

WHAT'S HATCHING?

Official Newsletter of the Maryland & DC Breeding Bird Atlas 3

ISSUE NO 16 | MAY 2021



Yellow-billed Cuckoo by [Stephen Davies/Macaulay Library](#)

CONTENTS

From the Coordinator.....	3	Bird of the Month.....	4
Atlaser Spotlight.....	7	How Birds Saved Me.....	8
From the Field.....	11	Out of the Archive.....	17

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

Each spring, cuckoos track down super-abundant food sources, and boy oh boy, do we have food for them!

FROM THE FIELD

For anyone who enjoys birds, it's hard to ignore the migrants May brings us. To celebrate that, we've included two entertaining Big Day reports.

OUT OF THE ARCHIVE

We've dredged up a fascinating set of BBA2 predictions from Maryland and DC's first atlas coordinator, Rick Blom.

On May 21, 2021, Austin Jennings found not one but two first county records for nesting Great Black-backed Gulls. From David R. Craig Park, [Austin spied a nest](#) on the fourth P.W. & B. Railroad bridge pier, an observation that marked Harford County's first Great Black-backed Gull Confirmation. Not content with that, [Austin then located](#) a nesting Great Black-backed Gull on the Cecil County side—also the fourth P.W. & B. Railroad bridge pier, this time counting from the shore of Cecil County. Unsurprisingly, these also represent Maryland's northernmost breeding records for this species.



"The process of atlasing forces one to slow down, to really look at the birds instead of simply listing them, to move cautiously lest one disturb a delicate interaction... The rewards have been endless."

--Emily Huang, Montgomery County Coordinator

Montgomery County Coordinator Emily Huang's poignant account of her introduction to birds and atlasing is deeply moving and contemplates our responsibility to nature and the personal rewards of that commitment.

UPCOMING EVENTS

Maryland Ornithological Society Annual Convention Seminars June 11–13 2021

<u>Ashley Kennedy</u> <i>June 11 1:00–2:05</i>	<u>Gabriel Foley</u> <i>June 11 2:30–3:35</i>	<u>Susan Stockdale</u> <i>June 11 4:00–5:05</i>	<u>Dr. Sonja Kolstoe</u> <i>June 12 1:00–2:05</i>	<u>Matthew Felperin</u> <i>June 12 2:30–3:35</i>
How to make your yard better for birds (and the environment)	Strategies for more effective atlasing	Bird books for kids! An author/illustrator reveals her process	How economists use data to value birds and ecosystem services: from traditional data to citizen/community science data	Year of COVID birding presentation

From the Coordinator

The Breeding Birds of Maryland, MOS-style.



The annual convention for the Maryland Ornithological Society is nearly here. The virtual event is being held a bit later than most years, on June 11–13. But there's a good reason for that: breeding birds!

The timing falls on one of the best weekends of the year for atlasing, and that's no accident. The convention's theme this year is the breeding birds of Maryland. By mid-June, almost every one of our breeding species is nesting. With that in mind, we have created four goals for you to aim for while atlasing that weekend; if you happen to have the highest tally in one of those categories, there's a \$50–\$100 prize for you.

The first goal is to find breeding codes. Each category has a different point value—Possible codes are worth one point, Probable are worth

three points, and Confirmed are worth four points (except codes UN and PE; since those are not often used, we decided to exclude them). As I often say, Probable codes may be your path to victory (and \$50!).

Our next goal is the total number of species we find with breeding codes (except codes UN and PE). This means that Possible codes count the same as Confirmed codes. Since almost all species are within safe dates by mid-June, you can focus on covering different habitats. If you manage to have the highest species list, there's a \$50 prize for you.

The third goal is my favorite. We compiled a list of species that have nested in all 23 of Maryland's counties. The total was surprisingly high—[96 birds](#), or nearly half of all our breeding species! Find as many of the "all-county" species as you can

(no breeding codes needed) to compete for this category's \$50 prize.

Finally, arguably the most important goal: covering under-atlased blocks. I have selected [two blocks per county](#) that need more atlasing effort. From these, you can pick a block close to you, or one further away in a county with fewer atlasers. Find the most species with breeding codes from one of those listed blocks, and you'll take home \$100.

To participate in any of these, you don't have to do much more than you normally would while atlasing.

[Register for the conference](#) (free for MOS members, or \$20 to buy a membership), and share all of your eBird checklists from June 11 to June 13 at 5:00 PM with MOSConvention2021 (if you're not sure how to share checklists, read [this eBird help article](#)).

There is, of course, much more at the convention than just these light-hearted competitions. There's also [a great line-up of speakers](#) (I'm particularly looking forward to the [keynote](#) from eBird's Ian Davies on atlasing in the 21st century), [a photo contest](#), [a silent auction](#), [a poster session](#), and even a [wine and cheese social](#).

I'm looking forward to seeing you there (and to seeing some of these low-effort blocks get filled in!). Happy atlasing! --Gabriel



Red-eyed Vireo by Gabriel Foley

bird of the month:

YELLOW-BILLED CUCKOO

Yellow-billed Cuckoo by [Daniel Irons/Macaulay Library](#)

Yellow-billed and Black-billed Cuckoos both look alike, have similar behaviors, diets, and habitats—and yet Yellow-billed Cuckoos are about ten times more abundant than Black-billed in Maryland and DC. The higher elevations of western Maryland are where Black-billed Cuckoos are most common, descending to a near absence on the Coastal Plain. Both species are found in open, scrubby forest associated with water, but Black-billed prefer more heavily wooded areas and tolerate conifers more than their congener.

The migration and breeding schedule of cuckoos is far more flexible than that of many other birds. Both cuckoos tend to arrive in Maryland and DC in late April or early May, but briefly become nomadic after completing their migration north from their South American wintering grounds. The

peripatetic cuckoos search for especially abundant food sources and once found, begin nesting. This influences their local breeding density and timing from year to year, making them somewhat unpredictable. In Maryland and DC, the double-brooded Yellow-billed Cuckoo nests from mid-May to mid-September, although most of their nesting is wrapped up by mid-August. Black-billed Cuckoos, which appear to raise only one brood each year, have not been documented breeding here after the end of July.

