three main breeding species of owls in Maryland, Eastern Screech-Owls are the least commonly reported. Many birders have heard or seen Barred Owls in the daytime and the call of the Great Horned Owl carries for long distances, so these species were coded more frequently than Eastern Screech-Owls. Eastern Screech-Owls are small, with a quiet call and rarely seen in daylight. But it turns out they are very easy to find at night! In just a few months, I have identified over twenty-five Eastern Screech-Owls locations in Baltimore County and continue to add more every night I go out.

As with every species, owls are particular about their habitat, and looking in the correct spots will maximize chances of success. In my experience, Eastern Screech-Owls are rarely found far from water, and the most reliable locations are forested stream crossings. Here is my step-by-step owling process:

1) *Identify potential locations* – using Google maps you can toggle between 'Terrain' and 'Satellite' views while looking for bridge crossings over small streams with a patch of forest around them (Figure 1a, Figure 1b). Open fields or even residential housing nearby are no problem, and may be preferable to nothing but mature forest.

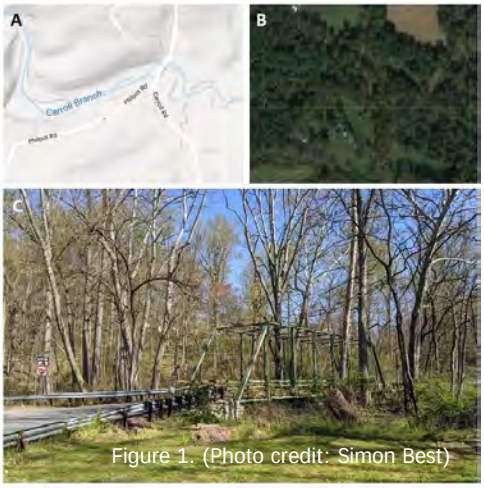


Figure 1. (Photo credit: Simon Best)

2) *Daytime scouting* – this will confirm the suitability of the location, with a mix of mature trees, undergrowth, and open fields (Figure 1c). If you can hear running water, that is a great sign! Daytime scouting also helps identify parking pull-offs, which are common around bridges.

3) *Equipment* – a Bluetooth speaker that can sync to your phone and a bright flashlight are both essential. I use a Fenix 860 Lumen flashlight with high-quality rechargeable batteries. This gives off enough light that a flash is not required for photography.

4) *Get out at dark* – the most important factor is wind, far more than moonlight or clouds, or dusk, night, or dawn. Screech-owl calls are quiet and don't carry well, so if you choose a night with minimal wind you'll be in a much better position to hear the owl when it starts calling.

5) *Play the recording* – while playing calls during the breeding season is discouraged for diurnal species, playing a recording at night for atlasing purposes is part of the recommended protocol. The cadence of screech-owl calling is quite rapid, and I play the alternating 'trill' and 'whinny' call with only about a 20 second gap between them.

6) *Location* – there is no need to hike into the woods. In fact, the best place to play the recording is directly on the bridge or stream edge. The photos in Figure 2 were taken within 20 feet of my car, from pavement. They will come to you!

7) *Response* – the fastest I have seen a screech-owl after parking the car is probably 90 seconds, while the longest is about 10 minutes. In

general, you will start to hear the trilling almost so quietly you think you are hearing a phantom noise, and then more loudly as they come closer. Owls fly silently, but they sometimes make a noise upon landing, like a rustling branch, or the tink of their claws on a nearby metal post. On moonlit nights, the shadow of the incoming bird can occasionally be seen, and I've even had the owl buzz by my head! They will continue to come closer even when the tape has been stopped, and often incredibly close if they find a suitable perch from which to trill.

Figure 2. (Photo credit: Simon Best)

8) *Locating the owl* – I was surprised to discover how low to the ground screech-owls can be. Certainly there are times when they are overhead, but the vast majority of the time they perch at eye-level or even lower. Many times they find a branch not more than a foot or two off the ground! After being located with a light, screech-owls continue to behave comfortably, trilling even as you move around for a better view or for a photograph. Seeing the owl rather than just hearing it also allows you to appreciate the red and gray color morphs of the Eastern Screech-owl (Figure 2). Most of my encounters end with me turning off the light and walking away out of respect, not because the owl has flushed or flown away. Sometimes I will drive away with the owl still calling from the same perch! They appear completely nonplussed by my presence at night.

