

WHAT'S HATCHING?

Official Newsletter of the Maryland & DC Breeding Bird Atlas 3

ISSUE NO 22 | FEB 2022



Carolina Chickadee by Brett Matlock/Macaulay Library

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BIRD OF THE MONTH

Carolina Chickadees are found in nearly every block east of Allegany County, but hybrids pose a thorny challenge.

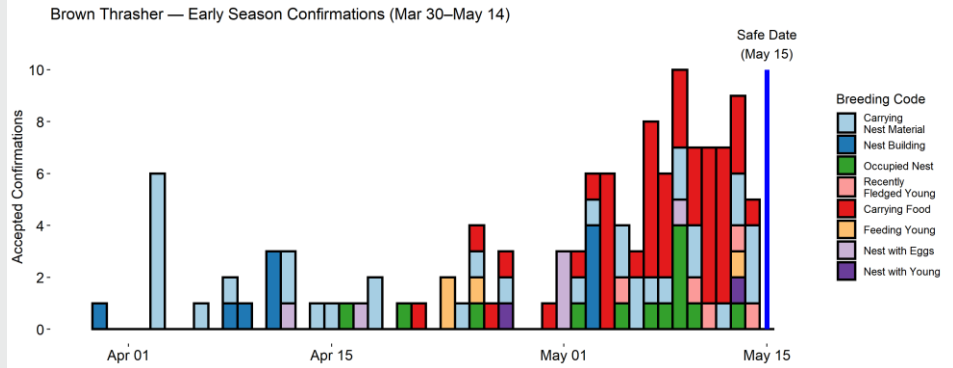
TIPS AND TRICKS

Ready for a block party? Paul Kreiss provides a detailed strategy for thorough 'blockbusting'.

OUT OF THE ARCHIVE

Keeping with our block party theme, you'll find advice from Walter Ellison, BBA2 Atlas Coordinator, on blockbusting.

Safe dates do not represent the nesting season of a species. Instead, they indicate when a species has stopped migrating through Maryland and DC and an individual can be assumed to be nesting here. Brown Thrashers are a good example of this, as the adjacent figure shows. For decades, the early egg date for thrashers was April 18, until Scott Clark found a nest with eggs on [April 12, 2020](#), in St. Mary's County. If you observe breeding behavior prior to a species' safe date, feel free to document it with a breeding code. Just remember that the further outside their breeding season you are, the more definitive the behavior must be. Use the eBird comment box liberally!



This figure shows the number of accepted Confirmed codes for Brown Thrashers reported to the MD-DC BBA3 eBird portal before May 15 in 2020 and 2021. The height of the bar shows how many codes were reported on each date, and the bar's color corresponds to the breeding code in the legend. The blue line on the right represents the safe date start for Brown Thrashers.

"We were lucky in having Bob Ringler on most trips; he could by himself do two quadrants excellently."

--Paul Kreiss



Magnolia Warbler by [Brad Heath/Macaulay Library](#)

UPCOMING EVENTS

March 22–26, 2022

Naturally Latinos Conference

Tuesday–Thursday 11:00 AM–3:00 PM | Friday 10:00 AM–5:00 PM

The Audubon Naturalist Society and partners will host the [4th Naturally Latinos Conference](#) in a hybrid format with a series of virtual panels and speakers leading up to an in-person networking and advocacy day at the Silver Spring Civic Center on March 25th.

The 2022 theme is "Otro mundo es posible / Another world is possible." This theme highlights the importance, beauty, and urgency of co-creating powerful new visions for the future as we enter a form of rebirth into a post-Covid, climate-urgent world.

From the Coordinator

Bob Ringler's impact on the Atlas is hard to overstate.

It's with a heavy heart that I write this month's column. As you've likely heard by now, Bob Ringler suffered a stroke shortly after Christmas, and sadly passed away earlier this month.

As a new transplant to Maryland, I didn't know Bob well. But, it would have been impossible to try and do something like coordinate an atlas here without his involvement. His contributions touched every part of the project. A retired analytical chemist, Bob told me his hobbies were the three 'B's: birding, butterflying, and botanizing. Bob was a founder of the first atlas in the 80s, and heavily involved with guiding the direction of both previous atlases. He spent hundreds of hours in the field collecting data; I've included a map showing Bob's prodigious atlasing during BBA2. It's clear he contributed data—often a lot of data—regardless

of where he was (a task that required more deliberate intention when paper maps and forms were in use), but it is his effort in his home county of Carroll that is particularly astonishing. One of 54 observers there, Bob submitted nearly 40% of the county's observations. Bob also wrote the "[Yellowbook](#)" with Jim Stasz and Marshall Iliff; its egg dates and county breeding records have been an invaluable resource. For BBA3, he was on the Steering Committee, helped curate the safe dates, was an Atlas eBird reviewer, stepped in to coordinate Somerset County, and was an authoritative source for, well, just about any bird-related question.