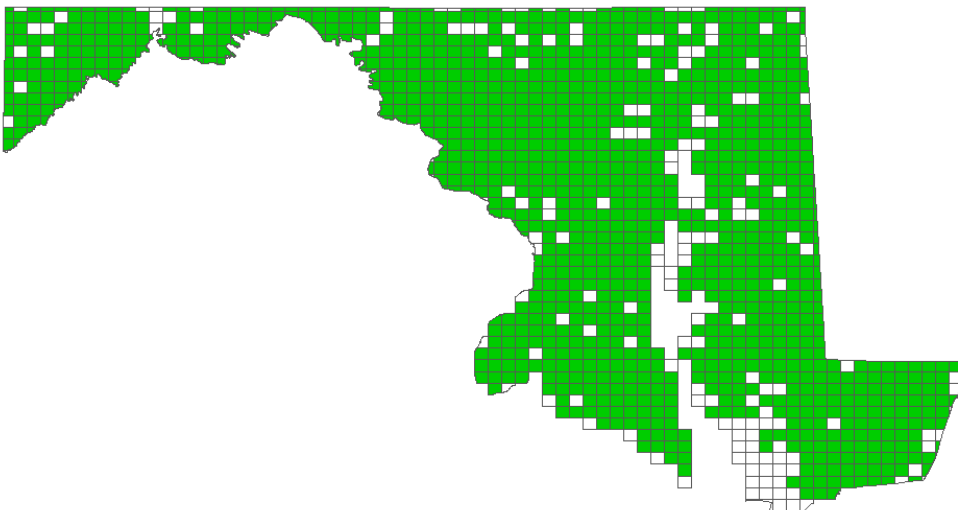
The periodical cicada's Brood X is emerging in Maryland and DC this month, providing a massive source of food. As one of the cuckoos' preferred foods, we should expect to see higher cuckoo abundance in response and egg-laying should align with the emergence. Yellow-billed

STICKS, CICADAS, & SHORT TAILS

Regardless of safe dates, watch cuckoos carefully for breeding behavior.

The search for abundant prey leads to an opportunistic nesting schedule for cuckoos. Both species may nest well before and after their designated "safe dates", mid-June to late July. The start and end of these safe dates have been established to reflect their tendency to wander within their breeding range, not to reflect a short breeding window. Cuckoos are just the opposite, in fact, and have one of the most extended breeding seasons of any of our nesting birds but they are not breeding continuously within this period.

Cuckoo vocalizations should be used as a cue to look more closely for better breeding evidence regardless of safe dates. Laying eyes on a cuckoo can be tricky, but once you find them, watch for birds carrying food and nesting material. Nest construction is ongoing throughout incubation, and the rapid growth of nestlings means frequent food trips. Finally, watch for the short tails and begging behavior of local fledglings.



Yellow-billed Cuckoo breeding distribution map from the Maryland & DC Breeding Bird Atlas 2.

Cuckoos lay an exceptionally large egg for their size—one of the largest relative to their body size of any bird—that promotes the embryo's rapid development. Incubation requires a mere 9–11 days and the nestling fledges at eight days old—also one of the shortest cumulative development periods known among birds. But this expeditious progress comes at a hefty cost for the female: producing one egg requires about a third of her daily energy intake. Every other day, she lays one of her clutch's 2–3 light-blue eggs. Incubation begins after laying the first egg. To offset the substantial cost of egg production, the male does the majority of incubation. During the day, both sexes share duties equally. At night, the male takes over. The chicks hatch asynchronously; if there is insufficient food available for the entire brood, the parents will remove the youngest from the nest.

Their nest is a flimsy affair constructed mostly of dry twigs, somewhat recalling the notoriously poor structures that doves deem nests. Eggs are often visible through the nest's exterior. Whether they build a shallow cup or just a platform, the well-concealed nest is built on a horizontal branch or wedged into a fork 3–20 feet off the ground. Cuckoos have something of a continuous construction technique, where males add to the nest throughout incubation. Their strategy of quickly building a loose structure with ongoing reinforcement supports their approach to reproduction: make the most of an abundant, ephemeral food source.

Both cuckoos are facultative brood parasites, meaning that they will lay their eggs in other birds' nests if they want to. They may parasitize their own species, their

congener, or other species such as American Robins, Wood Thrushes, Chipping Sparrows, or Gray Catbirds. Cuckoos likely parasitize nests more often when food is abundant and energetic constraints are lower. On the other hand, Brown-headed Cowbirds—an obligate brood parasite—are unable to successfully parasitize cuckoo nests because cowbird eggs take longer to incubate than cuckoo eggs.



Yellow-billed Cuckoo by George Jett.

The diet of adult and nestling cuckoos is similar. They tend to rely most heavily on caterpillars, including hairy caterpillars that are inedible to many other birds. The caterpillars' hairs pierce the cuckoos' inner stomach lining and eventually this interferes with digestion. At that point, the cuckoo coughs up a pellet of stomach lining and hair and carries on munching caterpillars, repeating the process as needed. Other important diet items include katydids, grasshoppers, and, of course, cicadas. The cuckoo chicks are 0.3 oz when they hatch and 1.2 oz at fledging (about half of an adult cuckoo's weight). The day before fledging, cuckoo chicks are covered in sheathed feathers; over the course of just one day, the chick removes the sheaths and becomes nearly fully feathered. When the still-flightless chick leaves the nest, one parent will go with it and take care of it for an additional 3–6 weeks. Despite lacking flight capability until they are three weeks old, the chicks may travel a substantial distance from the nest. A marked Black-billed Cuckoo was recaptured 1.3 miles away from the nest just two weeks after fledging.

Cuckoo behavior is fascinating, and, as anticipated, their copulatory display does not disappoint. Perched on a branch, the female leans forward and cocks her tail upright, then tucks it low, repeating the tail pumping several times. The male watches from a nearby branch, snaps off a twig, and flies toward the female. He lands on



Black-billed Cuckoo by George Jett.



Yellow-billed Cuckoo by George Jett

her back, and offers her the stick—if a female is truly lucky, she might receive a caterpillar. The pair holds either end of the stick and commences copulation. Three to five seconds later, the deed is done and the male flies to a new perch, still holding the stick.

Cuckoos are skulky and spend much of their time motionless, so their vocalizations are the best way to detect them. Yellow-billed Cuckoos give a methodical [kowlp call](#) that begins with an accelerating series of *ka* syllables before transitioning to several repeated *kowlp* notes. Less guttural, [Black-billed Cuckoos deliver the *ka* syllables faster](#), break them into a series of groups, and do not give the *kowlp* ending. Yellow-billed Cuckoos also give a [moderately rapid series](#) that has been likened to the sound of a door knocker striking its plate, and a [*coo* song](#) repeated 5–11 times at regular intervals. After a 7–10 second pause, the *coo* series is repeated.

