

WHAT'S HATCHING?

Official Newsletter of the Maryland & DC Breeding Bird Atlas 3
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Brown Thrasher by Jonathan Irons/Macaulay Library

BIRD OF THE MONTH

Brown Thrashers occur in nearly every Atlas block—have you found them in yours yet?

TIPS AND TRICKS

Dave Wilson shares his insights on where to look for vulture nests.

FROM THE FIELD

John Harris, Bonnie Ott, and Kristin Trouton all contribute to an intimate collection of a Ruby-throated Hummingbird at the nest.

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Eurasian Collared-Doves were first documented breeding in Florida in the 80s; they have exploded across the continent since then. By the late 90s, both Virginia and Delaware had recorded them nesting. Despite multiple breeding records practically within sight of the state boundary, no breeding had been documented in Maryland until this year (and, shockingly, DC has never reported the dove at all!).

On June 27, 2021, [Heather McSharry and Mark Abdy](#) reported a collared-dove in Washington County. Three weeks later, [Aaron Graham](#) reported the pair nesting in a pine tree, Maryland's first breeding record.



Eurasian Collared-Dove carrying nest material by [Anna Hutzell/Macaulay Library](#)

"The brown thrasher is one of our best and most spectacular singers; his loud, striking spring song, once heard, can never be forgotten."

--Arthur Cleveland Bent



Brown Thrasher by George Jett

UPCOMING EVENTS

A Maryland Public Television program, Outdoors Maryland, has featured the Atlas!

The program aired on November 23 on Maryland Public Television; you can stream the episode (Ep. 3303) at <https://www.mpt.org/programs/odm-episodes/>

From the Coordinator

Good birds.



There are some common birds that just feel uncommon when you observe them, and I think Brown Thrasher is a great example of this. It's a 'good bird'. Every time I see one, I do an internal fist pump. Brown Thrashers are not especially hard birds to find or to detect, but I suppose their density is just low enough that they're not guaranteed. In the BBA2 book, the relative abundance for Brown Thrasher was illustrated for most of the region as being less than 10%, even though they were found in almost 90% of blocks. A check on eBird shows a similar pattern; at their peak annual frequency, [Brown Thrashers are reported on about 15% of checklists](#) in Maryland.

Compare that to Gray Catbird, a bird that was also found in about 90% of

BBA2 blocks. Their regional relative abundance was illustrated as somewhere between 10% and 50%, and likewise eBird indicates [they can be found on 35–50% of checklists](#) while they are here in Maryland.

Some folks like to say 'all birds are good birds', and I agree with that (even extending the sentiment to oft-maligned birds like pigeons, starlings, or cowbirds). But, a species' intrinsic value and the value of the opportunity to see it shouldn't be conflated. I have fewer opportunities to see a Brown Thrasher than a Gray Catbird, so it makes sense that I would value the thrasher sightings higher than the catbird sightings and appreciate them more—effectively turning the thrasher into a 'better' bird locally than the catbird.

Neither bird is better than the other, of course. Brown Thrashers are thick and sturdy with an attitude to match. Gray Catbirds are dapper but unobtrusive. Nevertheless, during the summer a catbird would seldom get a fist pump from me—they're just not that hard to find, and so I perceive the value of the sighting differently.

There's a sharp downside to this intuitive approach though. Opportunities to view the catbird and its behavior are easier to come by. I could learn a lot about catbirds, birds in general, and how birds relate to their environment if I would just stop and watch them, and take advantage of their commonness. Instead, I often find myself searching for the thrasher, looking for the next 'good bird'.

There's no right or a wrong approach—as long as you are not harming birds or people, then you're enjoying birds right—but there are costs and benefits depending on where your attention is focused. Focusing on common birds and truly noticing them (at least for me) takes intention but is rewarded with renewed appreciation for the bird and an extra boost of joy. Whatever your approach, I hope you are able to enjoy birds, common or rare, and that they bring you some happiness.

