

eNEWSLETTER



An informational e-newsletter for the friends of the Douglas County Wildlife Management Area

July 2004

This eNewsletter describes the breeding bird census fieldwork conducted in Wisconsin from 1995-2000. The original (and somewhat longer) article was published in the April 1998 issue of "Wisconsin Natural Resources."



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For the birds

By Maureen Mecozzi

Take a static noun and make it fly. That's how atlas, generally used to describe a leather-bound behemoth with all the Earth crammed between two covers, becomes atlasing, a lively engaging quest to create a detailed portrait of a certain place at a certain time.

Painting one such portrait of Wisconsin has long been a goal of the Wisconsin Society for Ornithology (WSO). In 1995 the organization embarked on an ambitious 10-year project to compile a record of all the birds breeding in the state at the end of the 20th century. The ultimate product of the endeavor will be a comprehensive atlas revealing the status of birds in Wisconsin through maps, tables and

figures. Researchers will use the atlas to document changes that have occurred in breeding bird populations, to determine how human activities affect bird life and to provide information for similar projects nationwide.

Remarkable for its breadth and scope -- every corner of the state will be monitored during the project's five-year fieldwork phase -- the **Wisconsin Breeding Bird Atlas (WBBA)** is perhaps most notable for the hundreds of volunteers observing birds and gathering valuable data in marshes, woodlands and fields statewide. Each "atlaser" tracks the birds present in a "block" -- an area three miles by three miles in size -- and follows-up with observations on breeding and nesting. Analysis of the atlasers' field records and notes will increase our understanding of the natural history, and distribution of breeding birds throughout Wisconsin.

Sighting by sighting, atlasers are sketching in the detail of this grand feathered portrait, and they're having a grand time in the process. Many have discovered atlasing -- which combines sight and song identification skills, habitat analysis, map-reading and recordkeeping abilities, a touch of diplomacy and a knowledge of bird behavior -- has added a new level of enjoyment to bird watching.

Atlasing begins with quads -- the U.S. Geological Survey's topographical quadrangle maps. Each quad is divided into six blocks, each block being three miles square. Using this method, Wisconsin can be gridded into roughly 6,900 blocks.

That's a lot of ground to cover. To manage the area to be surveyed while maintaining the statistical integrity of the atlas, the WBBA designated the centereast block of each quad as a priority block. All atlasers are required to survey that priority block in their quad before

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they work specialty blocks (sites of unique habitat or particular interest) or supplementary blocks (the remaining blocks in a quad).

During the breeding season, which runs from February (starting with great horned owls) through September 15, the day all field reports are due, atlasers try to identify all the birds present in their blocks. They then try to confirm nesting for at least 50 percent of the species they find in those blocks.

Atlasers mark down sightings and other details on field cards, which are then sent on to one of 27 Regional Coordinators (RC).

The RC's review the data and pass the information on to the Data Management Center at the University of Wisconsin Green Bay, where it is processed for the atlas.

Atlasers don't have to visit every single field or marsh in their blocks, but it helps if they can survey every type of habitat in a block. In areas with roads a half-mile apart or closer, much of the observation can be done from roadsides. In other cases, atlasers must get permission from property owners to conduct surveys on private lands. (That's where diplomacy comes in.)

The WBBA has completed three years of fieldwork, with two more to go. Add another five years for data processing, analysis and the writing and publication of the atlas. For those who can't wait for 2005, interim results from the breeding bird surveys done to date are available at <http://www.uwgb.edu/birds/wbba/> on the World Wide Web.

There are ornithologists involved in the WBBA, of course, and some professional atlasers are paid to cover especially difficult or remote blocks, but most of the people working on the atlas are amateurs. "I say that in the truest sense of the word," says Bettie Harriman, director of the WBBA. "They do it for the love of birds."

Volunteers must be able to identify the birds that breed in Wisconsin, either by sight or by songs and calls. The better an atlaser is at sound identification, the easier it will be to cover a block.

Atlasers are encouraged to visit their blocks often in June, when most species are singing

to attract mates. July is the best time to confirm breeding, because many species are feeding their young and are easier to spot as they search for food. The early bird gets the worm no matter what month an atlaser surveys. "Getting out early -- 5 to 10 a.m. -- is the best time for finding most birds," says Harriman.

The field card is the heart of the entire atlas project. Atlasers track sightings and mark down observations using a series of codes. These codes cover habitat types, estimates of abundance, behaviors, and breeding criteria divided into four categories of evidence: Observed, Possible, Probable and Confirmed.

Harriman knows the amount of detail needed can be daunting for novice atlasers. Not to worry! After a few visits to a block, an atlaser will become well acquainted with the birds frequenting the site. "This is when you get to be a bird watcher, actually watching the bird's behavior, compared to just making a list of birds observed," she says.

Besides recording specific details on breeding behavior and habitat, the atlasers also are encouraged to write down casual observations of birds and wildlife in their blocks. Recording casual as well as specific observations adds depth to a day in the field, sharpening an atlaser's senses for future outings.

Harriman estimates most blocks require about 25 hours of work to be thoroughly surveyed, not counting the time spent getting permission from private landowners. To date, landowners have been not only cooperative about the project, but overwhelmingly friendly, offering their own bird observations and even inviting some atlasers to lunch!

Some volunteer atlasers choose to complete their surveys in one season. Others elect to make observations across multiple breeding seasons before completing a single block.

Close to 1,000 volunteers of all ages are participating in fieldwork to confirm nesting for all of Wisconsin's 220-plus identified breeding bird species.

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