

WHAT'S HATCHING?

Official Newsletter of the Maryland & DC Breeding Bird Atlas 3

ISSUE NO 13 | FEB 2021



Photo credit: [Daniel Irons/Macaulay Library](#)

CONTENTS

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

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

Contact the editor: mddcbba3@mdbirds.org | 202-681-4733

Want to donate to the Atlas? You can do that at mdbirds.org/donate

On social media? Join the flock! @mddcbba3 | #mddcbba3   

BIRD OF THE MONTH

White-breasted Nuthatches are common, but surprisingly little is known about their ecology.

TIPS & TRICKS

Is there an easier way to get Confirmations than sipping coffee and watching your feeder? Maybe, but we don't know what it is.

FROM THE FIELD

Cell towers are a novel place for birds to nest, and they're making use of them. What will be the next species to nest on a cell tower?

On July 7, 2003, James McCann extended the existing late egg date for American Oystercatcher by two days. Last year, Jim Stasz did the same thing, extending the date to July 11.

Oystercatchers are one of our priority species, so any breeding observations should include additional details, including a precise location and what sort of habitat the bird is in. And anytime you find a priority species, you should make a special effort to try and Confirm it, if possible.



Photo credit: [Jim Stasz/Macaulay Library](#)

The teal wears such a look as if
It had gazed into the water's depths.

--Naitō Jōsō (translated by Asatarō Miyamori)



Photo credit: [Jim Stasz/Macaulay Library](#)

UPCOMING EVENTS

*Patuxent Bird Club and
Prince George's Audubon Society
March 9, 7:00 PM*

County Coordinators Dave Mozurkewich and Ross Geredien will be giving an update on Atlas progress in Prince George's County, and Atlas Coordinator Gabriel Foley will supplement with a state-level overview.

<https://mdbirds.org/birding/virtual-meeting-patuxent-bird-club-pgas-5/>

*Cornell Lab of Ornithology
March 2, 12–1:00 PM*

*Get to Know Your Backyard Birds: Nest and Egg ID with Nestwatch
Join NestWatch Project Leader Robyn Bailey and Project Assistant Holly Grant as they share tips and tricks for identifying common backyard nests and eggs.*

<https://www.birds.cornell.edu/home/event/webinar-get-to-know-your-backyard-birds-nest-and-egg-id-with-nestwatch/>

From the Coordinator

Keep an eye out for those early-nesting species!



I still don't think I've adjusted to the mild winters here. It's been weeks of reminding myself that it is not, in fact, March. Even the freezing rain that we had last week, at least here in Montgomery County, reminds me of spring. In my Ontario hometown, mid-winter temperatures were usually too cold for any precipitation but snow. Once it came, the snow generally stayed until spring brought the interchange of thaw and freeze. Cool nights, warm days—growing up, those were the days I spent at my neighbor's sugar shack, collecting sap and boiling maple syrup.

I'll admit, I do miss many things about Canadian winters. The snow, the frozen lakes, the distinct seasonal divides—but I do not miss the birding trade-offs that come with it! Not only are there more species here, but there are more individuals, more pleasantly surprising finds, and less discomfort while outside. But best of all, the nesting season starts weeks earlier.

Starlings copulating, cardinals singing and courting, doves cooing and displaying, a Red-shouldered Hawk building a nest—all of this is happening right now, right on time, right across the street from me. I've been using the Atlas portal for a couple of weeks now, and it's only February!

Further north, there is less opportunity for flexibility in the breeding schedules of resident species. And even here in the mid-Atlantic, the insect protein so necessary for raising young birds constrains nesting phenology. But some species are not so conventional and can gamble on the harsh demands of early nesting—increased incubation costs, reduced food supply, and fewer other fledglings to ameliorate predation. Early nesters like crossbills and siskins somehow disregard the need for insects, and doves convert seeds into a regurgitated "crop milk" for their offspring. Canada Goose goslings eat

almost entirely grass, and robins may be able to sufficiently provision their brood if there is unfrozen soil.

