# WHAT'S HATCHING?

Official Newsletter of the Maryland & DC Breeding Bird Atlas 3 ISSUE NO 17 | AUG 2021





Chimney Swifts spend most of their life above our rooftops—here's what to look for.

### TIPS AND TRICKS

Mike Hudson shares about the overlooked potential of atlasing in an urban environment.

### OUT OF THE ARCHIVE

Read BBA2 Coordinator Walter Ellison's answers to his top 10 list of frequently asked questions.



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### **ISSUE NO 17 | AUG 2021**

The second state record and first Montgomery County record of a Mississippi Kite nest was found on June 13, 2021, by Menachem Goldstein. Menachem visited the site, and waited for the kite to return to its preferred perch. The bird briefly perched before moving just out of view. Menachem followed the bird and almost immediately spotted a second kite on a small nest in the fork of a tulip poplar. Since the nest's discovery, dozens of people have reported on its progress—which now represents a single fluffy white chick.



"The notes of the swift remind us of the bird itself—energetic and quick; sharp and hard like the bird's stiff wings."

-- Winsor Marrett Tyler



Chimney Swift by <u>Peter</u> Finley/Macaulay Library

#### HOW TO CODE BIRD BEHAVIOR

### "NY" VERSUS "FY"

TIP - NESTS ALWAYS GET \*NEST\* CODES

#### NY = Nest with young

No matter what is happening in and around a nest with chicks, always use code NY because it is *a nest with young* 



FY = Feeding young

If you see a chick that is outside the nest being fed, use code FY because it is *feeding young that have left the nest* 



Check the Atlas Handbook for more details!

### From the Coordinator

As summer winds down, parental care is the key.

With the arrival of August comes the departure of another atlasing season. If nothing else, the beginning of <u>Maryland's first fall morning flight</u> <u>count</u> at Turkey Point this month was a hefty reminder that the annual movement of southbound migrants has begun.

But don't let that dissuade you just yet; there is still atlasing to be done! Birds that failed earlier in the year may still be attempting subsequent broods and many of the region's resident species may try to get another nest attempt in before temperatures drop. Carolina Wrens and Northern Cardinals, for instance, have both had active nests documented here in early to mid-September. Most importantly, goldfinches and waxwings tend to nest late in the summer, after most other species are largely done. August is a key month to target both these species.

August also highlights the dilemma of determining which juveniles are eligible for the recently fledged code (code FL) and which are too old. As the breeding season continues to wind down, more evidence is needed to be reasonably sure that a juvenile is indeed 'recently fledged' from that block. As a general rule, most family groups break up once the young reach independence, so watch for begging behavior and interactions with adults.

In other words, whenever possible look for code FY (adult feeding young) in late summer rather than just code FL.

--Gabriel



The mean count per week of codes FL (recently fledged young) and FY (adult feeding young) from passerine species reported to the Maryland & DC Breeding Bird Atlas 3 from January 2020 to June 2021 (n = 21,148).

## bird of the month: CHIMNEY SWIFT

Chimney Swifts arrive in Maryland and DC in mid-April and begin forming pair bonds soon after. Initially, the dark brown, cigar-shaped birds spend their nights in large communal roosts with dozens or hundreds of other swifts, but each breeding pair soon selects their own nest site. Occasionally, that nest site may be an outbuilding, a hollow tree, a cave, or some similar structure, but almost invariably a chimney is chosen. Stewart and Robbins describe the peak nesting season as late May to early August.

Pairs (which appear to be monogamous) are formed through intense chases. In Bent's *Life Histories*, Winsor Marrett Tyler describes the chase:

> The breeding season is here. Purpose has come into the swift's brain, and purpose has brought intensity and speed,

and concentration on a mate. Now they fly close together, two birds, three birds, sometimes four in a little bunch. The length of a swift's body scarcely separates them as they tear along, ripping through space, following the twists and turns of the bird in the lead. (p. 272)

In addition to the chase described by Tyler, pairs often engage in "V-ing", where the wings are set suddenly and stiffly into an acute 'V'. The leading bird imitates the posture initiated by the rear bird, and the two descend together in a gliding arc. This display appears to be important for pair bond maintenance throughout the season and it continues into the fall. It can be documented with code C (courtship display).