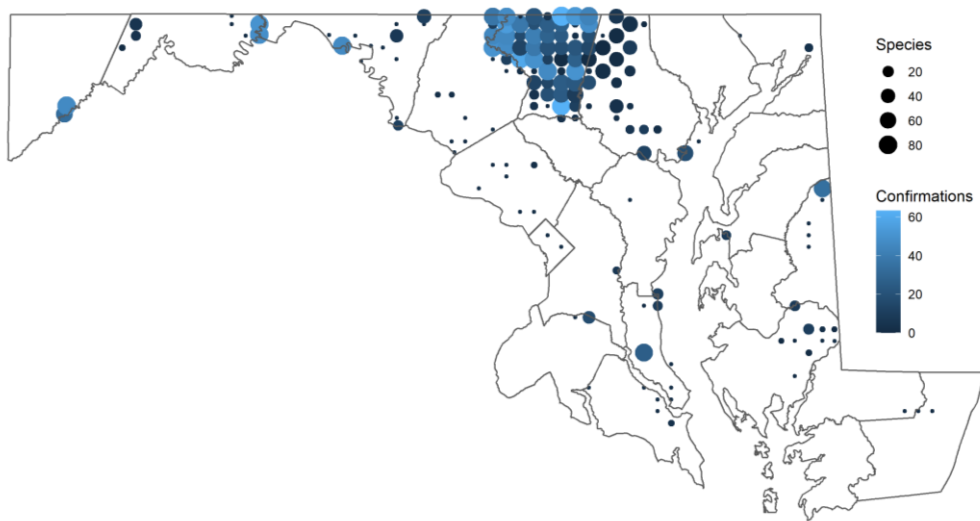
He was thorough and direct in his replies, rarely verbose, but always kind. Most recently, I had asked Bob to look over distribution maps I'd made using a reviewed Atlas dataset;

Bob replied that he was "excited to be working on it". A few weeks later, in late January, he called to apologize for not getting back to me and explained that he had been in the hospital. I offered to print the maps out so we could look at them together in person, and we agreed to meet in two weeks.

I was fortunate to get this last opportunity to visit Bob. We spent a couple of hours together looking at the maps, with Bob explaining how we could collect more accurate data on Cerulean Warblers, what additional information we needed for Ring-necked Duck records, and why fewer blocks are reporting Yellow Warblers.

Bob would pass away just a few days after I saw him. As I look through the scribbled and highlighted maps, I see a beautiful, lifelong devotion to our birds and our community. This love is illustrated with an astute perception of seasonal patterns, of haunts and habits, punctuated by an exhaustive knowledge of dates and counts, of arrivals and departures, of songs and calls, and underlined by his role as a mentor, friend, and leader. Bob's impact on us wasn't just because he had exceptional knowledge or a detailed dataset. Rather, his knowledge and his data were avenues that allowed him to share, contribute, and guide; evidence of how Bob did what we should all do—leave our community better than we found it.

--Gabriel



This map depicts Bob Ringler's atlasing contributions during BBA2 (2002–2006)—nearly 5,000 breeding codes in 159 blocks. Each point is located at the center of a block where Bob atlased. The larger a point, the more species reported from there. The brighter the blue, the more Confirmations reported.

bird of the month:

