

# WHAT'S HATCHING?

Official Newsletter of the Maryland & DC Breeding Bird Atlas 3

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Photo credit: Mark R. Johnson

## BIRD OF THE MONTH

Widespread, but uncommon, Blue Grosbeaks are a breeding bird that should be specifically targeted.

## FROM THE FIELD

Marty B. tells us about how he documents—and shares—breeding behaviors while atlasing.

## CONTENTS

From the Coordinator.....	3	Bird of the Month.....	4
Atlaser Spotlight.....	6	Block Party.....	7
Tips and Tricks.....	8	From the Field.....	9
Out of the Archive.....	10		

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## TIPS AND TRICKS

When is a fledgling a fledgling, and when is it just another bird?

On June 12, 2020, a nesting Mississippi Kite was Confirmed in Calvert County. While this isn't a new breeding species for Maryland, it is a new breeding species for the Maryland and DC atlases! In fact, this is only the second nest that has ever been documented in Maryland. The previous nest was found in June of 2019, also in Calvert County (although an adult was seen feeding a fledgling in July of 2008, which Confirmed breeding). Mississippi Kites have been increasing in Virginia since the 80s and nesting since 1995. They are also fairly new to the Maryland landscape; the earliest accepted record is from 1987.



Photo credit: Landowner

"I learned that atlasing begins where most birdwatching ends, with the identification of the species."

- Rick Blom, MD-DC BBA1 Coordinator

Atlasing is a fabulous way to learn more about the behavior and ecology of our region's birds. To access most of the current research on each species, consider purchasing a subscription to Cornell's Birds of the World—there's even a special for MOS members!

## UPCOMING EVENTS

### ***Maryland Ornithological Society Membership Benefit!***

*MOS has joined with Cornell Lab of Ornithology to offer a **20% discount** to Birds of the World and Cornell's online bird and song identification courses. This discount is open to MOS members and is good for one year, starting July 1, 2020.*

*You may join MOS or request the discount code at <https://mdbirds.org/join/member-information-restricted/birds-of-the-world/>.*



# From the Coordinator

*It's a great time of year to be an atlaser.*



July can be a difficult time of year for birding. Spring migration feels like it was years ago, and the beginning of fall migration is difficult to notice. The temperatures can be stifling, even early in the morning, identifying birds by ear is much more challenging than it was a month ago, and the chance of finding new species for your favorite list seems much lower. It can be hard to find the motivation to get up, leave the cool air conditioning behind, and step outside into the sticky heat.

But that's if you're just a birder.

If you are an atlaser, July is the most productive time of year. Fledglings seem to be within every shrub, behind every tree, and under every

leaf. Parents are doing their level-best to satiate ravenous, squawking, thankless offspring, constantly flying back and forth with mouthfuls of insects. For atlasers, these fledglings and their parents are the most efficient route to Confirmation.

Fledglings vocalize frequently, but it takes some effort to tune your ear to detecting those chip notes; it's easy to filter these less familiar sounds out. Once you detect them, confidently identifying a fledgling by call alone can be challenging, and finding the ventriloquial chicks for a visual identification isn't easy either. It is maddeningly hard to pinpoint where their call note is coming from, so the best solution is often just to wait for an adult to arrive with

another mouthful of food. This can help you make sure the identification is correct, since adults are easier to identify than juveniles (but don't forget that adults may be raising cowbirds). Waiting for an adult to feed the chick will also provide a slightly higher breeding code than if you only have recently fledged young. Like most atlasing tips, the solution ultimately boils down to being patient and moving slowly.

Don't forget to compare your block's current species list to that block's [species list from past atlases](#). Atlasers that use these historical species lists consistently detect more species in their blocks than atlasers that ignore this information. If your current list is missing previously recorded species, make sure you haven't overlooked atlasing in that species' habitat.

July is also the time to look for species that tend to nest later in the year, like American Goldfinch, Cedar Waxwing, or Blue Grosbeak. If you have a block that is nearing its completion targets, be sure to put in a special effort to find these widespread species.

It may be hot out, and fall migration may be barely a dribble, but fledglings—and Confirmations—abound in mid-summer. It's a great time of year to be an atlaser.