Chimney Swift breeding distribution map from the Maryland & DC Breeding Bird Atlas 2.

Chimney Swift by Stephen Davies/Macaulay Library

## SWIFT FORAGING

## Be mindful when applying code H.

Foraging swifts follow concentrations of aerial insects their sole food source—that are pushed together by wind and thermal updrafts, both of which are influenced by topography and ground cover. Interestingly, these sites where airflow concentrates the insects are not necessarily the same as sites where insects are produced.

This behavior may result in swifts traveling quite far from their nest site to forage. Like other wideranging birds, such as vultures or colonial nesting birds, code H (an adult in suitable nesting habitat during its breeding season) should be applied only if there is a potential nest site nearby.

Due to the frequency of uncapped chimneys in Maryland and DC, this means that a substantial proportion of Chimney Swift observations can be reported as code H.

Be sure to consider the time of year as well as the location; if the swifts are not within safe dates (May 15– August 10), they should not receive code H. The pair work together over the next three to four weeks to build a nest. They both collect small twigs from the tops of dead trees; selected twigs are  $\frac{1}{8}$  inch by 1-1  $\frac{1}{2}$  inches. Using a sticky saliva, the twigs are glued in a cupshape to the interior of the chimney wall. Once the nest is half-completed, the female begins egg-laying. She normally lays 4–5 white eggs, but occasionally as many as seven. Both adults develop brood patches and share incubation duties that begin when the penultimate egg has been laid. The eggs hatch about 19 days later.



Chimney Swifts rarely display any territorial behavior to other swifts. Other nonbreeding individuals may roost unbothered in the nest chimney, but there is only ever a single nest. In addition to the uninvolved coroosting birds,

it is not uncommon for Chimney Swifts to have one or two helpers—usually males—who brood and feed nestlings. At least some of these are former young of the parents, but the purpose of helpers at swift nests hasn't been well studied and isn't fully understood. The majority of over 400 documented swift nesting combinations were pairs, but 15% had one helper and 2% had two helpers.

The nearly universal preference for chimneys as nest sites concentrates Chimney Swifts around urban and residential areas. If you have permission, watching chimneys is a solid tactic for Confirming swifts. Although non-breeding individuals may roost alongside nesting swifts, roosting swifts only enter their roost site at dawn or dusk or when forced by inclement weather. These dawn or dusk movements should never receive a breeding code. On the other hand, a swift entering a chimney during the day in good weather is almost certainly nesting there; multiple entries and exits in an hour remove any doubt. These observations (which are not always obvious and can be easy to miss) can be documented with code ON (occupied nest).

Dr. Margaret Rubega describes Chimney Swifts as "constitutionally uneasy". She's Connecticut's State Ornithologist and a professor at the University of Connecticut. Her lab has studied Chimney Swifts and she co-authored the Birds of the World species account. Although adult swifts can be reliably identified in late summer by their molting primaries, the absence of a visible molt does not safely indicate a juvenile. It's also unclear how long swift families may stay together at a site, although current research indicates at least a week. After juveniles leave the nest site, at least some will join communal roosts. For these reasons, Dr. Rubega cautions against using code FL (recently fledged young) for Chimney Swifts. And family groups aren't the only challenge presented by the prodigiously aerial swifts. They also carry food back to the nestlings internally in their throat, rendering code CF (carrying food) useless, and fecal sacs are not carried off (they're either eaten by adults or excreted over the nest edge).

"Swifts are tough," she says. "All the things that make it tough to observe them nesting, directly, along with their monomorphism, also make 'family groups' tough to define."

If a first attempt fails, Chimney Swifts may re-nest, and at least one active nest has been recorded as late as September 1. Chimney Swifts can be found here until midto late October, when the last stragglers disappear for their South American home.

Author: Gabriel Foley

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## ATLASER SPOTLIGHT

Vickie Bailey is a Montgomery County photographer, gardener, writer, and speaker. She recently helped spearhead the effort to save Rockville's Redgate Park.

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

One thing that was important in saving Redgate was that we had photographs of nearly all the 159 birds we saw there. I never go birding without my Canon 5D MarkII camera and zoom lens (150-600).