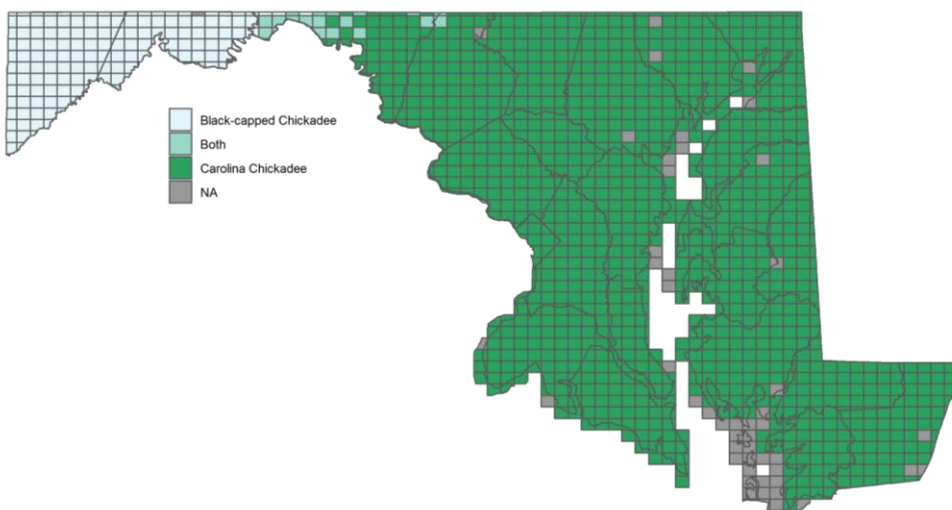
CAROLINA CHICKADEE

Carolina Chickadee by [Nathan Tea/Macaulay Library](#)

Chickadees are abundant and familiar birds in Maryland and DC, found almost anywhere there is forest. Both Black-capped and Carolina Chickadees occur in Maryland, but despite the state's relatively small geographic area, each species' distribution is sharply demarcated and there is little overlap between the two species. Carolina Chickadee is essentially the only chickadee in Maryland east of the Allegany and Washington county border. West of that line, the Carolina's range transitions to Black-capped. In the *Second Atlas of Breeding Birds in Pennsylvania*, Bob Curry says that, "Black-capped Chickadee densities generally increase with elevation, in part because the species is absent from the low-elevation regions occupied by Carolina Chickadees, but also because forest cover tends to increase with elevation." In Maryland

and DC's first atlas, Black-capped Chickadees were reported on the Catoctin and South Mountain ridges, but Carolina Chickadees have been steadily invading the Black-capped Chickadee's range. By the second atlas, Black-capped was found in ten fewer blocks and it is now unclear if Black-capped Chickadee persists east of Allegany County.

Separating Carolina and Black-capped Chickadees from each other is not simple, but fortunately the correct identification can be safely assumed by location in almost every case. In the narrow contact zone, not only should each chickadee be carefully examined, but the potential for hybrids—which may be quite common in the contact zone—must be considered. One of the best resources for separating these two



Chickadee breeding distribution map from the Maryland & DC Breeding Bird Atlas 2. Dark green fill indicates a Carolina Chickadee breeding observation in that block, medium green fill indicates both chickadees, light green fill represents Black-capped Chickadee, and dark gray indicates no chickadees.

IDENTIFYING CHICKADEES

Chick-ID-ee tips.

Apologies for the terrible, horrible pun, but sometimes I just can't help myself. Separating Black-capped and Carolina Chickadees in Maryland's narrow contact zone is challenging. If you're going to be in eastern Allegany or western Washington County, make sure you are familiar with multiple field marks. The six questions below will help guide your identification, and are based on David Sibley's excellent [website post](#) about this topic; be sure to read his full post.

When identifying a chickadee, ask yourself:

- 1) What color is the side of the neck?
- 2) Is there contrast between the tertials and the back?
- 3) How fast are the *dee* call notes?
- 4) What color are the greater coverts?
- 5) What is the overall color impression?
- 6) What is the overall size and shape?

species is on [David Sibley's website](#) (however, note that this article is focused on fall and winter birds, and not the darker, more worn appearance of summer birds). Many chickadees in the contact zone will not be identifiable to species. Hybrids complicate matters not just because their appearance is less predictable, but also because they may sing Carolina or Black-capped songs.

Any chickadee in the contact zone that is not confidently identifiable to species, including those only heard singing, should be recorded as Carolina/Black-capped Chickadee. As Matthew Shumar says in the *Second Atlas of Breeding Birds in Ohio*, "Increased overlap between Black-capped and Carolina Chickadees...highlights the need for observers to identify chickadees carefully within overlap zones."