--Gabriel



Fledglings are insatiable, constantly begging for more food. Photo credit: George Jett

bird of the month:

# BLUE GROSBEAK



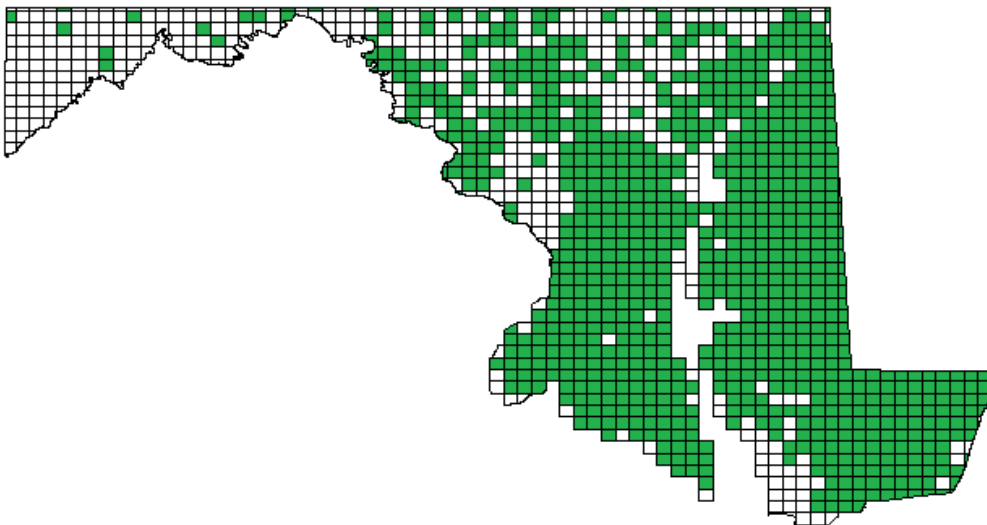
Photo credit: Mark R. Johnson

Blue Grosbeaks are an uncommon but surprisingly widespread bird that can be found in open, early-successional habitat like overgrown fields, forest edges, or floodplain thickets. Transmission-line corridors, regenerating timber cuts, hedgerows, and ditches along crop fields are excellent places to find this habitat. Their song is rich and rolling—in fact, it is remarkably similar to a Purple Finch's song. Their call note, a sharp, metallic *blink*, is useful later in the summer when they sing less frequently. Be careful not to confuse Blue Grosbeaks with Indigo Buntings; both are dark blue birds of open habitats. Blue Grosbeaks have a massive bill relative to their face, and all plumages show a rusty wing-bar that Indigo Buntings lack. Blue Grosbeaks may also twitch their tail, something Indigo Buntings

don't do as much.

Male Blue Grosbeaks begin arriving in Maryland and DC in late April, and females follow shortly thereafter. From an exposed perch or from within vegetation, males advertise their fifteen-acre territory with a song composed of 11–19 unique phrases. The song always starts with the same combination, but the endings vary, and older males sing longer songs than younger males. Once the grosbeak's eggs hatch, the territory size will shrink by 15%.

Most nesting begins in late May. Although males have been documented helping build the nest, it's thought that females do the bulk of construction. The nest is typically placed in a small tree or shrub (although there is a



Blue Grosbeak distribution map from the Maryland & DC Breeding Bird Atlas 2.

## BLUE GROSBEAK

### *One molt, two plumages.*

After migrating south to their wintering grounds in Central America, Blue Grosbeaks undergo a complete molt. A complete molt is when all of a bird's feathers are molted; conversely, a bird with an incomplete molt usually retains its flight feathers. The new feathers, like many 'non-breeding' plumages, are drab and brown. Females remain brown throughout the year, but males will be a deep blue by the following breeding season. Adult males avoid a second molt into this plumage through feather wear, like European Starlings or Snow Buntings. As the year progresses, the brown tips of their feathers gradually wear away, exposing the blue hidden underneath. By the following spring, this process of abrasion is largely complete. Unlike their older counterparts, first-summer males molt directly into blue plumage. This patchy brown and blue appearance can separate first-summer birds from older adults, but shouldn't be confused with hatch-year birds.



record of a Blue Grosbeak using a bluebird box!). In Maryland, the height ranges from 1 to 10 feet above the ground. The female gathers twigs, bark strips, and grass stems, as well as snakeskins, dead leaves, and suitable anthropogenic objects like rags, newspaper, or string. The cup is lined with finer materials like rootlets, hair, or thin grasses. Once she is satisfied with her nest, the female begins laying 3–5 unmarked blueish-white eggs. Extra-pair copulations are a common occurrence; one study found 29 of 55 fledglings were unrelated to the paired males.



Photo credit: Mark R. Johnson

Although Blue Grosbeaks have been reported as a regular host to Brown-headed Cowbirds, only one out of 104 nests documented in Maryland were parasitized.