--Gabriel



Brown Thrasher by [Gabriel Foley/Macaulay Library](#)

bird of the month:

BROWN THRASHER

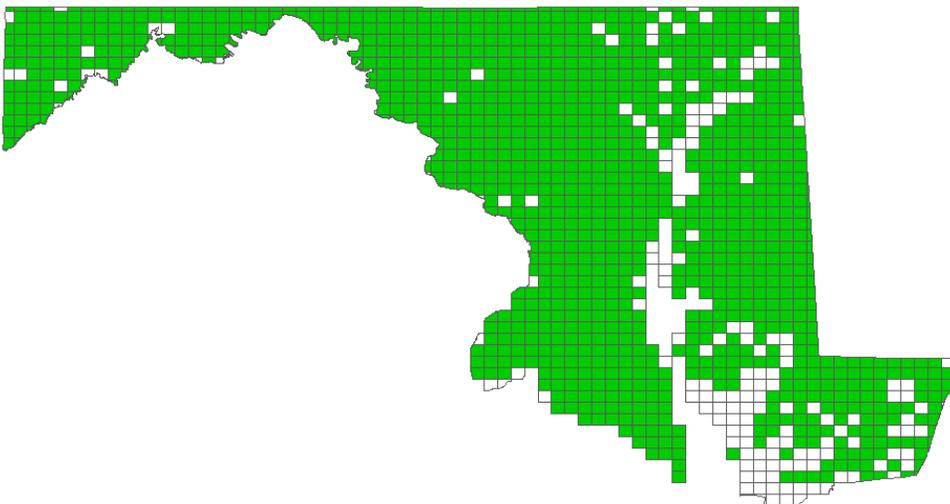


Brown Thrasher by Keith Eric Costley/Macaulay Library

Aside from parts of the lower Eastern Shore, Brown Thrashers can be found breeding in just about every block in Maryland and DC. Powerline cuts, overgrown pastures, hedgerows along fields, and dense, shrubby plants in developed areas are all good locations to find Brown Thrashers in. They prefer edge areas and spend most of their time near the ground in shrubby cover, scratching through leaf litter. Beetles make up a substantial portion of their diet, but they'll eat just about any arthropod, as well as fruits and seeds.

A thrasher's large size, long tail, and brick-red plumage make them fairly distinctive and unlikely to be confused with other Maryland birds. The sexes look alike and, other than the adult's yellow eye, juveniles appear similar. Their skulky behavior makes them somewhat more difficult to detect than, say, a mockingbird or a catbird, so

their song—maybe the loveliest of our mimids' songs? —is a good one to become familiar with. The male thrasher belts out a rich, rapid series of paired phrases, often from an exposed perch. Not only is the paired sequence generally considered to be the best way for humans to identify the thrasher's song, it is also apparently the way that Northern Mockingbirds differentiate thrasher songs from their own! This doesn't appear to work the opposite way though. Brown Thrashers respond to playback of mockingbirds at the same rate as their own songs. A thrasher's song is quite loud, but a softer version of it has been correlated with courtship, incubation duties, and locating fledglings. It's also worth becoming familiar with their distinctive call note, which has been described as a "smacking kiss".



Brown Thrasher breeding distribution map from the Maryland & DC Breeding Bird Atlas 2.

OUTRAGED THRASHERS

A fascinating account in Bent's Life Histories reveals intense and observant parenting.

In *Life Histories of North American Nuthatches, Wrens, Thrashers, and their Allies*, author Arthur C. Bent relayed a report from Dr. T. M. Brewer on a pair of Brown Thrashers reacting to a change in their nest contents:

"I found a [Brown Thrasher] nest containing three eggs, which I removed, leaving in their places three Robin's eggs, and retired to wait the issue. In a few moments the female approached, gave the contents of the nest a hasty survey, and immediately flew off. She returned in a short time in company with her mate, and both flew to the nest in the greatest rage, took each an egg in their *claws*, and dashed it against the ground at a distance of more than a rod from the nest, the female repeating the same to the other egg. This done, they continued for some time to vent their rage on the broken eggs, tossing them about, and at the same time manifesting their displeasure in every possible way. They afterwards forsook the nest."