Chickadees form socially monogamous pairs while still part of their winter flock. Males begin singing a [simple, though somewhat variable, whistled song](#) in late winter; Black-capped Chickadees sing a [two-note fee-bee song](#). About three weeks before laying their eggs, the pair begin excavating cavities with entrances of 1.6–1.8 inches, often near a forest clearing, removing pieces of soft, rotted wood with their bills. Black-capped Chickadees prefer a lining of wood shavings in the cavity (important if you want to put up a [birdbox](#) for them), but Carolinas don't seem to care. On average, the nest site is only nine feet high and 4–5 inches in diameter. Once the selected cavity's interior has been excavated to about 2.6 inches wide and 7.0 inches deep, the female begins bringing



Black-capped Chickadee by George Jett



Carolina Chickadee by George Jett

nest materials. She layers the bottom with moss, then lines the cup with plant fiber, hair, or fur. The final product is distinct and recognizable as a chickadee nest.

The female lays half a dozen white eggs with reddish-brown blotches, then begins incubation. The male will bring her food throughout incubation, but even so she takes a five-minute break every fifteen minutes or so. The eggs hatch after thirteen days and the female continues brooding while the male brings each voracious youngster food once an hour. By seventeen days, just before the chicks leave the nest, both parents are working together to bring each nestling food once every ten minutes (although larger broods do have a lower per-nestling feeding rate). When bringing a meal, the parent normally perches within fifteen feet of the nest, then flies to the cavity and exchanges the food for a fecal sac.

The chicks fledge at 16–19 days, but don't always leave the nest all at once. They remain with their parents for another 2–3 weeks before gaining independence and dispersing. To identify fledglings, look for short wing and tail feathers, a fleshy, yellow gape, or begging behavior.



Carolina Chickadee by Andy Wilson/Macaulay Library

Chickadees will use cavities as roost sites throughout the year, so encounters with chickadees entering or exiting a cavity at dawn or dusk outside the breeding season should not receive a breeding code (the safe dates can be used as a guide for each chickadee's breeding season). Likewise, chickadees at a feeder may interact aggressively or carry food away during the non-breeding season; neither of these behaviors should receive a breeding code. Code A (agitated) should not be used outside of the breeding season. By the time spring rolls around, winter flocks have broken up and chickadees together are generally pairs (code P). Both fledglings and adult females will quiver their wings to beg for food and/or to solicit a copulation (in the case of females). Females should receive code C (copulation or courtship display). If you see adults feeding their fledglings you can use code FY (feeding young); otherwise use code FL (recently fledged young). Pairs investigating potential cavity sites in March



Carolina Chickadee nest by Ken Clark/Macaulay Library

(or April for Black-capped) can be coded with code N (visiting probable nest site) and excavation should receive code NB (nest building).

Author: Gabriel Foley



Carolina Chickadee eggs by George Jett

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Carolina Chickadee with nest material by Peter Osenton/Macaulay Library

ATLASER SPOTLIGHT

Joseph Hadaway, from Aberdeen, Harford County, is a contributor to the Maryland & DC Breeding Bird Atlas 3.



What made you interested in birds?

Kevin Dodge and Aaron Graham introduced me to the importance of birding and continue to mentor me today.

What bird do you particularly like?

Nothing is more exciting than doing rail surveys for Virginia Rail and Sora in the marsh.

What's our biggest conservation issue?

A lack of explanation regarding the importance of how conservation will affect not only the target species, but the person you are educating.

What is the best thing about atlasing?

Going to a remote area with little to no data, and filling in those blocks!

Where is your favorite place to atlas?

Deal Island WMA in Somerset County.

What bird best reflects your personality?

Winter wren, a lot of sass but they are pretty wicked.

Have you been involved with other atlases?

No, this is my first BBA.



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

I'd take a spotting scope.

Who would you go atlasing with?

Aaron Graham.



Blue-headed Vireo by Joseph Hadaway/Macaulay Library

TIPS AND TRICKS

Blockbusting—by Paul Kreiss

Editor's note: In 2009, following the completion of the last atlas, Paul wrote this blockbusting advice. Blockbusting, or a 'block party', is intensive, targeted atlasing, usually by a group, of an underatlased block. Paul graciously allowed me to reprint his advice in the newsletter, and add any relevant revisions. I have modified a few things to avoid confusion (like references to territoriality, which functioned like code S7 does now), but have tried to keep his excellent advice as unaltered as possible. Enjoy!

In the Maryland & DC Breeding Bird Atlas 2, I started out as an atlaser, eventually adopting six blocks. In the fourth year of the atlas, I became a County Coordinator for Baltimore, joining Debbie Terry and Elliot Kirschbaum. Elliot had charge of data entry and analysis; Debbie, the

atlasers. My responsibility was in setting up and running blockbusting. So, based on my atlasing experience, I have advice for atlasers, particularly for blockbusting.