### What bird do you particularly like?

Like so many birders, I love owls. Finding the nest of the Great Horned Owl at Redgate was one of the best moments of my life. Anne Mytych had seen the male owl hunting at dusk one evening, so I spent the next week combing the area for the nest. Once I found it (thanks for the help, crows!), I still didn't realize the female was already sitting. When I took Patti Armistead to see the nest, she pointed out the ear tufts poking up through the gathered sticks. People came from Richmond to Philadelphia to see the owlet that hatched! It became a park mascot.

#### What made you interested in birds?

I grew up in Tennessee where birds were all around me. I became more obsessively interested ten years ago when I went on a trip to South Africa where a naturalist helped us see 50 birds. I wondered if I could find 50 birds here in Montgomery County. It actually took me much longer to get from 0 species to 50 than from 50 to 100! Or even 100 to 200, because by then Concetta Goodrich had introduced me to eBird. Where is your favorite place to atlas?

Redgate Park!

What is the best thing about atlasing?

It is wonderful to feel I'm part of the scientific part of birding.

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

No, this is my first one.

## What bird best reflects your personality?

Out the window I just watched a male cardinal feeding his mate. My husband and I are very close too, even after a year of being quarantined alone together!



A "Bird Panel" by Vickie Bailey

![](_page_5_Picture_18.jpeg)

![](_page_5_Picture_19.jpeg)

#### Who would you go atlasing with?

We created a group we called the Redgate Trailblazers—Anne Mytych, Mike Bowen, and Concetta Goodrich. I would always want to go birding with them!

## What's our biggest conservation issue?

People are in despair. To help them have hope, I have created "Bird Panels" which show all the birds I've seen in a given area—Montgomery County, Redgate Park, or the area in New York where we go on vacation. I took the Redgate Park Panels to the lobby of the Town Hall to show the impact of how many birds we were really talking about. One of the council members told me it was the most powerful piece of advocacy he'd seen in a long time. It is more powerful to see the photos all at once, than in series in my slideshow talks, or in online platforms.

## TIPS AND TRICKS

Urban Atlasing: Exploring One of Our Most Dynamic Habitats-by Mike Hudson

I grew up in southeast Baltimore City, nestled between Johns Hopkins Hospital and Patterson Park. It was an undeniably urban area, bisected by several busy city thoroughfares and continually serenaded by sirens and the thrum of helicopter traffic. But it was also a neighborhood shaded by huge old maple and linden trees, with the aforementioned Patterson Park and the Canton waterfront section of Baltimore's Promenade both within easy walking distance. My earliest birding experiences all involved exploring this corner of Baltimore, at the intersection of the busy downtown and quieter residential neighborhoods, so perhaps its not surprising that the birdlife of urban habitats has long fascinated me, at least as much as that of the far-flung

wildernesses of Garrett County or the windswept dunes of Assateague Island.

Cities are perhaps most famous for the extraordinary shows that their downtown parks can provide during migration. The oft-discussed Central Park Effect—the name for the phenomenon when large numbers of birds are funneled into modestlysized greenspaces within highly developed, urban landscapes-is rightly famous among urban birders; Patterson Park, the park I grew up birding in, can be among the most productive migrant traps in the region during peak migration in May, September, and October, when conditions are right. Perhaps less widely acknowledged, is the treasure trove of exciting and unusual

 View
 Crowyed, Alight, Herons by Mie, Hudson, Macaulay, Library

observations birders can be treated to during the breeding season in urban areas. The conventional image of breeding species in cities and other highly developed habitats is probably dominated by introduced species, like Rock Pigeons and House Sparrows. Common and familiar backyard birds like American Robins and Mourning Doves would probably also spring to mind, and some might think of more recent devotees of urban environments, like Peregrine Falcons. Famous and abundant in their urban proclivities, these are fitting species to think of, but it does not require much effort to realize they represent barely a fraction of the breeding birdlife within urban habitats.