Brown Thrashers overwinter in small numbers on the Coastal Plain, but elsewhere in Maryland and DC they arrive in mid-March from their wintering grounds in the southeast. Males appear to precede females by about a week. During that time, the males establish their territories. Once the females arrive and a socially monogamous pair bond is established, the two birds select a nest site and begin construction together. The nest is generally built in dense, often thorny cover, usually in the fork of a shrub, small tree, or in a dense vine tangle. The average height of 279 nests documented in Maryland was four ft. Only 8% of those nests were higher than seven ft above ground, and just 5% were actually on the ground. The nest's composition is multi-layered. It begins with a cup of sticks on the outside, then a cup of leaves, then a cup of small twigs and roots, then a lining of vigorously cleaned grass roots. They have been known to commandeer catbird nests, or they may decide to reuse a previous year's nest. If so, they'll replace the nest lining and add sticks to the exterior. This results in some



fact, Brown Thrashers are the largest bird that cowbirds regularly parasitize), but thrashers recognize and eject cowbird eggs. This parasitism doesn't appear to affect thrasher nest success much, and cowbirds don't usually do well as part of a thrasher's brood.

Incubation of the clutch begins with the penultimate egg. The female is the only one with an incubation patch, but the male still does about a third of the incubating. They incubate their eggs for 11–14 days and the nestling period lasts an additional 11–12 days. As with nest construction and incubation, both parents cooperate to feed the chicks. The chicks fledge while their wing and tail feathers are still

thrasher nests growing to almost a foot in depth—nearly a third deeper than usual. Nest reuse saves the thrasher pair a couple of days of construction effort and allows earlier egg laying, which has been correlated with greater nest success. Be cautious around any suspected nest sites, especially early in the season. Predation is a primary cause of thrasher nest failure, and they will readily abandon a nest that has been discovered by a potential predator.

Immediately following nest construction, 2–6 eggs are laid. The eggs are smooth, glossy, and pale. A thick spattering of fine brown dots encompasses the shell. Brown-headed Cowbirds will parasitize thrasher nests (in





Brown Thrasher with nest material by Forest Jarvis/Macaulay Library



Brown Thrasher nest by Thomas Schultz/Macaulay Library

quite short, but their strong legs allow them to move around well. The parents may split the brood up if the female begins a second clutch, but most thrashers are single-brooded. The young remain with the parents in the vicinity of their nest site until they are about six weeks old.

A Brown Thrasher's song is loud and distinctive, so they are good candidates for code S7 (singing for 7+ days). They are territorial (code T) and tend to be solitary except when in a family group, so pairs (code P) are fairly easy to recognize. Thanks to their skulking, courtship is difficult to observe, so code C doesn't get a lot of use with thrashers. Thrashers spend a substantial amount of time perched, watching their nest. If a perceived threat approaches their nest or fledglings too closely, parents may engage in a 'broken-wing' display (code DD), or they may just attack (code A). Adults carry fecal sacs away from the nest (code FS), but only for the last three to four days of the nestling period; prior to that, they eat the sacs at the nest. To identify fledglings (code FL), look for dark-eyed birds with a fleshy gape and short wings and tails.

Author: Gabriel Foley

References

Bent, A.C. 1948. *Life Histories of North American Nuthatches, Wrens, Thrashers, and their Allies*. United States National Museum Bulletin 195. Smithsonian Institution, Washington DC. 475 p.

Cavitt, J.F., C.A. Haas. 2020. Brown Thrasher (*Toxostoma rufum*), 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.brnthr.01>

Williams, T.D. 2012. *Physiological Adaptations for Breeding in Birds*. Princeton University Press. Princeton, NJ. 368 p.



Fledgling Brown Thrasher by George Jett



Brown Thrasher feeding young by Emily Schneider/Macaulay Library

ATLASER SPOTLIGHT

Michael Bowen (Bethesda, Montgomery County) is a long-time birder in the DC area and has birded many different parts of the world.



Where is your favorite place to atlas?

Glenstone Museum property near Potomac in Montgomery County. Because of Covid restrictions on visitors and because of the generosity of the managing staff there, I have been one of the very few people able to visit the property for birding on a regular basis.

What is the best thing about atlasing?

The best thing about atlasing is the knowledge generated by the combined efforts of so many volunteers. On a personal level, atlasing greatly expands the individual atlaser's knowledge and understanding of bird biology.