Both cuckoo species look similar, but the eponymous bill color is just one diagnostic feature to distinguish them—however, be aware that juvenile Yellow-billed Cuckoos have dark bills. Other distinctive features include a rufous patch on the Yellow-billed wings that adult Black-billed lack (juvenile Black-billed Cuckoos have a rufous wing patch), a red orbital ring on adult Black-billed, and—perhaps the best feature—the spots on the underside of the Yellow-billed tail are larger and more obvious than its congener.

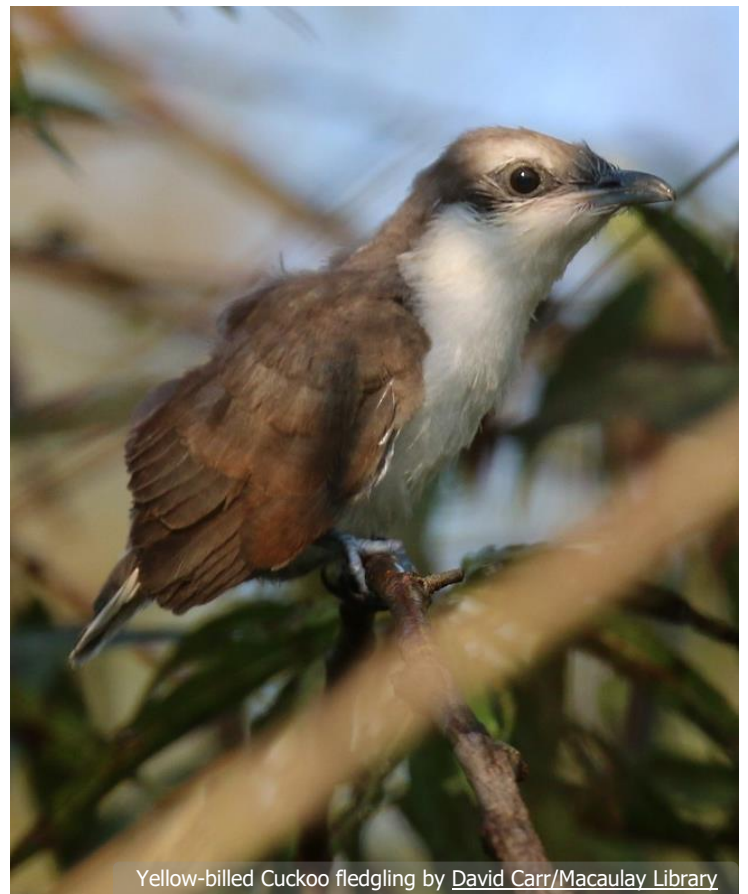
In both of the past atlases, about 65% of Yellow-billed Cuckoo observations were Probable or Confirmed while

Black-billed Cuckoo observations were only about 35% Probable or Confirmed. This substantial, consistent difference is interesting, since both species are fairly similar in habits. In fact, since Black-billed are so much less common than Yellow-billed, we might have expected that observers would put more effort into finding better breeding evidence for them. BBA3 will almost certainly see a higher rate of Probable observations, since code S7 was not used in past atlases and is a simple and efficient way to reach Probable status. It will be interesting to see if the proportional difference between each species' breeding confidence continues with BBA3.

Author: Gabriel Foley

References

- Hughes, J.M. 2020. Black-billed Cuckoo (*Coccyzus erythrophthalmus*), version 1.0. In Birds of the World (P.G. Rodewald, Editor). Cornell Lab of Ornithology, Ithaca, NY, USA. <https://doi.org/10.2173/bow.bkbcuc.01>
- Hughes, J.M. 2020. Yellow-billed Cuckoo (*Coccyzus americanus*), version 1.0. In Birds of the World (P.G. Rodewald, Editor). Cornell Lab of Ornithology, Ithaca, NY, USA. <https://doi.org/10.2173/bow.yebcuc.01>
- Kaufman, K. 1996. *Lives of North American Birds*. Houghton Mifflin, New York City, NY.



Yellow-billed Cuckoo fledgling by David Carr/Macaulay Library

ATLASER SPOTLIGHT

Ed Vigezzi is from Germantown, Montgomery County, and is the Atlas Webmaster and State Director/Webmaster for the Montgomery Bird Club.

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

My iPhone. I am always on eBird and being able to see the block boundaries really helps me atlas.

What bird do you particularly like?

I have always loved Pileated Woodpeckers. I love their size, their call and the way they glide from tree to tree. Their black, white and red colors are striking against the landscape.

What made you interested in birds?

My parents gave me my first bird feeder as a housewarming gift when I purchased my first home.

Where is your favorite place to atlas?

I love to atlas in my neighborhood and my Atlas block (Gaithersburg CW). I love to know what is happening in my area.

What is the best thing about atlasing?

Atlasing provides so much more information than just seeing the bird. I am learning and really noticing bird behaviors and nests where I had not done that previously.

Have you been involved with any atlases prior to this one?

No, this is my first one.



Who would you go atlasing with?

My family—Kathy, Stephanie and Joe. Spending time outdoors with them while birding would combine two of my absolutely favorite things in life.

What's our biggest conservation issue?

Land use and development. We continue to eliminate so much green space and bird habitats. We must really take a much better look at our land use and the effect it is having.

Pileated Woodpecker by Ed Vigezzi/Macaulay Library



Want to show your support of the Atlas with some swag?



Check out cafepress.com/mddcbba3

How Birds Saved Me

by Emily Huang, Montgomery County Coordinator

Ten years ago, I knew the names of perhaps a dozen or so native bird species, and then only incompletely. I could name the American Robin and the Mallard, and I thought it was “Canadian Geese” and “seagulls.” Who knew there was more than one kind of gull? Like many people, I loved animals but was too busy with job and kids to be more than vaguely aware of the wildlife that leads its existence all around us.

Ten years ago, however, was another lifetime. In 2013, my younger son, beautiful eight-year-old Eli, died of brain cancer, and our world ripped open. In a frozen state, just trying to hold on, I tossed out one meaningless comfort and one empty credo after another. I desperately, desperately needed evidence of

grace, and, although it took a little time to accept, it did come—from nature.