The atlas block Baltimore East Center-West is a highly urban block, but it has the benefit of being dotted by a number of parks of varying sizes; the north end of Herring Run Park crosses the northeastern corner of the block and running down the northwestern edge is Wyman Park and the Johns Hopkins University campus while Clifton Park and Greenmount Cemetery sit within the center of this block. In this block 45 species have been confirmed as breeding, including many of the famous and prominent city nesters-Rock Pigeons and Mourning Doves are easy to find breeding here, as are House Sparrows, European Starlings, American Robins, House Finches, and Gray Catbirds. But this block also plays host (owing to the tall woods in some of its parks) to several species generally associated with more

extensive woodlands. Perhaps the most notable of these is Acadian Flycatcher, a species that is declining across its range and which is often associated with extensive, mature hardwood forests. Yet this small, mossy-green *Empidonax* flycatcher hangs on in highly urban blocks in Baltimore and Washington, DC, wherever corridors of healthy hardwood forest remain, a testament to the tenacity of this imperiled species.

This is also the block in which Baltimore's famed, long-persisting Yellow-crowned Night-Heron rookery is situated. Since I was in middle school, the Wyman Park Drive bridge into Druid Hill park has been a favorite stop of mine on late spring and early summer walks; from the middle of the bridge, you can look down into the heart of the small colony of Night-Herons and spy on their breeding activities, enjoying behaviors from courtship displays, to the feeding of young chicks, to the awkward firststeps of gangly fledglings, hobbling their way along the arching branches of their sycamore homes. This species

![](_page_7_Picture_3.jpeg)

has earned something of a reputation for being an urban-dweller, as unusual and improbable as that may seem. In addition to Baltimore's nesting population, birds also nest in parks along Rock and Carroll Creeks in Frederick, and the heavily built-up DC suburbs have also seen breeding confirmations. Two relatives of the Yellow-crowns, the Black-crowned Night-Heron and Green Heron have both also established themselves as urban-breeders, with one of Maryland's most famous and persistent Black-crown colonies being located in the heart of Baltimore's Fells Point neighborhood, along Thames Street. They also nest at the oasis that is the National Zoo, in Washington DC, and have for many years now. Green Herons, meanwhile, long suspected of nesting in Patterson Park, were this year confirmed to have an occupied nest in there, proving that even some of the more secretive species can tolerate urban environments, if conditions are correct.

It's worth mentioning that some true oddballs have also set-up shop in urban areas for breeding in the past. During the second atlas, Ruddy Ducks bred at Druid Hill Park in central Baltimore; when I was in high school, a pair of Least Bitterns attempted to breed at least twice at Patterson Park's Boat Lake, and the species still occurs there with some regularity in late spring. These, and other rarer and more unusual species should be looked for, and as a general rule, its good to be suspicious of late-lingering species that persist in habitat that is theoretically conducive to breeding. Summer records of many species, from waterfowl to songbirds, could be late migrants or failed breeders from elsewhere, but you never know when one might represent a species

attempting to nest. Spend a little extra time with these birds, really paying attention to their behavior; make note of how persistently they sing, what the habitat they're in is like, and whether they do anything that strikes you as strange-like repeatedly visiting the same obscured fork in a tree or repeatedly vanishing only to turn up again in the same spot, every few minutes. Even if you can't Confirm breeding, some of these behaviors can be indicative of lower-tier breeding codes and even a Possible or Probable designation has great value.

But unusual and exciting species aren't the only surprises in store for those who choose to take a deeper dive into urban atlasing. Cities also produce some opportunities to observe behaviors that may not be easy to observe elsewhere and may also give atlasers the opportunity to document wholly new and exciting behavioral discoveries; last March, during the first year of the Atlas, a Baltimore atlaser sent an intriguing photo to Baltimore Co-coordinator Paul Kreiss and I. The photo depicted a recently fledged American Robin begging from a parent. That observation brought to light a second report of a robin, from even earlier in the month, feeding four recently fledged chicks. Some birds are known to take advantage of early warm spells to extend their breeding season, giving them a chance to raise more broods and this seems to happen with particular frequency in high urban areas, where slightly warmer temperatures and an abundance of easy food in the form of refuse, insects, and rodents may make conditions more conducive for these early season nesting attempts.

![](_page_8_Picture_2.jpeg)

In addition to American Robins, a litany of species including House Sparrows, European Starlings, Mourning Doves, Gray Catbirds, House Finches, and, of course, Rock Pigeons may all engage in surprising early breeding attempts, and atlasers should start looking for evidence of early breeding by these, and other common, urban species as early as the end of February and beginning of March!