The capability of raising multiple broods also probably influences whether a bird might nest early. For instance, raptors may have opportunity to nest earlier than normal, but spring brings an abundance of naïve prey. Optimal timing will improve foraging efficiency, and subsequently the chicks' physical condition. With only one opportunity each year to raise a hungry brood, there are minimal benefits to sub-optimal timing.

Of course, if conditions change—as climate change is already forcing—then there may be selection pressure on species to shift their timing. We can speculate whether a bird makes a conscious decision to nest early or if it is unwittingly responding to genetic impulses, but regardless of the mechanism, the bird's decision directly influences its fitness and the genetics that get passed on.

The Atlas provides an opportunity to accurately and intensively document when birds are breeding across the region, and is especially important for monitoring change at a local scale. As spring ramps up, keep an eye out for when each species begins nesting and document that in the Atlas database.

--Gabriel



A cow stands in an early-winter Saskatchewan field. Photo credit: Gabriel Foley

bird of the month:

WHITE-BREASTED NUTHATCH

Photo credit: [Eric Walther/Macaulay Library](#)

White-breasted Nuthatches are abundant and widespread in the US, yet surprisingly little is known about their ecology. They are common throughout much of Maryland and in the last Atlas they were recorded in 76% of blocks. They showed a strong distribution increase from BBA1, increasing throughout southern and eastern Maryland (particularly from Cecil to Talbot County).

Males and females look similar, but they can be separated by the color of the top of their head. Males have a black crown, while the crown on females is grayish. The female's crown will contrast with her black nape, while a male won't show any contrast.

Their preferred habitat is mature deciduous or mixed forest, and they have been reported nesting in cavities

in silver maple, American elm, hackberry, and black walnut.

White-breasted Nuthatches are common visitors to bird feeders, but most of their diet is insectivorous. Seeds will compose nearly three-quarters of their diet in winter, but none in warmer months. They hide many of the seeds they find throughout their territory. The seeds are tucked behind a piece of bark and covered with another piece of bark and covered with another piece of bark, lichen, moss, or even snow. This hoarded food is reserved for colder temperatures, and is quite likely the reason that they maintain year-round territories.

Pairs mate for life, and remain together year-round in the same 25–40 acre territory; any intruders in their territory are chased away. They

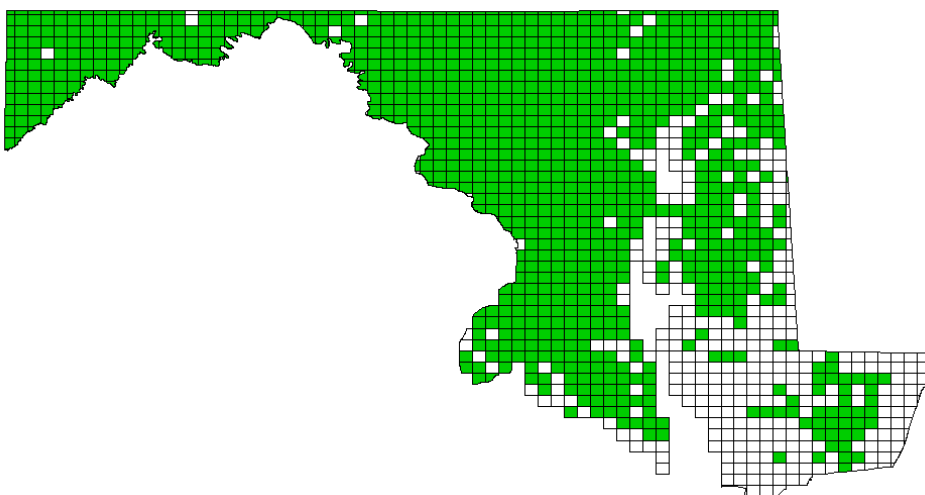
WHITE-BREASTED NUTHATCH

Their seasonal movements may be more common than we realize.