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

I had two blocks in the 2002–2006 atlas. The blocks covered parts of Montgomery and Frederick counties, together with a portion of Virginia.

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

These days, a smart phone is essential. I have several field guides on my iPhone, and I particularly like the Sibley.

What made you interested in birds?

I was invited to join a local group in Waynesboro, Virginia, in the 1960s, at a time in the spring when the warblers were moving north. Not only had I never seen these little birds before, but I never knew they existed! I was forever hooked.

What's our biggest conservation issue?

Loss of and degradation of habitat due to human activities, exacerbated by climate change, are the huge issues before conservationists today. Birders can help materially by 1) encouraging their political representatives to be environmentally aware and responsible and 2) by financial support of organizations like the American Bird Conservancy, whose principal activities are aimed at land acquisition and protection of threatened bird species.

Who would you go atlasing with?

I'd love to go atlasing with Scott Weidensaul. I've heard him speak and read many of his books. A day in the field with him would be a massive learning experience.



What bird do you particularly like?

I am particularly fond of the Blue Grosbeak. That's a species that didn't used to be common in Montgomery County, but whose breeding areas have moved steadily north in recent years. I love hearing the scratchy song of the male and photographing both males and females.



Blue Grosbeak by [Michael Bowen/Macaulay Library](#)

TIPS AND TRICKS

Finding vulture nests

Vultures are quiet, unobtrusive birds. Their nest sites can be challenging to find, yet finding their nests is one of the only ways to Confirm them (and getting vultures to Probable status is almost as difficult). Vultures prefer sheltered, undisturbed locations to nest in. Hollow logs, brush piles, or caves are good natural sites. Unused buildings—including hunting blinds—make fine anthropogenic sites. Enclosed deer stands are common across Maryland and these can be ideal nest sites for vultures, as long as the vultures can access the interior.

Worcester County Coordinator Dave

Wilson has had excellent success locating vulture nests in BBA3. So far, he has mostly found Black Vultures in Worcester; his impression is that Black Vultures have supplanted Turkey Vultures in many of the sites where he had Turkey Vultures in BBA2. I reached out to Dave to ask him about his techniques, and if there was anything in particular he did to find vulture nests.

Dave's main atlasing strategy involves long walks across public or sometimes private land. While walking, he keeps an eye open for deer stands and abandoned buildings. He says if there is an

opening large enough for a vulture to get inside, then the structure will probably contain a nest. To check deer stands (or any other abandoned building) for vultures, walk over to the stand and pound on its legs. Any adults inside will flush out and you can use code ON (occupied nest). Dave says that May is the best time of year for this, but in June and July you'll often be able to see "puffballs" perched in the openings (code NY, nest with young). Remember to keep disturbance to a minimum; vultures will reuse a nest site if it is suitable.

If are out earlier in the season in February or March and you see a pair of vultures perched near a likely-looking site, then code P (pair) should be used. Prior to nesting, both species perch near a potential site for about two weeks. This behavior appears to be the vultures determining whether the site is a suitable nest site or not. And, if you have access to the site, you can check later in the year if the vultures committed and nested there.

Unlike many other species, code H (habitat) is a difficult code to use for vultures because they travel so far in search of food. Code H should only be used when you suspect a vulture is in a location it could be nesting in. It should not be used anytime you see a vulture flying overhead or when vultures are at their roost sites.

Author: Gabriel Foley



Black Vulture nest in a deer blind by [Dave Wilson/Macaulay Library](#)

FROM THE FIELD

Atlasing and Ruby-throated Hummingbirds—by John Harris

During the week of August 30, 2021, a few birders and naturalists gathered in an Ellicott City, Howard County neighborhood hoping to observe a female Ruby-throated Hummingbird feeding a tiny hummingbird still in the nest. Bonnie Ott had found the nest earlier in a small deciduous tree in an area surrounded by homes. When first found, the nest held three tiny birds, with the adult female actively coming and going to feed the young. We were all watching the last-remaining bird in the occupied nest, cameras and binoculars at the ready, hoping to see the adult feeding the nestling. We eventually did see that. However, before that, someone noticed a recently-fledged hummingbird perching near the nest and practicing flying. The tiny, short-billed fledgling seemed barely able to go three feet before returning to its perch! At some point the question was posed: will the adult feed the bird that was *not* in the nest? The answer was, yes. We saw her feed the fledgling several times and then eventually feed the one still in the nest.