The female is the sole incubator, but the male will feed her while she's on the nest. The chicks hatch 12–13 days later, and both parents begin feeding them. Blue Grosbeaks feed the chicks grasshoppers, beetles, mantids, and other insects; their large bills allow them to handle these sizeable insects easily. One pair in Tennessee was observed feeding their chicks almost exclusively praying mantids; the head, wings, and legs were stripped off and the remainder given to the chicks. The chicks remain in the nest for an

additional 9–10 days before fledging. It's unclear how long chicks may remain with their parents after fledging, but shortly afterwards the young birds form flocks together. The adults remain paired together and build a second nest, repeating the process. Eggs from this second brood have been found as late as early September. Once the second brood fledges, adults and youngsters join the juvenile flocks and prepare for migration, and it is not unusual to see adults feeding their offspring in September.

Surprisingly, Blue Grosbeaks were documented nesting in DC four years before the first Maryland nest was reported, in 1867. It appears that Blue Grosbeaks were never abundant in Maryland or DC, but their range here has been expanding substantially in recent decades. In previous atlases, they were Confirmed in a quarter (BBA1) and a third (BBA2) of the blocks they were documented in, and 72% (BBA1) and 85% (BBA2) of those were of recently fledged young or adults carrying food.

Author: Gabriel Foley

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© George Jett

Photo credit: George Jett

# ATLASER SPOTLIGHT

***Bud Poole is an avid volunteer for the Friends of Patterson Park and Patterson Park Audubon Center in Baltimore City.***



*How did you become interested in birds?*

Although I have always loved nature and the outdoors, my interest in birds fledged recently. Growing up in the DC suburbs, the fragmented, manicured landscape was likely a contributing factor. A little more exposure to birds, and this spark may have ignited long ago. My first job was at a catering company, and Montgomery County birder Jim Green was one of the event managers I worked under. The occasional Red-winged Blackbird or Northern Flicker would show up, and I'd inquire about its ID. One day, I joined him for a lunch break at Hughes Hollow and he shared some of his joy for birding. You could say that he's my spark birder (thanks, Jim!).

*What bird do you think reflects your personality best?*

Common Raven—and I'm not even a football fan. Baseball and the Baltimore Orioles run deep in my blood. You tend to see ravens alone; they aren't as social as crows. They are inquisitive and exploratory birds that are known for using tools.

*What bird do you particularly like?*

This changes with every experience! Right now, I particularly like the Eastern Kingbirds that are nesting in Patterson Park. I admire their acrobatics and tenaciousness towards other birds. Cooper's Hawk, also nesting in the park, come to mind as well. It's hard not to like a raptor able to adapt to city life and prey on Baltimore rats (with the exception of those large ones behind the local pizza place!).

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

Camera. I'm a blend of birder and photog. As a glutton for punishment, I have taken on learning about bird ID, behavior, and breeding while learning wildlife photography. Nothing like photographing a 4–5 inch warbler grabbing food in the canopy while adjusting for shadows and ever-changing lighting. Atlasing is a welcome break from spring migration. Time to snap photos of sedentary objects like nest structure, eggs, incubating parents, and nestlings.

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

Keith Costley. Have you seen his Baltimore County atlasing? Incredible. There is so much to learn from him, and he has a great disposition to go along with it.

*Where is your favorite place to atlas?*

Patterson Park in Baltimore City. While we don't have the heavy hitters, the data are no less important.



*What do you think is the best thing about atlasing?*

The best part about atlasing is knowing that your area is capable of supporting that life cycle for some species. Your neighborhood is not just a brief Airbnb stop for some pretty migrant *en route* to better digs. Your neighborhood is worth setting up some roots!

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

The biggest issue in conservation is policy, from the federal level to community associations. Setting the right policy gets effort and money directed to where it needs to be.

*Have you been involved with any other atlases?*

This is my first experience and it is a bit overwhelming. I'm glad that it's a long process so I can ease into it. I'm definitely looking forward to growing into it and becoming more of an asset to the community.

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# BLOCK PARTY

## Ridgely SW, Talbot County



The Ridgely SW block lies predominately in the northeastern corner of Talbot County, with the eastern edge of the block in Caroline County. This rural block reflects the best of the eastern shore: rural lands consisting of open fields, forest edges, and the Tuckahoe Creek that winds along the eastern edge of the block. This is an ideal block for birding by car along the empty backroads, although the shoulders are narrow, so extra care should be taken when pulling off the road. There are also public areas to bird on foot, as well as a convenient area to launch a canoe or kayak.