Although White-breasted Nuthatches are generally regarded as permanent residents throughout their range, there is evidence (such as morning flight observations at Cape May Bird Observatory) that they are irruptive. More research is needed to determine the extent of their irruptions or what demographics are involved, but movement timing appears to mirror the more pronounced irruptions of Red-breasted Nuthatches.

In 1958, Robert Stewart and Chandler Robbins reported peak migration dates of White-breasted Nuthatches as March 5–April 10 and October 10–November 1. The species' late May 10 safe date is a product of this publication, which asserts the late end of the White-breasted Nuthatch's normal migration period to be May 5.

Special thanks to Matt Hafner and Tim Carney for an illuminating discussion on seasonal White-breasted Nuthatch movements.



White-breasted Nuthatch breeding distribution map from the Maryland & DC Breeding Bird Atlas 2.

regularly associate with chickadee and titmice foraging flocks, but only while the parids remain within the nuthatches' territory. At the boundary of their territory, the "satellite" nuthatches will join the "nuclear" chickadees and titmice. As a temporary member of this flock, the nuthatches will be able to reduce their vigilance and increase their foraging time. Once the nuclear species—which only establish territories in early spring—reach the edge of the nuthatches' territory, the nuthatch pair resumes their 'flockless' behavior. Young White-breasted Nuthatches establish territories during their first winter; individuals who fail to do so will 'float' between territories.

In late winter and early spring, the socially monogamous pair regularly exchanges "hit and tuck" notes with each other, and males sing a 6–8 note *wha-wha-wha* song. Both sexes indicate excitement using a distinctive *yank* call. Once nesting begins in late March or early April, the pair becomes quiet and more difficult to detect, so don't be afraid to use codes S7 (singing for 7+ days) or P (pair) before the safe date of May 10—but be sure to only use singing codes for the nuthatch's song, and not its call.

Suitable nest cavities—which occasionally include nest boxes—are 15–65 ft above ground and have a 1–1.5 in opening, and are routinely re-used. Although the pair may enlarge a cavity, they won't excavate a new one. If you are considering using code N (visiting a probable nest site), be aware that, like many other cavity nesters, White-breasted Nuthatches use cavities to roost in as well—and will even remove feces from their roost cavity. Once a nest site is selected and sufficiently cleaned, the

female begins building the nest by layering bark chips in the bottom of the cavity. The entrance to the cavity may be "swept" with a crushed insect, presumably to use the insect's chemical secretions to deter predators. The female will line the nest cup with shredded bark, fine grass, rootlets, hair, fur, or feathers, then begin laying her clutch. On average, she will lay six eggs and incubate them for twelve or thirteen days. In Maryland, the white, red-speckled eggs have been documented from April 7 to May 20, but the peak is in mid-April. While she is incubating, the male will feed her; she tends to incubate for 30-minute stretches, then leave the nest for an average of four minutes before returning to her incubatory duties.



Photo credit: George Jett

After the young hatch, the female broods while the male feeds them. Once the chicks can thermoregulate sufficiently, the female assists with feeding them. If a threat is detected, the adults will spread their

wings and tail and sway in place (this threat display can also be seen in other contexts, including at bird feeders). If the nest fails, the pair will not attempt to re-nest, and they will raise only one brood per year. The young will fledge about 26 days after hatching, and remain with their parents for several weeks before dispersing, establishing their own territories, and beginning the cycle anew.

Author: Gabriel Foley

References

Grubb Jr., T.C. and V.V. Pravosudov (2020). White-breasted Nuthatch (*Sitta carolinensis*), 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.whbnut.01>

Stewart, R.E. and C.S. Robbins (1958). *Birds of Maryland and the District of Columbia*. United States Department of the Interior. Washington, DC. 401 p.