Start blockbusting in the second year; we waited until the fourth year and that was late. If the blockbusters consist of only one team, you can do 4–5 blocks a year if there are no data for the blocks, and 9–11 per year if there are a fair amount of data already collected for the blocks.

Trip Frequency

Ideally, you should do ten trips per block (and I don't want to hear at any point any comments about how unreasonable any of this advice is; I am assuming conditions are ideal, and I know they won't be). If the block has little data, it will generally not be possible to do more than one

block on a trip. I think the only time we did more than one block was with the Sparrows Point blocks, where two of the three blocks were either water or the Sparrows Point steel works. If the block has a lot of data and you are really only looking for a few species, it might be possible to do more than one block in a trip.

Trip 1

One person in January or February, [night owl calling](#). Plan for a 1–6 hour trip to cover all wooded areas in the block. It is possible to cover more than one block in a night, particularly if you get owl responses early on in the first block; I have done as many as three blocks in one night. If you get an owl responding to playback, you can use code T (territorial). On the other hand, if hear a single owl calling without using playback, you should return for a second trip a week later to get code S7 (singing for a week or more).

Trip 2

One person in January or February at least one week after trip 1, night owl calling again. This will be a 1–4 hour trip to pick up any previous owls that were reported as code S and thus get code S7. Or, if no owls were heard on trip 1, a second try for owls. Not required of course if owls are Confirmed or Probable, or if the habitat is such that there aren't likely to be owls. Again, it may be possible to do more than one block, particularly if you are only checking a spot to see if an owl can be called there again.



Barred Owl fledgling by Bob Schmidt/Macaulay Library

Trip 3

One person during the day in January or March. This will be a four hour trip to find nests before the leaves come out; this is [looking particularly for large stick nests of raptors](#) and herons, and is likely to be unproductive. You should also [watch for pairs of vultures near potential nest sites](#); these will be worth following up on later in the year.

Trip 4

This will be a group trip in mid-May. Head out in the morning, starting a bit after daybreak—anywhere from 6:30 to 7:30, and lasting until 10:30 or 11:30. By that time usually everyone is hot, hungry, and tired. This first group trip is to pick up species with early safe dates, and to pick up birds that are singing and setting up territories. Code S7 is okay if one of the dates for singing is outside the safe dates, as long as the other one is within safe dates (and as long as the species can be reasonably considered to be breeding in the block). Atlasers should record where birds are singing on a map or in the species comments box on the checklist. Record the same information for less common species or species not within safe dates, so later trips can try to upgrade them from Possible to Confirmed.



Prairie Warbler by [Kojo Baidoo/Macaulay Library](#)

Trip 5

One person a week later than trip 4. This will be a 1–4 hour trip. Go back to the locations where birds were reported to be singing, listen for them again, and upgrade to code S7. It may be possible to do more than one block on this trip.

Trip 6

This is another group morning trip, this time in June. Pick up species with later safe dates and begin to pick up fledglings. Again, for species that are singing, record where they are for use during trip 7.

Trip 7

One person, one week later than trip 6, a 1–4 hour trip. Go back to the locations where birds were reported to be singing, listen for them again, and upgrade to code S7. Again, it may be possible to do more than one block.

Trip 8

This will be a morning group trip in July or early August. Pick up late nesting species and fledglings.

Trip 9

One person, one week later than trip 8, for 1–4 hours. Go back to the locations where birds were reported to be singing, listen for them again, upgrade to code S7. This is also about the time for goldfinch young to be calling, which gives Confirmation for goldfinch (code FL; recently fledged young). It may be possible to do more than one block.

Trip 10

One person, if goldfinch weren't Confirmed on trip 9. Do a trip listening for goldfinch begging calls. It may be possible to do more than one block; I did five blocks once in one long trip.

In addition to these trips, if a mini-route was run get information from the mini-route results where birds were heard and do a follow up one week later for code S7.

These trips will require some coordination, so it is best to have a group leader in charge of organizing things. It's also helpful to keep the County Coordinator informed of your plans and progress so that efforts are not unintentionally doubled. If, after looking at the results of this season, with these trips there aren't enough species or the percentage of Confirmations are

too low, then repeat the following year or years. And if you can't do all these trips, then you can pretty much assume that another year's or years' efforts will be required.