I'll try to track their activity in hopes of catching one feeding another. Happy atlasing!

Author: John Harris, Columbia, Maryland

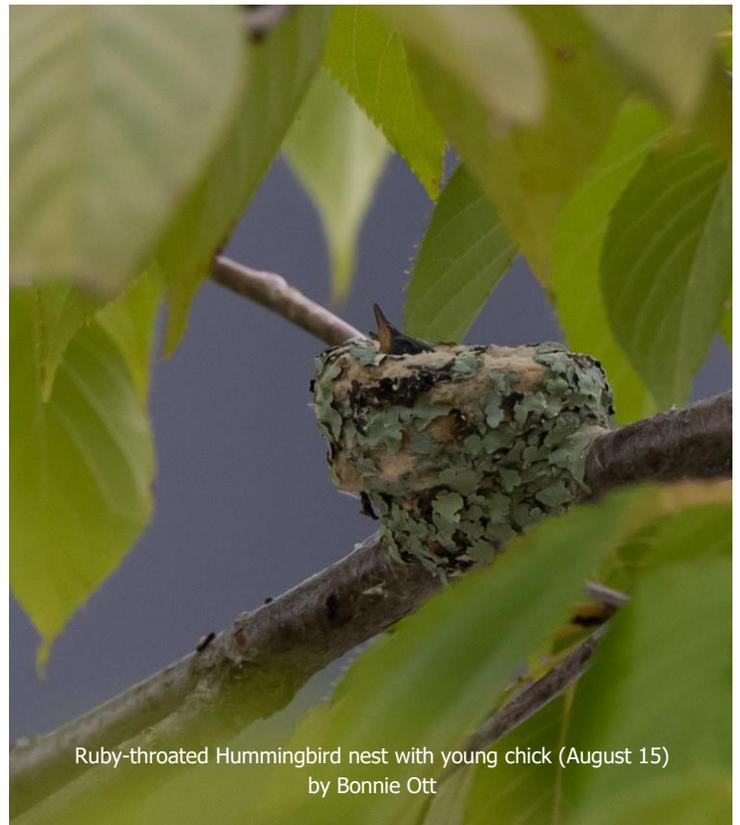


Female Ruby-throated Hummingbird feeding a young fledgling (August 30) by Kristin Trouton



Site of the hummingbird nest by Bonnie Ott

My atlas insight was that, if one ever sees two or more hummingbirds interacting, it is worth trying to track them, as one may be a dependent fledgling still being fed by an adult. This is useful to know, since, in my experience, hummingbird nests are almost never seen. I don't often see two or more hummingbirds interacting in the field, but I do see two or more almost daily around my house during the summer, usually defending the feeder. From now on,



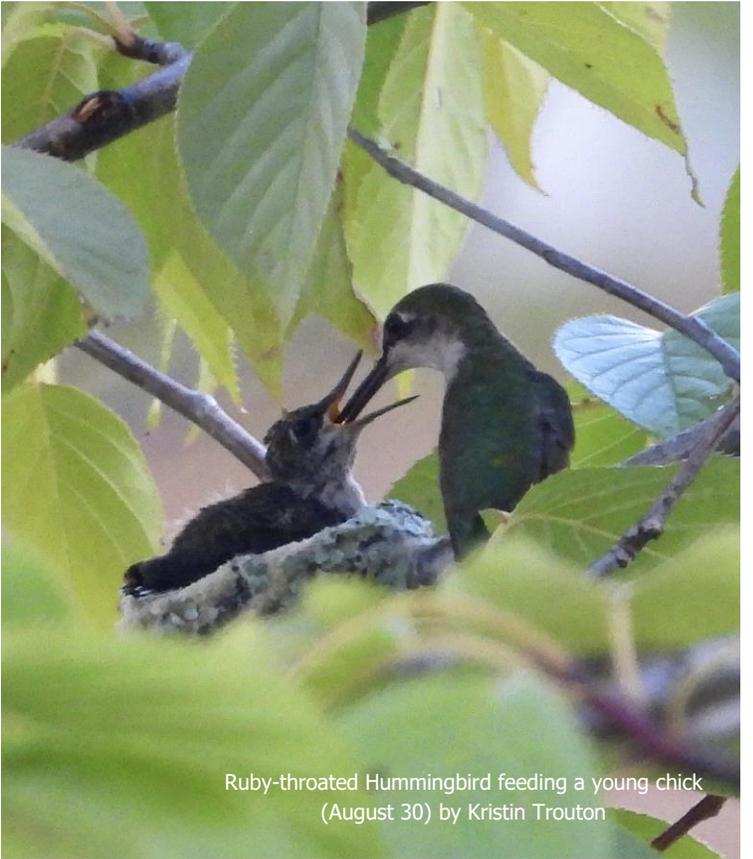
Ruby-throated Hummingbird nest with young chick (August 15) by Bonnie Ott