One of the best public areas to bird on foot is the 107-acre Frederick Douglas Park on the Tuckahoe. Located in the northeast corner of the block (13213 Lewistown Road), this is a relatively new park consisting of 67 acres acquired by the County under Maryland's Program Open Space, along with an adjoining 40 acres of privately donated wildlife habitat. The County dedicated the park to Frederick Douglas, who was born not far from the park's location, in 2018 on the 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary of his birth.

The park has varied habitat, consisting of open fields and forested edges along a ridge overlooking a wide bend in Tuckahoe Creek, along with some working lands consisting of barns and a horse corral. A house for an on-site caretaker is located at the back section of the park. The county maintains several grass trails that follow forested edges and open fields, with several spots overlooking the creek. The county intends to maintain the park as open space, with plans to add interpretive panels describing Douglas's early life experiences growing up in the area.

A public canoe or kayak launch site with a small parking area and picnic tables is about a one-mile drive from the park entrance. Head north on Lewiston Road, through the town of Hillsboro. Immediately after you cross Tuckahoe Creek, the launch site is

on the right. The launch site is just north of the dividing line between Ridgely CW and SW blocks; head south around the first bend to return to the Ridgely CW block.

There was a slight decrease in the total number of breeding species recorded between BBA1 (86) and BBA2 (83). Confirmed species decreased by 15 between BBA1 (46) and BBA2 (31) while Probable breeders increased by 17 between BBA1 (19) and BBA2 (35). Possible breeders decreased by 4 between BBA1 (21) and BBA2 (17). American Black Duck, American Kestrel, and Northern Rough-winged Swallow were all Confirmed in BBA1 but missing from BBA2. Northern Flicker was Confirmed in BBA1, but dropped to a Possible breeder in BBA2, with Cedar Waxwing recorded as a Probable breeder in BBA but missing from BBA2. Canada Goose, Wild Turkey, and Bald Eagle were all new in BBA2, recorded as Confirmed breeders.

If you are looking for varied habitat, a chance to explore a relatively new open space park on the Eastern Shore, or an opportunity to do some birding from a canoe or kayak, check out Ridgely SW block in Talbot County.



Photo credit: Ron Ketter  
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*Author: Ronald Ketter*

# TIPS AND TRICKS

The first breeding season of BBA3 is wrapping up, but there are still plenty of opportunities for Confirming species. There are fledglings, adults carrying food, parents feeding young—in fact, Confirmations are easier to find now than ever. But it's an ephemeral time. Fledglings will soon be independent and many will molt out of their juvenile plumage. Their parents will quickly outgrow the desire to continue stuffing food into their chicks' beaks. And this leads to the question, when is a fledgling no longer a fledgling?

To answer that, it's helpful to first understand the goal that the breeding code 'recently fledged young' (code FL) is trying to achieve. We want to know whether a species has attempted to nest within each 3-mile by 3-mile block (note that we are asking whether a bird has *attempted* to nest, not if it has *successfully* nested). For most species, recently fledged young cannot travel far, and this means that they likely nested nearby (*i.e.*, in that block). But, as those young birds age, they are capable of greater independence and of travelling further, which means they are less likely to have nested in the block they are currently in.

The most important criterion for categorizing a fledgling for the Atlas is that the bird must still be dependent on its parents. Most songbirds rely on their parents for a couple of weeks after fledging. These young birds will often still have down on their feathers, short tails, and a

'gape' on their bills. The gape is a fleshy hinge at the base of the bill; most birds lose it shortly after fledging, and its presence is an excellent indicator of a recently fledged bird. Recently fledged birds will also often be in small family groups (but not if its siblings were eaten, of course) and they will be calling frequently—the begging calls of most birds are substantially different from their other vocalizations. Begging calls are often accompanied by wing-fluttering and open mouths, in an attempt to get yet another morsel from their parents. These are excellent indicators, especially when in combination, that the bird in question is indeed a recently fledged juvenile.

Some birds, such as waterfowl, grouse, and shorebirds, leave the nest almost immediately after they hatch. If the young are clearly still dependent on their parents, they should receive code FL. A fluffy Canada Goose chick, for example, is clearly eligible for code FL, but it will remain with its family group until the next spring (when it is

obviously not a fledgling). The cut-off for when code FL should no longer be applied isn't cut and dried, but the rule of thumb is that if it looks like a baby, you can use code FL, and if it doesn't, then you should not use code FL.