Eli was a remarkable child: smart, funny, and a great lover of color and motion. My workplace at the time, the National Institutes of Health, had little of either quality in its Bethesda campus. So I was surprised out of apathy one day by a tiny flash of yellow before my eyes, on a gray path between two concrete monoliths. The yellow flash, which I saw was a bird with a little black cap, was bouncing in the air and uttering a soft call that went straight to my heart. It landed in a small tree and then took off again, still calling. It was my first encounter with an American Goldfinch.

I’m still amazed at how clearly I saw

that bird. Probably I *had* seen it before but passed it over, ignored it. Now I was hungry for more: more birds, more bird calls. Just how many birds are there, anyway? I soon found out. I started visiting parks with birdfeeders, bought a guide, two guides, three, got binoculars, went to organized bird walks. I learned about eBird and became ambitious to see as many species as I could. My life list started climbing past one hundred, past two hundred. To everyone’s astonishment, I toted binoculars and looked for birds on family trips to Texas and California and England.

It was all very engrossing, and I thought perhaps enough to make a life goal—becoming a better birder and piling up a nice big list. But I think the mother in me urged that there was something more to do. Birds had given me connection, renewal, and hope. What was I giving back to the birds?

The list of all the ways in which I’ve attempted to “do something for the birds” is lengthy, and scattershot. The more notable items include quitting my work in biomedicine and joining the staff at Croydon Creek Nature Center in Rockville and taking up membership in just about every bird advocacy organization in existence. I’ve tried a lot of bird-related activities. Ultimately, I think among the most satisfying are the ones involving breeding birds.

I started thinking about the problems of nesting birds when I learned about the Eastern Bluebird. As many reading this newsletter know, the Eastern



Common Yellowthroat watercolor by Emily Huang

Bluebird population plummeted in the early 20th century due to reduced habitat and to competition for nest cavities from invasive birds such as the House Sparrow and the European Starling. To meet this problem head on, a movement began to put up and monitor nest boxes—entire trails of nest boxes—specifically designed to give this species a wing up.

As soon as I heard about this movement and its remarkable success, I wanted to get involved. Croydon Creek had a bluebird trail,

but due to lack of person power it was in need of some TLC. Most of the boxes were getting old and were mounted on wooden posts with no predator baffles. Despite some success in years past, the boxes now were mostly hosting House Sparrows and House Wrens, if anything at all. I hoped we could reverse this trend with improved stations and regular monitoring.

I consulted with Ed Escalante from the Maryland Bluebird Society and bought some new nest boxes,

hardware, steel poles, and two-foot stovepipe to make Kingston baffles. As a side project, the work to construct the stations went slowly, but I was excited when the first ones were installed. Excited, but fundamentally unsure that it would make any difference. Could it be, I speculated, that our area was simply becoming too urban and busy for bluebirds? Had we placed the boxes in good locations, facing the right way? A few weeks later, when the first occupant of the boxes proved to be a paper wasp building a nest, I was not pleased.

With all the fuss, I was still unprepared for the electric jolt when I finally saw it: a male bluebird flying from a nest box as I approached. Still less was I prepared for the awe of seeing each step of the cycle: the nest, compactly woven out of pine needles, the clutch of beautiful pale turquoise eggs. The tiny naked babies with their bulbous closed eyes, the heaving feathery mass of older nestlings, the frantically busy parents with mouths full of insects. And finally, the ambiguous thrill of the empty nest, later to be covered, in most cases, by a coarser House Wren's nest.

Having the privilege—and the responsibility—of watching a bird's nest is tremendous. It brings you closer to the lives of birds and in my case further heightened my interest in bird conservation. So, when the call for breeding bird atlas volunteers went out, I was ready to go. The chance to make a close study of bird behaviors while contributing to conservation data was not to be missed. Like others I have talked to, I had considerable doubts about my ability to do the work. I'd seen pictures of birders' encounters with nests of all kinds, but



Northern Cardinal watercolor by Emily Huang

it seemed to me that I must have a breeding blind spot. Gabriel, however, provided excellent information about breeding bird behaviors and patiently assured me that no supernatural abilities were required.

January 2020 saw me primed up with breeding codes, tuned to bird songs, and perhaps overly keen to observe even the tiniest sign of courtship behavior. My first breeding code was the Bald Eagle's occupied nest at Lake Frank. I ran up and down the lakeside to get a favorable angle for a photo; with every turn of the eagle's white head, projecting above the massive platform of sticks, I clicked. The pictures all came out badly, of course. I'm not a good photographer. But that day, with a pair of Pileated Woodpeckers calling madly, and the promise of eagle babies in the near future, I was something I wanted to be much more: an atlaser.

The pandemic complicated things, of course, but failed to prevent many a jewel-like moment of discovery that season. The process of atlasing forces one to slow down, to really look at the birds instead of simply listing them, to move cautiously lest one disturb a delicate interaction—it would be no good to document a breeding behavior if by doing so one put an end to it. The rewards have been endless. I watched a Pileated Woodpecker excavate a large hole, chips flying helter-skelter in the air. I listened to the passionate songs of Northern Cardinals, Gray Catbirds, and Indigo Buntings. I enjoyed House Sparrows with faces stuffed



American Goldfinch by Brad Carlson/Macaulay Library

with long grasses, Blue-Gray Gnatcatchers collecting spider webbing, mother birds packed so tightly in their nests it seemed they must pop out, and the tiny, shrill cries of unseen nestlings.

Above all, through atlasing I recovered some of the feelings that I had when I first discovered wild birds. Atlasing reminds me to appreciate "common"

birds, who are altogether uncommon parents and fierce protectors of their young. Atlasing brings me forcefully back to the interconnectedness of nature—air, water, plants and animals—and us. Once again, in seeking to save birds, I find the birds are saving me.

Author: Emily Huang, Montgomery County Coordinator



Emily Huang, Montgomery County Coordinator

FROM THE FIELD

--Big Day Reports

Big Day: Prince George's County

By Kevin Bennett

I've been birding Prince George's County as much as I can since I moved to Greenbelt in 2018. It's not a long time, but I felt a strong connection to the county that seemed underbirded in relation to its potential. Mostly I biked to Lake Artemesia, a five-minute ride from my apartment, but in 2020 I started to explore more widely. This year, tragically, I moved to Alexandria, but I haven't been able to get over what still feels like my home county. So last month I decided I would attempt a big day in PG to get closure (and maybe also see some nice birds). I enlisted fellow UMD grad student and expert birder Menachem Goldstein to help pass the unofficial PG big day record ("unofficial," meaning it was the highest total Russ Ruffing had in his records—thanks, Russ!) of 120 species set by Dave Mozurkewich, Fred Shaffer, and Rob Ostrowski in 2009 and the same three plus Stan Arnold in 2010. A beatable number, but one that would require either getting lucky with a bunch of migrants or managing to find lots of the breeders.