Photo credit: Tim Carney/Macaulay Library

ATLASER SPOTLIGHT

Oliver Patrick (@oliver.patrick ) is a freshman at Middlebury College, a 'MoCo' native, and a member of the Youth Maryland Ornithological Society.



You can take binoculars, a field guide, and what other item?

A snack is essential for a long day in the field! As many can attest, I'm partial to Tostitos Hint of Lime chips, though I also love a good Clif Bar.

What bird do you particularly like?

Broad-winged Hawks! They're gorgeous little raptors, the pristine upland forests they breed in are fun to bird, and seeing one is always a pleasure.

What's our biggest conservation issue?

Human-made climate change is undoubtably today's biggest conservation issue. But with 70% of global greenhouse gas emissions being released by 100 corporations, solving the climate crisis requires nothing less than radical action by international governments. We can settle for no half-measures.

Have you atlased elsewhere?

I surveyed with the second Virginia atlas, including searching for Coastal Plain Swamp Sparrows, a unique subspecies that breeds in brackish marshes. In Virginia, the subspecies is found only at Mulberry Island on the Rappahannock River, and is barely hanging on as the local marsh grows into shrubland.

If you could pick anyone, who would you take atlasing for a day?

My boyfriend Will, to prove once and for all that Maryland can, in fact, compare to New England for birds.

What's the best thing about atlasing?

Roadside farm ponds, abandoned woodlots, tiny rural towns...searching for breeding birds often takes us off the beaten path to undiscovered places and new ecosystems.



Where is your favorite place to atlas?

Nothing beats Garrett County. The Allegheny Plateau is unmatched for stunning scenery and montane breeding birds, and there's an impressive range of ecosystems found nowhere else in the state. What's not to love about a cranberry bog?

What made you interested in birds?

My family visited Belize when I was six, and my parents got me a pamphlet of the local bird life. I became obsessed with finding the colorful species it depicted. When we returned to the States, I pointed out a Scarlet Tanager to my bemused father on a walk near Great Falls, and from then on I've been hooked.



Broad-winged Hawk. Photo credit: [Oliver Patrick/Macaulay Library](#)

TIPS AND TRICKS

Feeders with a Twist — by Lynn Davidson

Since last year, many atlasers have limited themselves to atlasing in their yards or neighborhoods. As we approach a second spring impacted by covid disruptions, our atlasing could use an injection of creativity. We all know that feeding birds can bring our feathered friends closer to us. Some folks with larger yards offer birds a wide variety of food—suet, black-oil sunflower seed, wild bird mix, peanuts, and sugar-water for hummingbirds, to name some commonly-used options. Providing water for birds can be essential, especially during frozen winter months when open water can be scarce. Many also put up bird boxes to provide nesting places for cavity nesting species such as Eastern Bluebird, House Wren, and Tree Swallow.



Eastern Bluebird carrying nest material
(code CN)

Photo credit: [Laura Wolf/Macaulay Library](#)

At this time of year, we can also take care of nesting birds by helping them out with nesting material. A number of species prefer to line their nests with fine, fluffy stuff. Chickadees, Tufted Titmouse, and White-breasted Nuthatch are among those who seek out soft nest linings. For these species, their human friends having to stay at home can be just the ticket! We might be missing our regular visits to the barber shop or hair salon, but cutting our hair at home is the perfect pairing with a hair feeder!

If you are blessed with fast-growing hair and you can cut a half-inch or longer off the ends, don't just throw it away—recycle it for the birds! The guard hairs from your pets can work well for this purpose too; just make sure their fur hasn't been treated with flea or tick treatments. You can also offer a little dry grass or pine needles, some feathers, moss, or cattail fluff.

You should avoid providing anything artificial, like plastic or string, since the adults or the chicks may get tangled in it. Dryer lint is also not a good material; it disintegrates and doesn't offer any insulation.