It also helps to know about a species' behavior. Raptors, terns, gulls, herons, and swifts all pose special considerations. Swifts are essentially never eligible for code FL; it's too difficult to know if a bird is actually a fledgling, or if it hatched nearby. If a family group of raptors is found, code FL can be applied, but otherwise caution should be used. Terns, gulls, and herons are all colonial nesters, and once their young fledge they tend to leave the colony area; a recently fledged individual is not a Confirmation of breeding in that block.

Become familiar with juvenile plumages, listen for begging calls, and follow the rule of thumb that if it looks like a baby, then it's probably a baby and can be coded as a recently fledged young.

*Author: Gabriel Foley*



Juvenile Blue Grosbeak. Photo credit: Tim Carney



# FROM THE FIELD

I like to film birds with my video camera. Up until this year, all of my filming has been abroad. Last fall, for a birding trip to Australia, I purchased a Canon XA11 HD video camera that came with all the needed peripherals. The camera was handy for capturing Crimson Rosellas and Kookaburras.

This past spring, I found myself homebound due to the pandemic. I decided to venture out and film local birds. I created a video showing short clips of fourteen birds I filmed in the form of a "video flash card quiz" that I uploaded to YouTube. The students from my cancelled birding class at the Community College of Baltimore County used the quiz to see how many birds they could identify. As I filmed more birds throughout the spring, I was able to create a YouTube channel called "[Marty's Bird Identification Flash Video Games](#)" with three more bird quizzes.

While atlasing this summer, I have been going out every day using my video camera. My birding skills have sharpened as I constantly scan the foliage looking for breeding activity, and my quiz videos now include nesting behaviors. I intend to make narrated instructional videos as I get more footage of each species of bird.

My last video quiz shows 84 birds to identify in fifteen minutes. Many of the birds were filmed during the Atlas. In fact, the title slide for the video shows a Common Yellowthroat carrying food.

If you are videoing while atlasing, I formulated seven things for you to consider:



**1. Video is a great way of documenting your nesting birds.**

You have a running record. I look through my binoculars and get visual proof before filming breeding activity. There is a bit of a lag between seeing the bird and getting it on camera.

**2. Tripods are ideal.** The tripod legs need to be extended and the camera on when the bird appears. In Australia I did not use my tripod. I held my breath to keep the camera steady. Now I use the tripod all the time. However, sometimes tripod noises are recorded while filming. You then have to be inventive to edit out the squeaky noise of the knob used to zoom in on the birds.

**3. Birds don't pose for you very often!** You have to film many minutes of birds to get good footage to share. Fortunately, high-tech video cameras use flash memory that stores many hours of film. I only download the good footage and make sure my flash disk is emptied every so often.

**4. You need to keep your camera battery charged.** My camera battery gets charged every night. I also pack a spare battery while atlasing.

**5: Sometimes the auto focus prefers to focus on branches.** You need to get used to using the manual focus.

**6. Don't verbalize excitement out loud while filming.** "Oh look, a Worm-eating Warbler!" You might have to edit around your excitement.

**7. As you look through the viewfinder, a red blinking light indicates the camera is recording.** Exciting birds can cause you to forget to make sure the camera is recording!

*Author: Martin Brazeau*

*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](mailto:mddcbba3@mdbirds.org).*

# OUT OF THE ARCHIVE

## First Maryland Breeding of American Coot at Deal Island

Armistead, H.T. 1970. First Maryland Breeding of American Coot at Deal Island. *Maryland Birdlife* 26(3):79–81.



Photo credit: Mike Hudson

Perhaps it is not surprising that a road passing through towns with names such as Deal Island, Monie, Chance, Dames Quarter, and Oriole should also be an interesting natural area. In spite of such gamy place names, I was unable to purchase soft drinks after several hours of mid-afternoon birding with the temperature in the mid-90s. Deal Islanders believe, with a vengeance, that Sunday is a day of rest. I was forced to return to the mainland to slake a very strong thirst. Nevertheless, my tour of the large impounded areas of the Deal Island Wildlife Management Area had certainly been worth this small discomfort.

On August 24, 1968, I had visited this Somerset County area and counted 40 Common Gallinules (*Gallinula chloropus*), which then marked a new high count for the state. This time,

August 16, 1970, the vegetation was much sparser, perhaps because of changing water levels or salinity, and the gallinules were easily seen everywhere. From one spot I counted 149 in sight and before leaving the total rose to 274, including four family groups with six, four, four, and three downy young. Most of the other birds were juveniles. Two years ago, I had counted nine gallinules at nearby Fairmount Wildlife Management Area, but this year I saw 31 there, including two family groups with three downy young each.