For the route, my plan was to start in the southern part of the county trying for owls and whip-poor-wills, then make our way north along the Patuxent getting breeders in the morning before snapping up specialized birds in the afternoon in the northern part of the county. I was



Barred Owl by [Melina Meshako/Macaulay Library](#)

counting on making up for lost morning migrants we might have had in a place like Lake Artemesia with getting all of the breeders while they were still singing. We didn't have time to do much scouting, so we relied on eBird reports from previous years to find breeders (thanks to Jeff Shenot for birding southern PG!). We stuck to ABA rules for big days, meaning rare bird alerts are off limits, but playback is OK. Ultimately, though, playback didn't net us any species, which I guess is how it ought to be.

We started at 3:30am sharp on Sunday morning (5/9) on the entrance road to Cedarville SF listening for whips. There was no moon, but it was a partly clear night so conditions could have been worse. No whips, but a Barred Owl called once to start us off. Next up was Aquasco Farm Rd, where once again, whip-poor-wills were not calling, and as with all of my previous attempts in the county, I missed this species. Rails were similarly quiet in the marshes at Aquasco, but a Solitary Sandpiper in our headlights was a nice driving tick, Barred Owls called like crazy from every corner, and a Barn Owl screaming from out in the marsh eliminated the need to try to see one later in a nest box. As we were leaving, we stopped with open windows to listen to a chat singing in the dark. Menachem called out Great Horned Owl. I strained to listen. Then yep, there it was. We left Aquasco at 5:15am with 13 species and headed for Milltown Landing.



Solitary Sandpiper by [Bill Townsend/Macaulay Library](#)



Prairie Warbler by [Christopher Gilbert/Macaulay Library](#)

Great Horned Owls were hooting as we arrived, and birds were starting to sing from the forest and tall fields. We walked through the mix of habitats counting birds mostly by song: Acadian Flycatcher, pewee, Wood Thrush in the woods, Prairie Warbler, Field Sparrow, Indigo Bunting on the edges. In the middle of the field, a Yellow-breasted Chat sang while showing off with an exaggerated display flight (breeding evidence: probable). At the boardwalk, a family of five river otters rolled around and played, oblivious to our presence. Beyond them, a Least Bittern grunted. I heard it, Menachem didn't—a "dirty" bird, at least for the moment. Menachem called out our one and only Yellow-billed Cuckoo of the day from down at the boat launch. As we walked back to the car, a Ruby-throated Hummingbird showed off its U-shaped display flight (breeding evidence: probable) and a flyover Pileated Woodpecker was carrying an insect (breeding evidence: confirmed). A Magnolia Warbler sang as we departed, and we headed up to Jackson's Landing at 56 species.



Ruby-throated Hummingbird by [Dan Rauch/Macaulay Library](#)

Jackson's gave us our best migrant haul of the morning: Ruby-crowned Kinglet, Bay-breasted, Cape May, Chestnut-sided, Blackpoll, Black-throated Blue Warblers, plus breeders Prothonotary, Yellow Warbler, and Louisiana Waterthrush. A Purple Martin at the boat launch saved us a later stop. Yellow-throated Warblers were cooperative next to Croom Airport (breeding evidence: probable, male singing 7+ days), and a Hooded Warbler sang from near the Selby's Landing boat launch. It was a few minutes before the Critical Area Driving Tour would open, so we made a quick run up to Mount Calvert for Laughing Gull and Marsh Wren plus a few others, then returned and headed down the CADT towards Merkle.

A few Greater Yellowlegs and a Spotted Sandpiper were



Hooded Warbler by [Mark R Johnson/Macaulay Library](#)

our only shorebirds from the observation tower, but a singing Yellow-throated Vireo was species 100 at 10:15am. A harrier over the marsh was a nice surprise. In the fields and edges at Merkle we added Grasshopper and Savannah Sparrow, plus Northern Waterthrush and Cliff Swallow, saving a long detour later. Finally, we stopped at the wetland on Fenno Rd for a pair of Red-headed Woodpeckers I'd found there last year. We added Green Heron and Belted Kingfisher for good measure. To finish up the morning, we tried without success for the Virginia Rail I'd found at Cheltenham Wetlands park two weeks earlier, but a Sharp-shinned Hawk overhead made the detour worthwhile.

For the second half of the day, we headed up north.

Ring-billed Gulls were at Bladensburg Waterfront Park as expected, and so were the nesting Yellow-crowned Night-Herons over the street in University Park (breeding evidence: confirmed). The fields at the Beltsville Agricultural Research Center did not produce the Dickcissel I'd found there the previous day, but Bobolink, meadowlarks, and kestrels were all in place. Menachem called out a Merlin, and sure enough, the small streaky falcon came right over our heads, flying north at a Merlin's typical pace, made a half-hearted pass at a flyby cowbird, and was quickly out of sight. In the woods along Beaver Dam Rd, we finally saw a White-breasted Nuthatch, heard a quiet Swainson's Thrush, and tracked down a rolling song deep in the woods—Kentucky Warbler, in the exact same spot I heard it last summer, was species 120.



Least Bittern by [Matt Felperin/Macaulay Library](#)

Next, we drove along the Patuxent south tract entrance road hoping for Worm-eating Warbler, but came up empty, so we headed up to Laurel Lake, where Black-crowned Night-Herons have been hanging out for a while. One bird was right in its place, and we were at 121. The last spot of the planned route was the fields at Konterra Dr. We opted to try parking on the side of the I-95 entrance ramp from Rt 200 for maximum visibility (a \$0.40 privilege), which paid off with a raven, another flock of Bobolink, and another Greater Yellowlegs. The Rough-legged Hawk, sadly, was a no-show. To finish off the north part of the county, we made a quick run to my old stomping ground at Lake Artemesia and added Warbling Vireo for species 123.

Our last stop was back at Mount Calvert for sunset. We didn't get the hoped-for Forster's Terns, rails, or nighthawks, but small groups of Spotted Sandpipers put on



Yellow-crowned Night-Heron by [Joe Hanfman/Macaulay Library](#)

a show. As the daylight faded and light rain started falling, Menachem heard a Least Bittern calling from the marsh, a "dirty" bird no longer, and we ended the day having both gotten all the birds, for a final species total of 123.