9) *Other owls* – playing screech-owl tapes will sometimes draw in another species, particularly hungry Barred Owls. But I have never had a location with both species, and it seems to me that they have sorted out their territories long before I arrive. If a location seems promising for screech-owls but there is no response after ten minutes, it is always worth playing a Barred Owl recording. Regardless of whether they are responding to a screech-owl or Barred Owl recording, Barred Owls will fly in and remain silent—essentially the opposite of screech-owls. Barred Owls will perch much higher up in the trees, usually on a strong horizontal branch (Figure 3).

Figure 3. (Photo credit: Simon Best)

Finding an owl at night is a thrilling experience. These beautiful birds appear out of the darkness, and being around them at night is a brief window into their world. The fact that we can do this while contributing valuable data to the Maryland & DC Breeding Bird Atlas makes it even better!

Author: Simon Best

Do you have a story or photo you would like to see in What's Hatching? We'd love to hear it! Send your submissions to the editor at mddcbba3@mdbirds.org.

FROM THE FIELD

I would not consider myself a 'birder'; I am more of an outdoorsman that appreciates birds immensely. I am not a pro at bird identification, but I can spot differences in birds and recognize when I am looking at a species that I do not usually observe. That's how it all began with a family of Common Ravens. Knowing they were not American or Fish Crows, I began to observe a small number of these birds at my worksite in Havre de Grace, which is on private property with no public access.


Photo credit: Joe Suboflesky

By 2016, I noticed that a handful of Common Ravens were hanging out and making almost daily appearances. In July, after watching their interactions with each other, I snapped a photograph and sent it to Matt Hafner to inquire about their behavior. He confirmed that the behavior was familial and most likely an adult bird that was caring for a juvenile. This meant there must be a nest nearby. I never located the nest that year, but in 2018 I discovered the nest they are currently using.

During my workday, I regularly drive past the nesting location, so I was able make multiple observations each day and keep close tabs on how the raven family progressed. Photographs of the 2018 nest with fledglings made this nest the eastern-most documented nest site observed in the state of Maryland. It is now believed that Common Ravens are nesting in Cecil County, but a nest has yet to be discovered and documented. In BBA2, there was a documented nest in western Baltimore County and during BBA1, nests were not found east of Frederick County.

The birds have reused the same nest for the last three seasons. On April 28, 2020, the three fledglings, pictured, left the nest. They are still nearby, and I have seen them every day since. Since 2016, it is believed that thirteen birds have fledged from nests at this general location. I enjoy watching their interactions with each other and their ability to recognize certain vehicles or people on the property. I truly hope they continue to nest on the property so I have the enjoyment of watching them for years to come.

Author: Joe Subolefsky


Photo credit: Joe Suboflesky

Last May, when the Common Ravens fledged, one had a three-foot-long piece of orange plastic rope attached to its leg. Unsure of how to catch the bird, I watched it all day to make sure it was able to move around. When I went to work the next morning, I found the bird hanging upside down like a bat from a small tree. Without hesitation, I cut the tree down and grabbed the bird. It appeared the leg had grown around the rope while the bird was in the nest. My wife, who holds a


Photo credit: Joe Suboflesky

bird banding sub-permit, talked me through the careful removal of the rope and the application of first aid cream to the bird's leg. The entire time we were working with the fledgling, its siblings and parents were nearby, watching every move I made. In less than five minutes, I released the bird, who then circled back in what I would like to think of as an aerial 'thank-you' display. To this day, the Common Ravens at my worksite seem to recognize my vehicle and allow me a little more freedom to photograph them.

OUT OF THE ARCHIVE

First Maryland Breeding of Green-winged Teal

Armistead, H.T. 1971. First Maryland Breeding of Green-winged Teal, a "New" Heronry, and Other Somerset County Records. *Maryland Birdlife* 27(3):111–114.

Cover: First Maryland nest of Green-winged Teal, Deal Island, Somerset County.

Saturday, June 5, 1971, came early, at 1 a.m., when the alarm sounded at the Oak Terrace Motel south of Salisbury. When I abandon my wife in favor of a full weekend in the swamps, I feel obligated to put in a full day's efforts to justify such folly. A quick breakfast at the nearby English Grill and then off to the marsh roads of Fairmount and Deal Island. The moon was still up, and it was warm and calm—good conditions for Black Rails.

Just before 2 a.m. one of them was calling at the first stop past Fairmount Wildlife Management Area (W.M.A.), a few hundred yards beyond the last trees. Although plenty of Virginia and Clapper Rails were calling continuously, no more Black Rails were heard, and I left the Fairmount Road with counts of 1 King, 14 Clappers, 10 Virginias, 1 unseasonal Sora, and 1 Black Rail.