Another change was the presence of 68 American Coots (*Fulica americana*), including adults with six and five tiny downy young complete with their bright orange head markings as illustrated in Peterson.

This seems to be the first state breeding record, although coots are known to breed sparingly from Massachusetts (Finch, 1969) to Florida (AOU, 1957). In 1968 I had not seen any coots at all. The American Coot has a rather spotty breeding distribution in the Northeast. Bull (1964) has noted the tremendous increase of breeding Common Gallinules and coots at Hackensack Meadows, N.J., in 1962, probably owing to the diking of tidal marshes. At Brigantine Refuge, N.J., a spectacular increase occurred in 1960, when 350–400 young coots were found (Scott and Cutler, 1960). In Massachusetts, coots have been found breeding only since 1957, and most recently at Plum Island (Finch, 1969). Recent Pennsylvania breeding records include 1968 at Lake Ontelaunee (Scott and Cutler, 1968) and 1969 at Tinicum (Scott and Cutler, 1969). At Little Creek Refuge, Delaware, Lesser (1963) found about twenty broods in 1961 and 1962. Elsewhere, coots have been suspected of breeding in 1961 at Chincoteague Refuge, Virginia, and Fenwick Island, Delaware (Scott and Cutler, 1961). Several other marsh birds that are quite scarce in Maryland during the breeding season also were present at Deal Island. These included thirteen Pied-billed Grebes, including one



pair with four juveniles which retained some of the distinctive black and white markings on the lower throat characteristic of very young birds. These may have hatched locally. Later that afternoon five of these grebes were found at Fairmount W.M.A. Nineteen Gadwalls were there including adults accompanying groups of three and eight juveniles. Several Gadwall breeding records are listed for this area in Stewart and Robbins (1958). More exciting were five male and twelve female Ruddy Ducks. The males still had their bright light blue bills and ruddy feathering, but no juveniles were present to suggest that these chubby little ducks had bred.

The presence of Pied-billed Grebes, Gadwalls, Ruddy Ducks, gallinules and coots at Deal Island is in keeping with their appearance elsewhere in the middle Atlantic coastal region. When new artificial impoundments are developed these species often appear during the breeding season in areas where they had been either scarce or absent. At both Little Creek Refuge and Brigantine Refuge all of these species have been found breeding since the construction of impoundments. To some extent this is true also of Bombay Hook Refuge, Delaware, and Chincoteague Refuge. Perhaps in the near future there will be definite breeding records for Pied-billed Grebes and Ruddy Ducks in the Deal Island area. Ruddies, however, frequently summer in parts of their winter range without breeding.

The Deal Island marsh is one of the least frequently visited birding areas on the Eastern Shore. This is unfortunate because it is one of the finest marshes in the entire area. Among the other birds I saw there on August 16, 1970,

were: 17 Little Blue Herons, 53 Cattle Egrets, 39 Common Egrets, 106 Snowy Egrets, eight Louisiana Herons, one Least Bittern, eleven Glossy Ibis, 65 Blue-winged Teal, two Marsh Hawks, five Ospreys, one White-rumped Sandpiper, and one Blue Grosbeak. There are two roads giving access to the marsh. Follow State Route 363 out from U.S. 13 at Princess Anne. After crossing the marsh for a mile or so, watch out for the first road, a small paved road going off to the left (south) at an angle of about 45 degrees to route 363. This takes one through a couple of miles of marsh and is marked with yellow signs as a public hunting area. Farther down route 363, turn left at Dames Quarter and follow the second road, an obscure dirt road, through several right angle turns for about three-quarters of a mile until it goes onto the marsh again with a good half-mile or so of access to the impoundment on the left and natural salt marsh on the right. There is a dirt road connecting these two roads, but I have found it to be closed by the state on occasion. During the hunting season, I should guess that birders might be *persona non grata* along the first road. But the second road is used

a lot by crabbers and fishermen and should be all right for birders anytime. It would be interesting to see how Deal Island compares with Elliott Island in terms of Black Rails. The sail and other boats at Deal Island proper are also worth looking at; they were the subject of an article in the December 1967 National Geographic.

*Author: Henry T. Armistead*

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Singing Blue Grosbeak. Photo credit: Mark R. Johnson