I'm proud of our total, especially since it beats—by one species—my personal big day record from a solo East Texas count I did a few years ago. We might have ended up with a higher number if we had put more effort into migrants early, but there wasn't too much to complain about in the end. Worst misses included Forster's Tern, Worm-eating Warbler, and (sigh) House Wren. In the end, if it is a record, it's certainly a beatable one. Hopefully someone tries next year. Maybe I will again! Birding in Prince George's County, especially its lesser-visited southern corners, is always a joy.



Bobolink by [Jeff Shenot/Macaulay Library](#)

Big Day: Baltimore County

By Nico Sarbanes

A few weeks ago, I proposed the idea of doing a Baltimore Big Day to Tim Carney. Shockingly, not a single Big Day had been attempted in the county, and we thought we'd give it a shot. Originally, we had planned to try on May 8th, but decided to postpone based on preceding reports and predicted weather patterns. Luckily, this postponement meant that we could enlist the supremely talented Claire Wayner and Kojo Baidoo, who would be returning home from school for the summer. With this fearsome foursome, we embarked on what would inevitably be a record-setting day. We opted not to use playback (specific calls or general "screech" disturbance tape) for the day. While this would surely cost us at least an Eastern Screech-Owl, it meant



Little Blue Heron by Derek Huddins/Macaulay Library

our final number would be "clean."

The Veterans Park was an enjoyable stop, with everyone remarking that it was perhaps the most birdy we'd seen it. A Traill's Flycatcher that remained silent despite our best pishing efforts was frustrating (we wanted an Alder!), but we were entertained by a female Rose-Breasted Grosbeak walking on the beach. I was able to pick out three high-flying Great Egrets (our only GREGs of the day), but the best get here by far was a flyby Common Loon (our only one) that Claire expertly spotted trailing the Egrets after I'd prematurely lowered my binoculars and moved on. Again though, the Marsh Wrens we expected failed to materialize. We wouldn't get one the entire day, perhaps our most glaring miss.



Eastern Screech-Owl by Keith Eric Costley/Macaulay Library

Our Baltimore Big Day was ushered in by a singing Field Sparrow at 4:30am at Soldiers' Delight. While we weren't able to pull out a hoped-for Whip-poor-will, a Great Horned Owl was obliging at the final pull-off we checked. We headed down to Fort Armistead Park in the hopes of a productive dawn stakeout on the water. While we whiffed on lingering waterfowl, each team member pulled out something special. Tim eagle-eyed the resident Peregrine Falcon (our only one of the day) on the concrete girders of the Key Bridge, Claire's sharp ears picked out a Wilson's Warbler, Kojo spotted a Little Blue Heron flying from Baltimore into Anne Arundel waters (a clutch tick, since the Black Marsh birds have been unreliable this year), and I shouted out our only Laughing Gull of the day. Striking out on Marsh Wren here was unfortunate, but we headed across the Key Bridge to Fort Howard Veterans Park with 46 species.



Rose-breasted Grosbeak by Colleen McCloskey/Macaulay Library



A suggestion by Claire to stop by [Diamond Point Rd.](#) on the way to Patterson Park for possible Bonaparte's Gull proved productive, as, while we didn't get any BOGUs, Tim did spot our only two Hooded Mergansers of the day swimming in Back River.

Patterson was a vital stop. We quickly checked the boat lake to tick the lingering Gadwall and Black Duck, and both were then quickly upstaged by the late Red-breasted Nuthatch that Claire spotted close by. Kojo and I called out a pair of young Broad-Winged Hawks circling above, our only Blackburnian Warbler of the day joined a beautiful male Canada Warbler in the Audubon wetland garden, and multiple spiffy Lincoln's Sparrows provided great views. The Green Herons on the boat lake were numerous, and one so obliging that even I, the group's scheduler and timekeeper, couldn't resist taking 3 minutes to enjoy some great photo-ops. We left [Patterson](#) reinvigorated, and with over 100 species on the day.



We next headed to North Point State Park, with high expectations (Tim having had a 102 species day just at NP in May 2020). However, with no sign of the resident Virginia Rails or the lingering Snow Goose, no other marsh birds, and only 15 species of warbler, the general feeling was that the park somewhat underperformed. Still, we did net our only Nashville and Cape May Warblers of the day, as well as Blue Grosbeak, Purple Martin, and Cooper's Hawk (not at all guaranteed). We left North Point at 10:20am with 94 species.

–[Black Marsh](#)

–[Wetland Loop/Entrance Road Fields](#)

–[Crystal Pier](#)



A quick stop at [Masonville Cove](#) produced my (as the team's avowed shorebird enthusiast) favorite bird of the day, a group of five Semipalmated Plovers in front of Captain Trash Wheel. The Bald Eagles tending to their fledglings put us at 107 species as we headed to SWAP.

While SWAP ([Southwest Area Park](#)) didn't give us everything we'd hoped for (we dipped on a lingering drake Blue-Winged Teal), we did get our main target: Common Gallinule. Kojo spotted the awesome chicken-like bird as it emerged from the reeds, and it showed well, seemingly oblivious to numerous aggressive fishermen. We also added Least Sandpiper and cleaned up a "dirty bird" (a bird identified earlier in the day, but NOT by all team

members) with a Chestnut-Sided Warbler just south of the boat ramp. As a bonus, just after leaving SWAP and pulling onto Annapolis Ave., I spotted a bird flying erratically. I knew what it was, but at 2:00 in the afternoon? Yup, Common Nighthawk! Tim deftly pulled our car over, leapt out, and signaled to Claire and Kojo (luckily right behind us). We watched five dancing CONIs, a great and unexpected "road" bird, and a year bird for all except Kojo.

We next headed to a spot along the Gwynns Falls for Yellow-Crowned Night-Heron. When we arrived, we found nothing. To add a little salt in the wound, a local garage owner approached us and told us he had seen our target herons just a couple of hours earlier, and that they were "always around." Not wanting to whiff on this must-have



Brown Thrasher by Tim Carney/Macaulay Library

species, we decided to check one more pulloff a little farther up the stream, and...BAM! A beautiful YCNH right off the road. Fist-pumps all around, then it was off to the Baltimore side of Liberty Reservoir.