It was now nearing 3 a.m. and necessary to rush north to the Deal Island Road in order to be on time for the anticipated Black Rail chorus there. This proved much more successful than at Fairmount. Ten Black Rails were heard, all between the mainland and Dames Quarter. Other rallids included 3 Kings, 9 Clappers, and 11 Virginias. This was my first experience listening for Black Rails other than in Dorchester County, Md., or Broadkill Beach Road, Del. These obscure, elusive little birds of the wee hours of the night seem to be at least as common in Somerset County as at these two other prime areas. There have been several records at Irish Grove Sanctuary at the southern edge of Somerset County. I expect that the dike areas edging the unimpounded marsh at the Fairmount W.M.A. may also be a good listening spot. I did not have time to check this out on June 5.

As it began getting light a steady stream of herons flew past the south dike of Deal Island W.M.A. from southwest to northeast. Presumably they were coming from some colony out on Smith Island or elsewhere in the central Bay. The

flight ceased about 8 a.m., by which time these counts had been obtained: Great Blue Heron 10, Green Heron 11, Little Blue Heron 6, Cattle Egret + Snowy Egret + immature Little Blue Heron 170 (many indistinguishable in the early light), Common Egret 20, Louisiana Heron 50, Black-crowned Night Heron 6, and Glossy Ibis 234. Some of these are sizable counts, even compared with countywide totals I have made during previous years in August."

Late in the morning as I looked over the area at the end of Route 363 I saw large numbers of herons circling around a group of small trees on Little Deal Island about one-half mile south of Wenona. A Glossy Ibis descended into the undergrowth there with a stick in its bill. It seemed almost certain that there was an active heronry. After talking with several Wenona residents I learned that the herons had been using the area for about five years. Mr. and Mrs. Paul Benton, Jr., who run a seafood house nearby, were kind enough to lend me their scow, and I paddled the hundred yards or so across the inlet.

Most of the nests were very well concealed in masses of honeysuckle growing up into a grove of 12-20 foot sumac. By my remaining motionless under the nests, the masses of wheeling herons and ibis eventually settled onto their nests again. The following species were observed incubating: Cattle Egret, Snowy Egret, Black-crowned Night Heron, and Glossy Ibis. Estimates of the birds seen at the colony at the time of the visit were: Glossy Ibis 110, Cattle Egret 25, Black-crowned Night Heron 20, Snowy Egret 15, Louisiana Heron 10, Common Egret 6, Green Heron 4, and 3 each of Great Blue, Little Blue, and Yellow-crowned Night Heron.

After penetrating to the center of the colony and circling it for about forty-five minutes, I hastily departed. It was midday, clear, and the temperature was in the low 90's. No young birds had been visible, so the nests must have contained very small young or eggs. In either case they would be susceptible to overheating, although feeding areas at dawn gives a rough indication that from 100 to 270 pairs were present.

The principal plants in the heronry area are honeysuckle and Winged Sumac (*Rhus copallina*). Other plants present were Poison Ivy, Bayberry, Phragmites, grape, cherry, Trumpet Creeper, and poplar. The east side of the colony is a typical tidal marsh with rich

Fig. 1. Site of Green-winged Teal nest on edge of diked impoundment.

most of the nests appeared partially shaded. It is difficult to estimate numbers in a colony where the nests are well-concealed, ten species are present, and many birds are feeding several miles distant. The estimates of birds seen at the colony compared to those seen coming from the colony to

growths of Salt-water Cordgrass (*Spartina alterniflora*), Salt-meadow Grass (*S. patens*), and Groundsel-tree (*Baccharis halimifolia*). On the west is sandy beach and Chesapeake Bay. Mammal tracks noticed were those of raccoon, deer, dogs, and

man. Mrs. Benton said that red foxes were sometimes seen on the island. The following birds were represented by individuals apparently breeding or on territory in the area: Common Crow (flightless juvenile present), Carolina Wren, Catbird, Yellow Warbler, Red-winged Blackbird, Boat-tailed Grackle, Cardinal, and Song Sparrow. In the nearby marsh were calling Clapper Rails, Long-billed Marsh Wrens, and Seaside Sparrows. Other birds present, some undoubtedly attracted by the prospect of prey or carrion, included: Turkey Vulture, Great Black-backed Gull, Herring Gull, Ring-billed Gull, Laughing Gull, Fish Crow, and House Sparrow. This colony has apparently remained unnoticed to the birding fraternity until now, although it has existed for several years according to some of the persons living nearby. Little Deal Island is uninhabited, but contains the remains of former dwellings.