We usually did two group trips in the second atlas, with one or two follow-up trips by me or another blockbuster, mostly to get territoriality (now code S7) and upgrade Possible to Probable. I have data for two blocks to show how this worked:

New Freedom CW

Before the first blockbusting trip we did there were 19 species total: ten Possible, six Probable and three Confirmed. The first group trip raised this to 61 species (78% of the final number for this block): 31 Possible, 12 Probable, 18 Confirmed. The second group trip raised this to 77 species (99% of the final number for this block): 15 Possible (19%), 28 Probable (38%) and 33 Confirmed (43%). The final results were 78 species, 12 Possible, 30 Probable and 35 Confirmed. Thus, the second group trip really got about everything the atlas ended up with and met the criteria for percentage of Probable (50%) and Confirmed (25%). However, note that for Baltimore County as a whole, the median Confirmed percentage was 50%, so this was a bit low. Blocks that were done much more intensively by atlasers had the percentage Confirmed up around 65–70% (these percentages do not count observed species).



American Redstart by Kojo Baidoo/Macaulay Library



House Wren by Simon Best/Macaulay Library

Lineboro NE

Before the first blockbusting trip here, there were just two species reported and both were Observed. The first group trip raised this to 64 species (86% of the final number for this block): 32 Possible, 10 Probable and 22 Confirmed. The second group trip raised this to 73 species: 8 Possible (11%), 30 Probable (41%) and 35 (48%) Confirmed. The only change in the final results were six Probable species that were upgraded to Confirmed so, again, the second trip got about everything the block ended up with.

Trip Scheduling and Preparation

One group blockbusting trip per week is a good goal for a county to aim for. These trips should start in late May and continue through late July and early August. Picking the same day every week makes trips predictable and allows people to set it aside. I chose a weekday, since I didn't want to tie up weekends; blockbusters also may not be available on weekends. A weekday trip had the advantage of no one out mowing their lawns drowning out bird calls, but the disadvantage of heavy commuter traffic and not being able to find people to ask them about their bird feeders or bird houses. Anyone volunteering to blockbust should know that they are not required to be involved every week and that joining even one trip is useful. There are never too many blockbusters. We either met at a park-and-ride or church parking lot and then carpoled to the block, or met within the block and then divided up into teams. Meeting within a block is better since blockbusters can start recording birds as they wait for people to arrive. I wrote my list of potential blockbusters twice a



Cedar Waxwing by Kim Tomko/Macaulay Library

week; once to give details of the next blockbusting trip—where to meet, which block, what time, *etc.*—and once to give everyone the results of that trip—species seen, numbers of Observed, Possible, Probable, and Confirmed, and what especially interesting things happened. I also asked people to let me know if they were planning to come.

In BBA2, we used paper maps and lists, so the organizer needed to have four block maps with boundaries marked and four copies of the current atlas results for that block so that blockbusters can see what species need to be found. I made copies of both a USGS map and an ADC map (the USGS maps weren't up to date enough and didn't have the names of the roads); I enlarged both somewhat for easy reading. Access to a free Xerox machine is thus useful. I did not pass maps and results out in advance; that might have been useful so people could prepare, although the logistics of getting them to prospective blockbusters would have been laborious. As an organizer, it is useful to point out to blockbusters where the good habitats are on their quadrant (if you know, and you probably should).

Techniques

The ideal blockbusting team consists of at least eight people, at least four of which are experienced atlasers and thus know the rules. Baltimore County's blocks were divided into quarters; the eight people divide into four teams, each team having at least one experienced atlaser and getting one of the quadrants.

Two people see and hear more birds than one, and younger folks sometimes have better hearing than older folks. If there weren't enough people, we sometimes put one person on a quadrant, and sometimes a team had to do two quadrants. We had as few as three people. We were lucky in having Bob Ringler on most trips; he could by himself do two quadrants excellently.