Some GREAT and essential pre-Big Day scouting by Kojo of local breeders made Liberty a productive stop. While we dipped on Prothonotary Warbler, we added our only Cliff Swallows, Hooded Warblers, and Louisiana Waterthrush of the day, with a gorgeous bonus Yellow-Throated Vireo. Popping over to [Soldiers' Delight](#) for our second shift of the day, we got great views of the Summer Tanager that has become almost automatic behind the Red Dog Lodge, and added our only Pine Warblers of the day. We headed east at 4:30pm, with 122 species and eyes on additional migrants at Lake Roland.

Needless to say, Lake Roland was a disappointment. In just under an hour spent, at two different access points, we turned up four warbler species. *Four*. A calling Northern Flicker cured a glaring omission on our list, but otherwise the park was as dead as any of us had seen it, even in winter. This was particularly painful for me, as one of the park's most consistent birders and most outspoken advocates of its elite status as a migrant mecca.

–[Sorrento Trail](#)

–[Rugby Field](#)

After Lake Roland had underwhelmed, and with just a couple of hours of daylight remaining, we were in need of a bit of a boost. And that boost came from some Tim Carney magic at his "favorite Loch Raven spot," [Peerce's Cove](#). Not only did Peerce's deliver some needed "easy" birds like Eastern Phoebe and Song Sparrow(!), but we also added Brown Thrasher and (the star of the show), a singing Yellow-throated Warbler, a much-desired target bird. We headed to the Ag Center with 130 species.

[The Ag Center](#), one of the most gorgeous spots in the county, provided a great backdrop to the conclusion of our Big Day. While we couldn't turn up a Grasshopper Sparrow (a painful miss), we did have a Bobolink belt out a quick stanza from somewhere hidden in the grasses. A flyby Killdeer called from the southeast, adding another new species. And, while I was embarrassingly straining to turn a distant yellowish female Red-Winged Blackbird into an Eastern Meadowlark, Tim thankfully spotted the real thing perched on a far fence.

After 17 hours of birding, and about 10 miles and 26,000 steps walked (according to my count), our team finished with a new Baltimore record of 133 species recorded in a single day. There were certainly some tough misses, including Marsh Wren, Grasshopper Sparrow, Common Raven, warblers, and waterfowl. The number we got is certainly beatable, and we intend to beat it next year. But all things considered, an amazing day of Baltimore birding, with some amazing birders. Tim, Claire, and Kojo are insanely talented, I'm just lucky they took me along for the ride!

OUT OF THE ARCHIVE

Potential Findings of the Upcoming Breeding Bird Atlas

Blom, R. 2001. Potential Findings of the Upcoming Breeding Bird Atlas. *The Maryland Yellowthroat*. 21(5):6-7.

Now that there are plans to redo the Maryland/DC Breeding Bird Atlas starting in the spring of 2002 there are undoubtedly a lot of MOS members saying to themselves: "Wait a minute. We just finished one. I just got the book. It's too soon."

Memory is a fragile vessel. It is approaching the twentieth anniversary of the initiation of field work from the last Atlas. It may not seem that long because of the delay in getting the first one in print, but it has been two decades.

Two decades may seem like a lot to most of us (in my case it stretches from the birth of my daughter at the beginning of the project to now, when she is in college) but it isn't much in evolutionary terms. Could there really have been enough change in so short a period of time that it justifies another massive commitment by the MOS and its members? Sure, a lot of things will not have changed: Starlings and Rock Doves and American Robins and Mourning Doves will still be in nearly every block. Black-throated Blue and Magnolia Warblers will still be confined

to the mountains of Garrett County. Whatever Piping Plovers are left will still be confined to the beaches of Worcester County.

There will be changes though, important ones. Some birds are increasing and spreading, some are headed in the other direction. What follows is a list of the birds for which there will probably be significant changes from the first atlas to the next. It is a bit quirky because it is mine, and the only thing that is absolutely certain is that there will be surprises. By the time you have finished the list you should be impatient to get to the field work and you will have probably thought of at least one bird that I missed.

Mute Swan: The results of the first atlas show it largely confined to the Chesapeake Bay edges of the central Eastern Shore. It has since spread north and south, across the Bay, and up the Potomac River. The emerging controversy over how to deal with Mute Swans means that a complete understanding of the current range is critical.

Canada Goose: A lot of people are beginning to think of them as starlings with webbed feet. They were widespread by the end of the atlas, but there were a lot of gaps, especially in Baltimore and Carroll Counties. Now they are a candidate to appear in virtually every block.

[American] Black Duck: Possible declines may be reflected in a more restricted range and in occurrence in fewer blocks. It is important to clarify the status away from the Bay by being cautious of hybrids and identification problems.

Black Vulture: Has been increasing and spreading for more than a century. May now be more widespread in Allegany County and there are hints that it may have gained a foothold in Garrett.

Ring-necked Pheasant: Fast disappearing as a breeding



Canada Goose by Don Carbaugh/Macaulay Library

bird in Maryland. It may be virtually extirpated in many areas and will be found in far fewer blocks in its traditional stronghold in the Piedmont and Ridge and Valley sections.

Wild Turkey: Re-introduction efforts mean it should be found in every county this time, a dramatic change from twenty years ago.

Northern Bobwhite: Serious long-term declines continue and it may now be absent everywhere except the Coastal Plain.

Common Nighthawk: Continent-wide declines continue and it is probable that they will be found in fewer blocks. It has been decades since a nest on the ground was found and any occurrence away from roof-tops will be notable.

[Eastern] Whip-poor-will/Chuck-will's-widow: Atlas results showed that Chucks were replacing Whips on the lower Eastern Shore and along the edges of the Bay. The pattern appears to be continuing and range extension by Chucks and range contraction by Whips is anticipated.



Tree Swallow by John Manger/Macaulay Library



Wild Turkey by Andy Wilson/Macaulay Library

Red-headed Woodpecker: Anecdotal evidence suggests that some traditional sites may no longer be occupied. Expect a slightly contracted range and fewer sites. It is possible that the declines will be bigger than we expect.

Alder Flycatcher: Some observers feel it is getting harder to find in Garrett County, perhaps being replaced by Willow Flycatcher.

Willow Flycatcher: The atlas found the first evidence of spread onto the Coastal Plain. The question is whether the pattern has continued and if the species is still expanding.

Least Flycatcher: Long-term declines continue and it will undoubtedly be more restricted and may be quite hard to find in its traditional range in Garrett County.

Tree Swallow: The atlas recorded the initial stages of the spread from Tidewater areas across the state but field work in Baltimore and Carroll Counties was done before the birds moved in. Because of bluebird boxes the species is now a candidate to occur in almost every block.