Of course, urban birds may also be

exposed to threats that their more rural counterparts don't have to deal with as often; the busyness of many nesting places may make chicks more susceptible to predation and some species nesting in urban habitats chose nest sites that are quite exposed to the elements, making premature fledging after storms more likely. They also have to contend with more intensive and frequent landscaping and nesting habitats that

![](_page_8_Picture_6.jpeg)

are prone to changing drastically from year-to-year, or even within a season. Don't be surprised if nests you've found and monitored seem to fail often or if chicks fledge long before you think they should. Urban habitats are tough places and not all nests will make it—perhaps one of the advantages for species that begin nesting so early in the year within cityscapes. If a bird starts nesting in March and the first nest or two fail, there is still a long season ahead to pull off a successful breeding attempt.

Luckily for us, though, many species, including several that are normally shy and reclusive about their breeding activities, thrive in cities, and may also be less reticent and easier to observe in urban situations. Last year, many residents of the Remington and Hampden neighborhoods in Baltimore were delighted by the presence of a family of Barred Owls, often shockingly easy to observe and exhibiting very little fear of people, within the lower stretch of Wyman Park. Joggers and dogwalkers would often stop and take note as the birds perched just a few yards away from busy pathways and roads, such was the owl family's obliviousness to the busy city life around them. The fact that not all species fare so well makes it important to remember that in some situations a birds' apparent boldness may be by necessity more than choice-they may not have the space and abundance of hiding places that birds in wilder settings have. In the case of these Barred Owls, they had ample space to flee if they wanted and the parents were remarkably calm about their chick's escapades into bustling urban landscape, but being aware of a given bird's

![](_page_9_Picture_2.jpeg)

behavior and keeping an eye on how much space it has to move away if it needs to is critical in situations like this.

One of the great joys about atlasing is that every day holds the opportunity for a new and exciting discovery. A new breeding species could be found by anyone, anywhere; any atlaser could be graced with a rarely seen or unusual breeding behavior. Urban atlasing is no different and the thrill of a cool sighting can be even more gratifying knowing you are minutes away from towering skyscrapers or busy bus stops. If you have never spent much time birding in cities, consider doing some atlasing in one! Look for some urban blocks near you and make a day of exploring them. Whether you find your common backyard species or make a thrilling find of a rarer species, you'll be contributing to our knowledge about the breeding fauna of one of the most dynamic and complex ecosystems around!

Author: Mike Hudson, Baltimore County Coordinator

![](_page_9_Picture_7.jpeg)

## **FROM THE FIELD**

![](_page_10_Picture_1.jpeg)

![](_page_10_Picture_2.jpeg)

Brown-headed Cowbird fledgling by George Jett

![](_page_10_Picture_4.jpeg)

## OUT OF THE ARCHIVE

### Join the Atlas Effort!

Ellison, W. 2002. Join the Atlas Effort. The Maryland Yellowthroat. 22(4):4.

The initial year of the second Maryland Breeding Bird Atlas has been highly successful. There are still, however, unassigned blocks in all parts of the state. If you are not yet participating in this valuable resarch project (which is also challenging and fun), consider joining for the final four years. State Atlas Coordinator Walter Ellison answers ten of the most frequently asked questions about the Atlas Project. Even if you do not commit to covering a block, providing breeding information from your yard or neighborhood can be valuable.

**Q:** If MOS did the Atlas from 1983 to 1987, why do it all over again?

**A:** Bird ranges will change over time even without obvious or extensive habitat or climate change. It is clear that habitat and climate change has taken place over the last twenty years so the birds will have changed as well. To be

![](_page_11_Picture_6.jpeg)

able to use Atlas results for bird conservation, we must repeat the project to see the direction and extent of change in bird populations over the last two decades.

**Q:** I don't know a lot about bird breeding behavior and nests, how can I improve my knowledge before I have to learn from the birds in my block?