To offer nest material to birds, all you need is an old suet or mesh feeder of some type. The birds can pull material out of the holes, and you'll be all set to Confirm breeding activity when they come to carry away your nesting material.



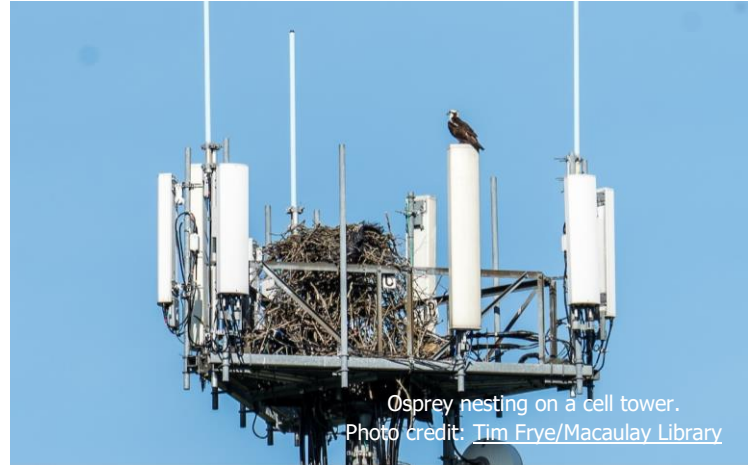
A "hair" feeder. Photo credit: Lynn Davidson

FROM THE FIELD

Cell Tower Bonanza — by Sue Muller

Until 2020, I don't think I ever gave a single glance to a cell tower. Early in the year, my co-coordinator Dave Ziolkowski told me about a pair of Bald Eagles he had been watching in Howard County—around routes 216 and 95—but that recently, he was only seeing one. His thought was that there was a nest in the area with incubation under way. So, we set out on February 28 in search of a nest—and a nest we did find, on a cell tower! This tower was right along route 95, with traffic buzzing by. In April, I stopped by the rest station across from this tower to check out the birds in the forested area near the parking lot. While there, I noticed a cell tower. I decided to take a look with binoculars and was delighted to see sticks! I waited around to see who was building the nest and watched an Osprey return with a stick. Another species on a cell tower!

Shortly after this, Kurt Schwarz photographed a pair of ravens on a cell tower, and it was the sharp eyes of Jo Solem that noticed a couple of sticks on the tower in the photo. Sure enough, a raven nest! That made three species on a cell tower. Team Howard also found a fourth species nesting on cell towers (although not nearly as exciting as the first three). European Starlings were found nesting on several towers. I became obsessed with looking at any cell tower I could see while sitting at traffic lights, running into the grocery store, *etc.* Team Howard became tuned in to checking out cell towers. We ended up with



Osprey nesting on a cell tower.
Photo credit: [Tim Frye/Macaulay Library](#)

three Osprey nests, all on cell towers. These were the first Ospreys documented nesting during a breeding bird atlas in Howard County. So, get out there and check those cell towers! Who can find a fifth species? I recently saw a pair of Red-tailed Hawks sitting on a cell tower and I plan to check them out again closer to their breeding season.

There is a downside though to the excitement of documenting all these birds on cell towers. The bird nests can cause a lot of problems for the tower owners. Bird waste is corrosive and can damage equipment on cell towers, not to mention the weight of some large nests can overload the weight limits of the tower. Nests can halt much needed maintenance on the towers as well.

We are barely into the new year and Team Howard has documented a new raven nest on a cell tower and observed a pair of eagles on a cell tower where an Osprey nest was removed from last year. There was also a pair of Eagles copulating on a cell tower, and we are busy watching for a nest on that one! Did I mention to get out there and check those cell towers?

Do you have a story or photo to share with atlasers?

We'd love to hear about it! Send your submissions to the editor at mddcbb3@mdbirds.org.



Common Raven nesting on a cell tower.
Photo credit: [David Sandler/Macaulay Library](#)

OUT OF THE ARCHIVE

Nashville Warbler Nest in Garrett County

Boone, D.D. 1981. Nashville Warbler Nest in Garrett County. *Maryland Birdlife* 37(1):3-4.