Bank Swallow: Colonies are ephemeral. The atlas recorded a shift from traditional sites along the Bay to inland locations at quarries. There is no telling where they will be next time.

Red-breasted Nuthatch/Golden-crowned Kinglet: Both species have been spreading south for 50 years and by the end of the atlas had reached not only Garrett, but extreme northern Carroll County, using spruce plantations. Has the spread continued? Are the numbers in Garrett growing?

Brown-headed Nuthatch: Declining and the range is

contracting. They are already known to be absent from many areas of the lower Eastern Shore where they previously bred.

Brown Creeper: The atlas revealed that though they were scarce they could occur anywhere in the state. Easily overlooked, they may be more common than thought, part of what seems to be a range-wide expansion southward.

Carolina Wren: Post-atlas there was a major die-off, but they may have recaptured some of the ground in the western part of the state.

Northern Mockingbird: Has it finally gotten a foothold in Garrett County, the last county where it was accidental as a breeding bird?

Brown Thrasher: Long-term declines have been great and for the first time it may be that it will not be a candidate to be found in virtually every block. The percentage of blocks it is recorded in will be a key indicator for the species.

Cedar Waxwing: We were unprepared at the beginning of the atlas to get a large number of reports from the Coastal Plain but by the second year it was obvious the species had spread into the region in numbers. If the expansion has continued, they are now a candidate to be found in nearly every block.



Blue-winged/Golden-winged Warblers: Golden-wingeds have been in a range-wide decline for decades, being replaced by Blue-wingeds. Garrett is the Maryland stronghold for Golden-wingeds, but by the end of the atlas, Blue-wingeds were making inroads and mixed pairs and hybrids were being found. Have Blue-wingeds continued to gain ground and are Golden-wingeds on their way out as Maryland breeders?

Yellow-throated Warbler: An expanding species at the time of the atlas, pushing west and north along the rivers into the Piedmont and Ridge and Valley. They have apparently made it at least to the Pennsylvania border in all counties except Garrett and they may have established themselves there along the Potomac. They are also candidates to invade the northwest corner of Garrett from the west.

Cerulean Warbler: The declines have been so severe that they are now candidates for federal listing. Anecdotal evidence suggests that they will be much harder to find this time and will occur in notably fewer blocks.

Yellow-breasted Chat: Another declining species that will probably be found in notably fewer blocks as the second-growth thicket habitat it prefers continues to disappear. Other species that share the habitat and all also declining, including **Prairie Warbler**, **Eastern Towhee**, and **Field Sparrow**, may also be harder to find in many blocks.

Blue Grosbeak: An expanding species. Thirty years ago reports made the rare bird alert. Expansion into Allegany and perhaps Garrett may have already occurred and east of there they are candidates in nearly every block.

Vesper Sparrow/Grasshopper Sparrow: The two most important of a group, the grassland birds, that is the fastest declining on the continent. The results of the next atlas will undoubtedly show significantly compacted ranges and occurrence in many fewer blocks. They may already be extirpated from parts of the state where they have bred in the past. Two other grassland species, **Eastern Meadowlark** and **Red-winged Blackbird**, are also declining and while they were more widespread to start with, the change may show up this time.

Swamp Sparrow: The Coastal Plain race, *nigrescens*, may be in real trouble and studies indicate that it may be gone from many of the Bay marshes where it was found before. The difference this time may be dramatic.

Purple Finch: A Garrett County breeder that may be slowly slipping away, being replaced by House Finches.

House Finch: Going up and up and up. By the end of the atlas they had spread over most of the state but there were still gaps, especially on the Eastern Shore and in Western Maryland. Now might be found in virtually every block and may be one of the commonest breeding birds.

House Sparrow: Surprisingly, it seems to be declining as it is replaced in many suburban and urban areas by House Finches. May now be largely confined in rural areas to barns with large animals.

There are some species so rare, or that have declined so much, that they may be represented by only a few pairs. Any record of the following birds would be extremely significant: **Wilson's Plover, Upland Sandpiper, Laughing Gull, Yellow-bellied Sapsucker, Long-eared Owl, Short-eared Owl, Bewick's Wren, Sedge Wren, Swainson's Thrush, Loggerhead Shrike, Swainson's Warbler, Nashville Warbler, and Henslow's Sparrow.**

Some species are fairly recent additions to the state breeding list or have returned after a long absence. A new atlas will tell us if they have settled in and are expanding or increasing or if they tested the water and reversed field.

The list includes: **Brown Pelican, Double-crested Cormorant, Northern Shoveler, Green-winged Teal, Ring-necked Duck, Ruddy Duck, Northern Goshawk, [Northern] Saw-whet Owl, Yellow-rumped Warbler, and Pine Siskin.**

Marsh Birds: There is compelling evidence of long-term declines in almost all species, but especially hard hit have been fresh marsh birds such as **King Rail, Common Moorhen, and Least Bittern.** Atlas coverage was adequate only because of specially funded surveys. Even so, a concentrated post-atlas survey showed that we missed many birds. Normal atlas work will not provide useful data no matter how dedicated the participants.

Parklands: Two species associated with more open woods and parklands have been declining for many years: **Eastern Kingbird** and **Baltimore Oriole.** By the end of the atlas, field workers were working hard to add them to many blocks, although it could usually be done with diligence. The differences this time may not be dramatic but both species will probably be found in fewer blocks, the tip of a slowly disappearing iceberg.

The new stuff! This is the fun part, predicting (guessing) which will be the new species added to the state's breeding list this time around. My own list of candidates is long because I have learned that successful predicting means covering almost every possibility. Still, it is by no means complete and there is a perfectly reasonable chance that at least half the new breeders won't be on here. The following are legitimate (mostly) contenders, with my five top choices underlined: **Caspian Tern, Red Crossbill, Mississippi Kite, White Ibis, Olive-sided Flycatcher, American Wigeon, Yellow Rail, Common Merganser, Common [Wilson's] Snipe, Eurasian Collared-Dove, Clay-colored Sparrow, Western Meadowlark, White-throated Sparrow**, and my favorite quirky choice, **Lesser Black-backed Gull** (someone has to get out to the gull colony at Sparrow's Point)!

I think the evidence is overwhelming that not only is it time to start a new atlas, but that we will hardly have time in the five years of field work to answer all the questions that have emerged since the first one. And that doesn't even take into account the surprises that will emerge from every day's worth of field work.

Author: Rick Blom