Another exciting event occurred about 3 p.m. when I was walking the closed section of the dike connecting the impounded areas at Deal Island W.M.A. A female Green-winged Teal flushed from the *Spartina patens* along the side of the dike (Figure 1). The nest with five eggs was easily found at the marsh edge although partially concealed by the tops of the Salt-meadow Grass (which have been pulled aside in the cover photo). This is the first published Maryland breeding record, although in all likelihood Green-wings have previously nested on the Eastern Shore. Areas such as Fairmount and Deal Island W.M.A. seem to be ideal habitat for small numbers of them. They have been seen several times before at these locations in mid-summer. Later in the day on June 5 I saw another female at Fairmount W.M.A.

Within the past decade there have been definite breeding records at Bombay Hook and Little Creek refuges in Delaware. Although there are summer records from Chincoteague and Back Bay refuges in Virginia, there do not seem to be any definite breeding records south of Deal Island, except for a brood of young at Chincoteague Refuge some six or seven years ago (Frederic R. Scott, pers. comm.). Such records may develop soon. The present nest, then, is situated in an area similar to others at the extreme southeastern limit of the Green-wing's breeding range: a large, impounded refuge marsh. After discovering the nest I carefully marked its location and returned to the car to get a camera. Upon returning about forty minutes later, I found the bird was not yet back on its nest. I used the last few remaining exposures and quickly departed.

Several Pied-billed Grebes had been calling earlier in the pre-dawn darkness. I was not surprised to see one sitting on a mound of dead marsh vegetation soon after sun-up. A short while later I saw another one on a

Fig. 2. Pied-billed Grebe nestmound in impounded pond.

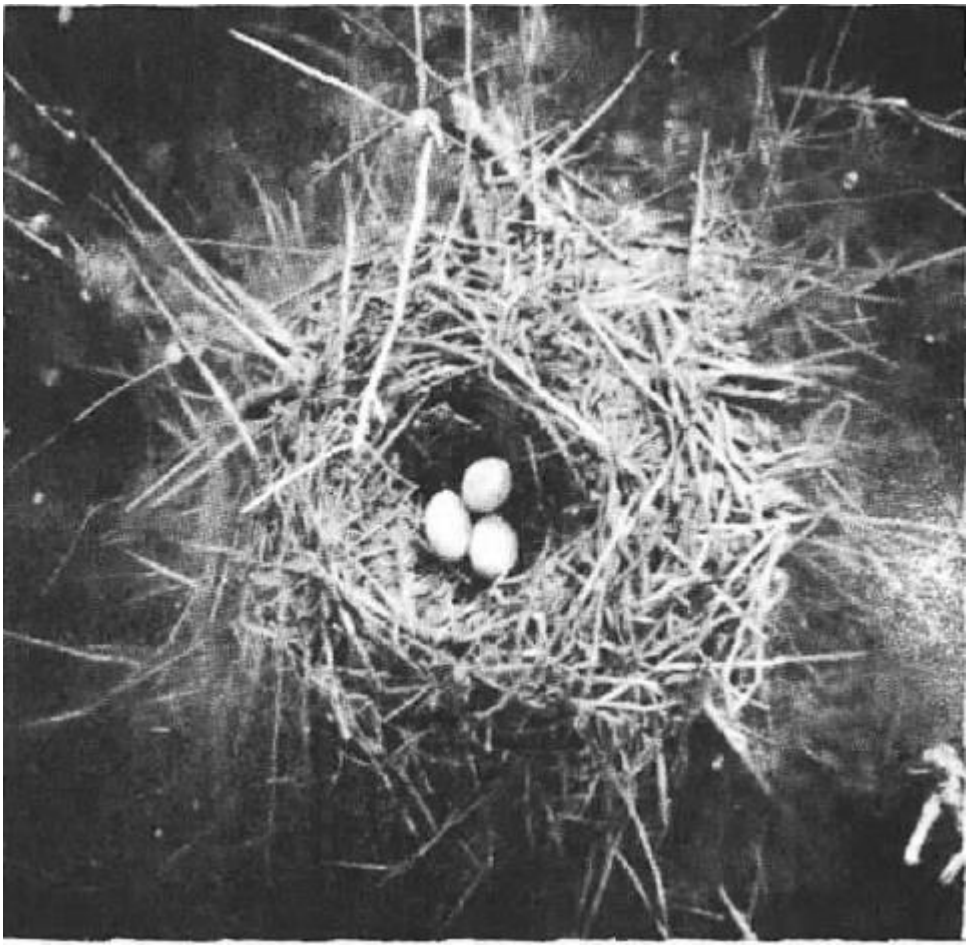


Fig. 3. Looking directly down on same Pied-billed Grebe nest at Deal Island.