If the block is rural, the team should drive along all the roads of the quadrant. At likely spots, park the car and walk. Likely spots include along wooded areas, streams, brushy fields, schools, golf courses, transmission lines, *etc.* Stop at any house that has bird feeders or bird houses and ask the inhabitants what they have seen (and if the inhabitants show interest, recruit them to supply data). Drive to every barn and ask the owner about Barn Owls (and pigeons, starlings, Barn Swallows, and House Sparrows if these species are still needed). Walk through parks and cemeteries. It is sometimes possible to get onto private property, but during weekdays it may be hard to find the owners. Generally, it takes the whole morning to do a quadrant, but if there are extensive public areas complete coverage will not be possible. The follow-up trip may be the time to complete coverage. Blockbusters need to focus on species that are needed and skip any that are already Confirmed. For urban blocks, it is not only impossible to drive every street, but it is also unproductive. Instead, do parks, cemeteries, any water, schools, woods, fields, wooded residential areas, *etc.*



Hooded Merganser by Anthony VanSchoor/Macaulay Library

Training Tips

If you are helping a new volunteer learn how to atlas, it's useful to do a training trip with them. This could be as a group or individually, and could be to their own block or to an unassigned block. The new atlaser should first learn what areas are likely to be good habitats for birds, such as streams, lakes, and bays, wooded cemeteries, wooded parks, farm buildings, wooded residential areas, *etc.*

Next, they should learn that atlasing is slow, unlike birding trips. When you see a bird, you stop and watch to see if it picks up nesting material, whether it has a mate, whether it is carrying food to young, or whether it is agitated because there is a nest or young nearby. You may have to follow it to discover that this Yellow-crowned Night-Heron is flying to a colony.



Eastern Meadowlark by Keith Eric Costley/Macaulay Library

And finally, they should learn about atlasing tricks, such as if you have transmission lines running through the block, kingbirds like the transmission towers. Red-winged Blackbirds can be found around the run-off ponds near shopping centers, new commercial buildings, and new tract housing. Every time you hear a bird singing, go back there a week later, because that is one of the easiest ways of getting a bird to Probable status. Cardinal young have a distinctive call. There is no excuse for not having goldfinch Confirmed if they occur in your block because the young have a strong begging call and all you have to do is hear it, and the young hatch out late, in late July and August, when nothing else is going on.



Least Tern by Simon Best/Macaulay Library

Talk to everyone who has a feeder or birdhouse. If you don't have bluebirds, put up bluebird boxes yourself in cemeteries, golf courses, *etc.* (well, you will have to get permission first). Try to recruit every birder in your block to submit atlasing data. The first year, go over every street in your block so you know every type of habitat and where the good habitats are. When you see an unusual species, spend a lot of time watching it, and go back again and again until you can get it Confirmed. Make multiple trips, every week if you can, to the good habitats. Do evening and night trips to find nightjars and owls. Expect that it is going to take three years to get good results.

In my home block, Baltimore West CW, by the end of the first year I had 73 species (85% of the final number, which included six Observed species) and 37 Confirmations (43% of the total number of species). At the end of the second year, I had 77 species (90% of the final number) and 42 Confirmed (49% of the total number of species). By the end of the third year, I had 82 species (97% of the final number) and 55 Confirmed (64% confirmed). I had to learn these tricks myself, and some of them I didn't learn until the last year of the atlas.

Author: Paul Kreiss, Baltimore County Coordinator



Kentucky Warbler by Kojo Baidoo/Macaulay Library

FROM THE FIELD



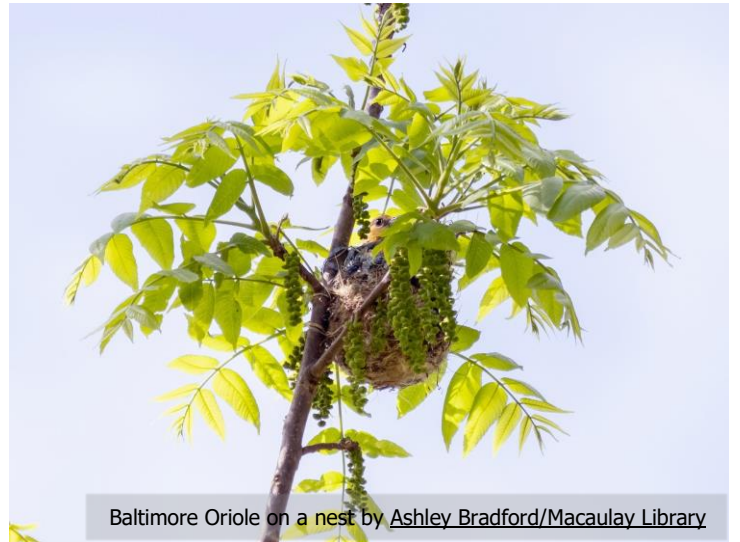
Baltimore Oriole building a nest by [Kaleb Friend/Macaulay Library](#)