Ruby-throated Hummingbird nest with young chick (August 15)
by Bonnie Ott



Ruby-throated Hummingbird feeding a young fledgling
(August 30) by Bonnie Ott



Ruby-throated Hummingbird feeding a young chick
(August 30) by Kristin Trouton



Ruby-throated Hummingbird chicks (August 27)
by Bonnie Ott



Ruby-throated Hummingbird chick (August 30)
by Bonnie Ott

OUT OF THE ARCHIVE

Owls? You want ME to find owls?!? (Part I)

Ricciardi, S. 2002. Owls? - You want ME to find Owls?!? (Part I). *The Maryland Yellowthroat*. 22(5):1,6-8.

When I decided to write this article, it was mostly for selfish reasons. How was I going to find owls in my own blocks? Worse, what would I say when my fellow Anne Arundel County atlasers asked me, their county coordinator, how to atlas for owls? How would I be able to answer in a way to make me look like I knew what I was talking about? Beyond that, these largely nocturnal birds were inadequately surveyed during the first atlas, and most of us could probably use some guidance in finding owls. So I set about reviewing the literature and asking successful owlers for their suggestions. What follows, I hope, will provide you some good techniques and enthusiasm for finding owls.

A Cautionary Note

Be sure to keep the owls' well-being your top priority. Ticking off an owl for the Atlas while harassing it enough to cause breeding failure must not be considered an option. Do not visit a suspected nesting site too frequently. Let a few weeks go by before returning. Keep a safe distance. If

you're using tapes, do so cautiously and judiciously. Do not repeatedly play tapes in the nesting area. Finding the actual nest location is not necessary. Besides, you will have another opportunity for Confirming breeding with the appearance of fledged young later on. If, after a reasonable amount of effort, you've achieved Probable status for one species in one location, quit for that species in that block. Also, keep nest sites to yourself. Well-meaning friends may not be as careful as you in safeguarding the owl.

General Tips

What time of night is best? Before dawn and at dusk are likely to be the optimal times to search. Pete Jeschke, in an article written for the first atlas, said that his most successful owling came between 3 a.m. and dawn on a moonlit night, when owls tend to be more vocal, and noisy traffic is at a minimum. At dusk, many owls will come to forest edges to begin hunting. Look for "headless lumps" on bare tree branches. For listening purposes, still, calm, moonlit nights are best, but cloudy or foggy conditions can work too. Windy or rainy nights are rarely productive. Be sure to get out of your vehicle to maximize your ability to hear calls. If you're playing tapes or doing your own imitations, start with a continuous series of calls for several minutes; then be silent for a few minutes. If necessary, repeat the calls. Although many owls will respond within the first few minutes, others will wait until you've just about given up.