The bogs of Garrett County are fascinating for ornithologists and botanists alike. In a 1980 survey, I attempted to visit the sixteen or so major bogs found there. On June 15 I found my way into a small bog near Sang Run, Maryland, bordering Swallow Falls State Forest. The ground cover was a carpet of sphagnum moss interrupted by blueberry 'hedges,' chokeberry and serviceberry shrub stands, with a few small black spruce adding a more northern flavor. Hemlock with a dense rhododendron understory bordered the bog.

The breeding birds present were typical of this northern habitat. Northern Waterthrush, Canada, and Chestnut-sided Warblers were common in the heath. Solitary Vireo [Blue-headed Vireo], Black-throated Blue, Black-throated Green, and Magnolia Warblers sang from the rhododendron and hemlock border while Hermit Thrushes serenaded from the surrounding hills. I was taking this all in when I heard an unfamiliar song. It was similar in pattern to an abbreviated Swamp Sparrow song, but the pitch and quality were wrong. Proceeding closer to the

Nashville Warbler nest in Garrett County. Photo credit: D. Daniel Boone



source (no easy task in a bog!) I mentally reviewed the possibilities. Given the habitat I was sure the bird singing was a Nashville Warbler (*Vermivora [Leiothlypis] ruficapilla*) singing only the first half of his normally two-part song. After some 'spishing' the bird popped up, sang, and confirmed my hunch—a Nashville, an uncommon and local breeding bird of Garrett County. Pleased with the find I proceeded to explore the remainder of the area. I had not travelled far when I heard the typical two-part song of a Nashville Warbler. "That's better," I thought. Then, singing from a different spot, the Nashville with the unusual song called again. Both songs were repeated and they increased in frequency, enabling me to walk close enough to see that there were indeed two males. Content with this I continued on my

way.

I enjoyed studying the abundant Round-leaved Sundews, sparkling from their dewy exudate against the sphagnum background. There were a couple of Pitch Pine sand islands interspersed through the bog. On these islands I found hundreds of Pink Lady's-Slippers in full bloom. After exploring for about an hour I decided to return to my car by way of a well-used deer path. The path was free of shrubs, though fully covered with the spongy sphagnum moss. As I was walking, a small yellowish bird flew up from the ground right at my feet. It "twittered" and fluttered about while I stood motionless, and my 'spishing' increased its distraction activities, allowing identification of another Nashville Warbler. Without moving my feet, I surveyed the ground nearby. A suspicious clump a

few inches from my foot warranted closer scrutiny. Leaning over and pushing aside some herbaceous vegetation with my clipboard revealed a nest with five brown spotted eggs sunken in the moss. I hurriedly photographed the nest and proceeded out of the bog. My slide is almost identical to the photograph of a Nashville nest found in Hal Harrison's Field Guide to Birds' Nests (east), page 181. I returned to this bog on June 24 but did not attempt to relocate the nest. However, one singing male Nashville Warbler was still present.

This nesting record represents a new breeding locality for Nashville Warbler and is only the second nest ever found in Maryland. The other record was of a nest with eggs found by Chan Robbins on May 30, 1951 in Wolf Swamp. Historically, summering (and probably breeding) individuals in Maryland have been recorded in Cranberry (Finzel), Cunningham (4-H Center), and Cranesville (Maryland portion) Swamps. Reports of summering Nashvilles in Garrett County are historically scarce, because of the limited amount of appropriate habitat and its remoteness. Recent records include a singing male that I heard in late June of 1979 in Cranesville Bog near the church on Cranesville Road, and birds that Mark Hoffman reported hearing and seeing in 1980 in Cunningham Swamp.



Nashville Warbler nest (Wisconsin). Photo credit: [Michael Mossman/Macaulay Library](#)