**A:** There is a list of useful references on bird biology in the blue Atlas Handbook (p. 13) furnished to all participants. Many of the "life histories" from the old Arthur Cleveland Bent Smithsonian series are available online at [https://birdsbybent.com/index.html]. The Enoch Pratt library in Baltimore has a set of the very detailed species accounts from the Birds of North America Series. The Maryland Atlas book that covers the 1983–1987 Atlas is also a goldmine of information on the biology and behavior of Maryland birds written from an instate perspective. This book is available from a number of sources. It can often be found at a low remaindered price.

**Q:** Will I be figuring out how common each bird is in my block?

**A:** Block work only requires that you determine the presence of a bird species and try to figure out its nesting status. Other observers will run special surveys in each block called miniroutes to estimate the abundance of the more common and widespread bird species.

**Q:** I live in a block that is divided into quarterblocks. Will you explain quarterblock coverage?

**A:** Quarterblocks are intended to reveal breeding distribution on a much finer scale than the standard 10 square mile (5 km<sup>2</sup>) block. Counties that are experiencing rapid population growth and development and counties with many unique breeding bird species (*i.e.*, Garrett and

Somerset) are entirely covered by quarterblocks to show detailed breeding ranges in order to detect subtle changes in bird ranges. The northwestern block in all quadrangles will also receive quarterblock coverage. When observers cover a quarterblock, they need only confirm a bird once in any of the quarters, but they must strive to see or hear the bird in the remaining three quarters to establish its presence in them.

**Q:** The topographic map of my block is out of date. What can I do to find out about current road, development, and habitat conditions in my block in the 21<sup>st</sup> century?

**A:** There is a useful compendium of mapping sources and information on land ownership on the Atlas Resources page of the MOS website. Also ADC county map books are available for all but three of Maryland's counties (Allegany, Garrett, and Somerset). The maps in these handy references are updated every other year and are at the same map scale as the USGS quadrangle maps used to produce the block maps. Mapquest provides access to

![](_page_12_Picture_3.jpeg)

![](_page_12_Picture_4.jpeg)

reasonably up-to-date aerial photos, and Merlin does the same with satellite images. (See the Atlas Resources page for more detail and other sources).

**Q:** What are the safe dates, and why do I need to pay attention to them?

**A:** Safe dates are intended to forestall counting migrants or transient birds such as dispersing post-nesters as possible or probable breeders in a block. If you see strong breeding evidence outside of safe dates (for example, nest building or a bird with a fecal sac), such behavior is countable for the Atlas.

**Q:** Are there "better" or "higher" codes to aim for within the probable and confirmed categoires? *E.g.*, is a nest code "better" than a code where I don't see a nest?

**A:** There are no probable or confirmed codes that considered better (or higher). This policy is intended to discourage overly zealous nest searching or other harassment in the name of "upgrading" an already confirmed breeder.

**Q:** What do I do if I find a rarity such as one of the birds listed at the end of my Atlas Field Card?

**A:** If you find a rare bird requiring verification, you should make an effort to have others document the rarity to support and corroborate your find. In any case, you should produce a written report documenting the rare bird on the form provided in your Atlas Packet.

Q: When should I plan to visit my block?

A: You will need to visit your block several times, mostly

in spring and summer. Productive times to work in a block include mid to late May, all of June, and early to mid July. Particular species will require special visits at "off" times, for example nesting by goldfinches is best confirmed from late July to early September, and Great Horned and Barred Owls are most vocal at night in mid to late winter.

**Q:** When should I consider my block "done" and how long will it take me to do it?

**A:** Most blocks will host over 90 bird species (some over 100), but the majority of observers will plateau at 80 to 85 species in a block. As a rule of thumb, a block is virtually "complete" at 85 species with half of the species probable or confirmed. Completing a block takes from 20 to 40 hours depending on the skills of an observer. Many

observers will require around 35 hours or a little less to reach 80–85 species with half probable and confirmed. For those blocks which are being quarterblocked, a minimum of 50–60 species per quarterblock is the goal and proportionately more time will be required to complete the block. For those who live in a block and will be providing sightings during the duration of the Atlas, or for those individuals who wish to do as thorough a job as possible reaching a high proportion of confirmed and probable species, minimum time in a block is irrelevant. If you feel you have "completed" your block and would like to continue to atlas, there are many unassigned blocks available on which to use your skills.

Author: Walter Ellison, BBA2 State Atlas Coordinator

![](_page_13_Picture_5.jpeg)