Baltimore Oriole building a nest by [Laura Wolf/Macaulay Library](#)



Baltimore Oriole fledgling by [Andy Wilson/Macaulay Library](#)



Baltimore Oriole on a nest by [Ashley Bradford/Macaulay Library](#)



Baltimore Oriole and its nest by [Keith Eric Costley/Macaulay Library](#)



Baltimore Oriole building a nest by [Clayton Koonce/Macaulay Library](#)

OUT OF THE ARCHIVE

Blockbusting: Commando Atlasing

Ellison, W. 2005. Blockbusting: Commando Atlasing. *The Maryland Yellowthroat*. 25(5):2.

"After the first year's field work had shown the areas where coverage was likely to be thin, attempts were made to fill gaps by short, intensive visits." —J.T.R. Sharrock in *The Atlas of Breeding Birds in Britain and Ireland*, 1976.

With these characteristically understated words, Tim Sharrock introduced the concept of blockbusting (*square-bashing* to our counterparts "across the pond"), in the first published large-scale breeding bird atlas. In an ideal world, all atlas blocks would be monitored by observers who live in them or who could easily reach them. The world is not ideal, of course; some blocks go wanting because the area has few birders, while some blocks, like the wallflower at a ball, just don't seem attractive. But because the goal of a breeding bird atlas is complete and adequate coverage, empty blocks must somehow receive their due.

A blockbust is a survey, lasting one to several days, of an atlas block's birds by observers who travel to reach the block (often quite far). The perfect blockbust would include a point count survey (in Maryland this would be a miniroute), two trips to the block a week apart, and a night visit with an owl and nightjar recording. In practice, a

minimal blockbust could be limited to a single day's visit. However, coordinators at all levels do their utmost to minimize "one-day blocks," covered in six to ten hours, because these blocks will inevitably be missing many probable and confirmed nesting records and a great many scarce and inconspicuous birds.



Osprey by Matt Felperin/Macaulay Library

What characterizes a block that needs busting? One major factor is remoteness from the haunts of most birders. A second feature is a perception that the block is unattractive, for birds and birders. This can have many causes: The block could be in a highly urbanized area, perhaps even perceived as dangerously crime-ridden. Many blocks appear to lack sufficient habitat range to host a good diversity of birds. Some blocks simply lie within birding terra incognita. Finally, some blocks run afoul of birding parochialism because they straddle a state line. In Maryland, we strive to cover entire blocks regardless of the amount of territory in them that lies in an adjacent state. Many state-line blocks have gone begging. These blocks need coverage—and those along the Mason-Dixon Line offer the added bonus of contributing sightings to the second Pennsylvania Breeding Bird Atlas, now in progress. [...]



Eastern Phoebe by Nico Sarbanes/Macaulay Library

The 2002–2006 Maryland and District of Columbia Breeding Bird Atlas enjoyed such superior coverage through the first three years that there was no real need to hire blockbusters. Instead, we relied on county coordinators to organize trips into empty blocks and to run atlas trips at MOS conferences; several dedicated observers have volunteered for blocks in places far from their homes.

Over the winter of 2004–2005, the Breeding Bird Atlas Committee determined that enough empty blocks still needed coverage to justify hiring paid blockbusters. We advertised for blockbusters beginning in late February and hired six people to blockbust this summer. Two were at-large blockbusters sent all around the state, while four others concentrated on smaller areas closer to their homes.

[...]

In 2005 our “hired guns” did a mix of pure blockbusts and miniroutes, largely in blocks with 30 or fewer bird species.

More than 66 blocks were covered by blockbusters from late May to mid-July. Because of the efforts of county coordinators, our most active observers, and the diligent blockbusters, we now have fewer than 25 empty atlas blocks. This allows us to concentrate on improving totals in blocks with low species totals and those lacking night birds.* We will have a completed atlas next year. It is largely up to the members of MOS to ensure that we make it an excellent atlas. Please do not let your enthusiasm or determination flag; the end is in sight.

*I encourage birders, and Chapters, to consider making a concerted effort early next year (starting in late December for Great Horned Owls) to locate territorial night birds. We currently have a long way to go to match the maps generated for night birds, including American Woodcock, in the first atlas, published in the 1980s.

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