mound. Almost surely these were occupied nests. Never having seen one closely, I took off across several hundred yards of channels, submerged shrubs, and rotting algae, wading staggering, sinking to my neck fully dressed, and then in water over my head, paddling with one hand and holding the camera above the surface with the other. Naturally, after this performance the incubating bird had long since slid off its nest by the time I arrived and found the three eggs, which had been carefully covered with dead grasses. I uncovered them, took several pictures (Figures 2 and 3), re-covered them, and quickly left. By the time I struggled back to the ear, the grebe was once more on its nest incubating. Later that day I saw three more mound nests for a total of five.

Some of the impoundments are so large that it is impossible to see what is in the center of them, even with a 25X telescope, so there may have been numerous other breeding pairs present. There are several other breeding records of Pied-bills on the Delmarva Peninsula (Bombay Hook, Little Creek, and Chineoteague refuges as well as Worcester County, Md.), but there are few for Maryland's Eastern Shore, especially ones with egg data. Except for records of downy young at Lake Roland near Baltimore, and in Worcester County, almost all Maryland nesting records are from the Patuxent Wildlife Research Center near Laurel. These birds seem to favor impounded marsh areas. They have probably been fairly common nesters at Deal Island for several years judging from the large numbers that have been seen there in mid-August.

Post-script

By Henry ("Harry") T. Armistead, April 22, 2020

Back in 1971, and bracketing that by several years, various species in the lower Eastern Shore tidal areas (the area of my main focus), were much commoner. Several times we'd find 10 or more each of Black Rail, Henslow's and Saltmarsh sparrows, American Woodcock, and Sedge Wren *on the same date*. They're gone or almost so now, the woodcock especially surprising.

However, since then Eastern Bluebirds and Bald Eagles have greatly increased. The countless thousands of loblolly pines killed in recent years by saltwater intrusion, resulting in the so-called "ghost forest", provide good habitat for Red-headed Woodpeckers that have increased.

Some of the other marsh birds are much less common now, especially Blue-winged Teal, Gadwall, migrant Soras, American Bittern (very rare breeder at any time), and I believe there has been a decline of Virginia Rail and even Seaside Sparrow. One day I walked the 7-mile dike at Deal Island and counted 343 Seaside Sparrows. A few years later far fewer. Clapper Rail by contrast and Common Gallinules seem to have increased slightly in some places.

Mute Swans have been largely exterminated (the term used is the euphemism "removed"). Once I saw a group of over 700 at Hooper's Island. Every Memorial Day weekend for a while we would explore Barren Island, now a unit of Blackwater N.W.R., and often find 10 or more Mute Swan nests.

There has been a loss of breeding habitat on some lower Chesapeake Bay islands. Consequently there are fewer herons, egrets, and Glossy Ibis on some of the mainland tidal marshes where many of them forage. On Bloodsworth Island formerly there were 180 Great Blue Heron nests. As the snags and nesting platforms built by the Navy have deteriorated or fallen over there have recently been just a few dozen.

Some of my earlier activities in these places is summarized in *Maryland Birdlife*, September 1978, pp. 99-151. Chan Robbins made me rewrite the entire article, helping to make many improvements. In addition to all else he did, he was a fine editor, too.

A more subtle decline has been that of Yellow-throated, Yellow, Black-and-white, and Prairie warblers, perhaps the near complete disappearance of Kentucky Warblers, fewer Acadian Flycatchers, and Wood Thrushes as reflected in the May bird counts conducted in Dorchester County. What is driving this is seemingly complicated, perhaps habitat loss here and on wintering grounds.

Another change involves the Deal Island and to some extent nearby Fairmount Wildlife Management Areas. Impoundments often tend to deteriorate in avian richness after two decades or more as shown by some in northern New Jersey. Back in 1971, or thereabouts, I can remember seeing over 100 Common Gallinules and dozens of Pied-billed Grebes *from one spot* at Deal Island.