Remember, however, not to overdo the tape playing and once you get a response, quit. Some sources say to start with the small owls first on the premise that calling up, say, a Barred Owl first will silence nearby prey species such as an Eastern Screech-Owl. Others counter with the argument that calling up the screech-owl first reveals its location to predator owls, which is obviously not preferable



Great Horned Owl by Max Wilson/Macaulay Library

either. However, Barred Owls will often respond to screech-owl tapes (and vice-versa). I would say that whatever you do, try to minimize stress on the owls. Also, while playing tapes, be sure to keep your eyes peeled for silent fliers. Owls will often fly in noiselessly and perch nearby. A Barred Owl did just that to me on last season's Christmas Count. But, owls will fly directly away from you too, so consider taking along a partner so that one of you watches while the other walks ahead. Use a flashlight to investigate movement in nearby branches or rustling leaves. Finally, inquire of utility and tower maintenance workers, lumbermen, bridge tenders, farmers with out-buildings, church custodians and others who may know of nests (or unfortunately disposed of them).

Great Horned Owl

This owl will nest in a wide variety of habitats, from open country to forests to wood lots. It prefers medium to extensive stands of upland forest with fields and edges nearby for hunting. Typically it will appropriate old nests of



other large birds such as hawks, crows, ravens, and herons, and will even occupy old squirrel nests. Great Horned Owls begin nesting in December, so you can start listening for their calls and looking for possible nest sites then. This is a good thing, because the leaves have fallen, letting you search for nest sites in daylight! This worked on Hart-Miller Island this past winter when at a scope distance, a large, former Fish Crow nest could be seen high in a tree. Gene Scarpulla later found a pair of Great Horned Owls using it. The earliest egg date in Maryland is in early January, but eggs also have been found as late as May. Adult Great Horned Owls tend to be vocal during the breeding season and beyond, and you may hear the young giving loud raspy calls when begging for food. They seem to be less responsive to taped calls and more likely to vocalize spontaneously, a little more frequently at dawn than at dusk. Their beginning safe date of December 15 is the earliest for any of our breeding owls, and their ending safe date is August 31.

Eastern Screech-Owl

Screech-Owls may very well breed in almost every block in Maryland and the District of Columbia. They are cavity nesters and use many habitats, including forest perimeters, thick second-growth woods, wood lots, parks, groves and orchards, in ravines, near lakes, rivers, and bay shore, and even in suburban neighborhoods and urban areas. How many of us know of an active nest box in someone's residential backyard? Old woodpecker holes, natural cavities, and artificial structures such as American Kestrel and Wood Duck boxes, are also used. However, finding a nest hole in the wild is not easy. You would do better by staking out screech-owls during Christmas Bird and winter



Eastern Screech-Owl by [Sam Miller/Macaulay Library](#)

Rick Blom observes that Barreds like the interiors of big woods with trees over 100 years old. This type of forest provides flight lines through the trees for “perch-and-drop” hunting, and knotholes for nesting. Barred Owls will use natural hollows in trees or broken tree stubs as well as old hawk, crow, or squirrel nests, and occasionally nest boxes. Their safe dates run from January 15 through August 31 and they lay eggs in Maryland generally from March through much of May. Try searching for them just prior to and again after the height of the breeding season; that is, late winter through early April, and then the middle of June up to September when the young have fledged. The Barred Owl is the one most likely to respond in the daytime to tape-recorded calls or your own vocalizations. I’ve been told by others that your hooting may even do better than

counts, which are well in advance of their beginning safe date of April 1. They are also more responsive to tape-recorded calls than as compared to the peak breeding period from mid-April through June. Moreover, early searches mean less stress on them during nesting. In July and August, your chances of finding a screech-owl increase when fledglings are out and about. At this time they may even respond to calls during the day. Their ending safe date is August 15. If this is too much for you, try putting up a screech-owl nest box in your block!

Barred Owl

Look for this owl in wooded settings with mature trees, especially wooded swamps, and river and stream bottoms.



Great Horned Owl by [Don Carbaugh/Macaulay Library](#)

tapes, so practice up!

Ed. note: Watch for Part II in the next issue of MD Yellowthroat, accompanied by an extensive list of references for further study. Until then, here is a basic reference for finding owls in the field:

Sutton, P. and C. Sutton. 1994. How to Spot an Owl. Houghton Mifflin, Boston, Massachusetts.

Author: Sue Ricciardi, BBA2 Anne Arundel County Coordinator



Barred Owl by [John Bowers/Macaulay Library](#)