One day I left Liz off at the Philly airport, drove to Deal & Fairmount, found the first state American Coot nest, and was back in the city for supper. I hadn't intended that to be a stunt. Later when with some pride I mentioned this the person I was with said, "Yes, but it was a coot," as if a coot was the waterbird equivalent of a starling.

Once at Deal I swam out to three grebe nests in one day. American Coots were not uncommon breeders back then, and, with reference to comments above, Gadwall and Blue-winged Teal broods were often encountered. Not the case now. And the big impounded area, abandoned years ago, off of Pokata Creek on Elliott Island Road is essentially bereft of birds.

Another possible loss has been the decline of American Black Ducks and Willets in the southern Bay marshes and islands, perhaps due to the presence of hacked Peregrine Falcons, formerly not native breeders in those places.

A hike of 20 miles on north Assateague Island was productive with, I think it was 37 Piping Plovers and 7 or 8 Wilson's Plovers, with several nests of each. That was back when the McCabe House was still there and apparently I wasn't supposed to be. I never had strong legs. When the Park Service fellow escorted me off and gave me a lift down from there it was a relief as I could hardly walk. Wilson's Plovers used to nest all the way up into New Jersey. I think their northern limit is now Metompkin Island, Virginia.

The decline of Barn Owls may be due to several causes, such as the decrease of grasslands and fallow fields. But with the big

Photo credit: Gabriel Foley

die-off of submerged aquatic vegetation c. 1970 there was a consequent decline in the quality of hunting for scaup, Redheads, American Wigeon, and Canvasback. As a result hunters stopped erecting offshore duck blinds, an important feature used heavily by Barn Owls.

Of course other grassland species, such as Eastern Meadowlark and perhaps Grasshopper Sparrow are also hurting, although on the Eastern Shore of Virginia I have been impressed with how many Grasshopper Sparrows are present in early growth soy bean fields, where I once saw one attack a Gull-billed Tern that was coursing over such a field.

I regret so much negativity in this essay, but that is what I have seen, or at least believe I have seen. One bright spot has been the relatively new presence of breeding Black-necked Stilts in Maryland, originally at Deal Island and Elliott Island Road, but now also at the reconstituted Poplar Island, Talbot County, complex. One hopes the birdlife at the coming dredge spoil deposition sites of James and Barren islands will be as thoroughly monitored as at Poplar Island.

The tremendous influx of breeding Brown Pelicans is phenomenal, mostly on the lower Bay, much less so in Worcester County coastal areas. I was present one day on Holland Island, Dorchester County, when over 1,500 pelican chicks were banded, one of Dave Brinker's and John Weske's forays with over 30 of us. Paralleling this has been the huge numbers of breeding Double-crested Cormorants.

I can remember being excited when I found Maryland's third breeding record of Great Black-backed Gull in Somerset

Photo credit: Jordan Rutter

County. Perhaps White Ibis will become regular Maryland breeders. There are hundreds breeding nearby in Virginia now.

Going back a ways, Dick Kleen loaned me some of his bands and I tagged a few Herring Gull chicks out on the remnants of Sharp's Island, Talbot County, in the mid-1950s, the site of their first state breeding record, swimming after some to capture them. In the 1970s some of my companions and I recorded the contents of over one thousand nests at Easter Point on Smith Island in one day.

American Oystercatcher has advanced up the Bay. Never saw any for a while. Found the first Dorchester County nest among a windrow of large, unexploded naval shells on Pone Island, a subsidiary of Bloodsworth Island. Now there are a few farther north at Barren and Poplar islands.

State biologists do a good job of monitoring colonial waterbirds on the lower Bay islands, especially since cormorants and pelicans are now abundant breeders.

There's been a lot of changes. The Atlas will document those. There are also many birds that seem to be rock solid with consistent, relatively unchanged abundance. It is just as important for the Atlas to document that.

In the face of these, my perceived changes, the current atlas results promise to be of great interest and significance. In view of the catastrophic declines of many common birds, including even Barn Swallow and Red-winged Blackbird, as noted recently in the now-famous article in *Science*, the results of the present atlas will be crucial to our understanding of what is going on.

My areas of activity have been in a relatively small portion of the state. I have only been to Garrett County once. So the efforts of hundreds of us will give a dramatic picture of current birdlife in Maryland, trends, increases, decreases, what has been stable, and more.

I wish I could contribute more to it, but my loss of hearing, and to some extent stamina, and phobic reaction to technology won't help. But I intend to try at least.

Author: Henry ("Harry") T. Armistead