



IOWA BREEDING BIRD ATLAS II

THE IOWA NESTER

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WE ARE OFF TO A GREAT START!

Whew!! Where has the time gone? This year has sure flown by, and we certainly have a lot to show for it! The Iowa Breeding Bird Atlas II is off to a tremendous start thanks to volunteers throughout our wonderful state.

Volunteer efforts have helped us collect over 1300 hours of observation, work in over 360 blocks, report over 18,000 records, and record nearly 180 species of birds in the first year! This is a great accomplishment, Atlassers!

Whether it is one record or hundreds, every report is important in documenting Iowa's breeding birds. The information collected is extremely valuable. Not only will we be able to see where in Iowa birds are nesting, we can use this to help aid managers in conservation.

Remember, this is only the beginning. There is still a lot to be done! We have

only four years left to try and document nesting for ALL of Iowa's breeding birds. With 791 blocks and 20 hours of observation in each block, it will take a lot of time, but I know we can do it!

I have gotten great responses from volunteers who find atlassing to be a very rewarding experience. If you know of someone who might be interested in helping, send them my way! Everyone's contributions are greatly appreciated. Keep up the good work! It is definitely something to be proud of!

-Nicki Nagl



Photo Credit: Carl Kurtz

American Goldfinches displaying pair bonding.

WE NEED YOU AND YOUR STORIES, TOO!

Volunteers are the heart of the Breeding Bird Atlas. Without their help, we would not get the information needed, and ultimately would not be successful. Your contributions will help everyone, from scientists to local farmers, learn more about Iowa and its birdlife.

Do you have a funny story to share about birding? Advice for birders new to atlassing? What about pictures you have taken while in a block? If so, we would love for you to share your experiences! Send your stories and photos to the BBA Coordinator. Stories sent in will have the possibility to be used in future newsletters and presentations.

CONTACT INFORMATION:

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FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

What is the Breeding Bird Atlas?

The Breeding Bird Atlas is a five-year project beginning in 2008, continuing through 2012. The project is sponsored by the Iowa Ornithologists' Union and the Iowa Department of Natural Resources. There are a total of 791 3 by 3 mile blocks statewide, and our goal is to have each of these blocks sufficiently surveyed (20 hours of observation in each block) at the end of the five-year period. The first Iowa Breeding Bird Atlas took place from 1985-1990, and a book was published in 1995. Participating in the Breeding Bird Atlas is a great way to learn more about nesting behavior of species throughout the state. With the data collected, we will be able to see nesting distribution of Iowa's breeding birds throughout the state of Iowa, as well as, compile a current list of birds actually nesting within the state. The BBA is a big project and its success will depend on many volunteers throughout Iowa.

How do I "atlas"?

In order to volunteer or "atlas", you must first choose a block (or blocks) you wish to survey. You will then go to the site,

record breeding evidence codes of species you find within the block on your field card, and then enter your data onto the website database. You will find everything you need to "atlas" under the "Get Started" menu on the BBA website.

Which, and how many blocks can I choose?

As a volunteer, you may visit any and however many blocks you wish. Blocks aren't necessarily being assigned, so multiple people may visit the same block. Species lists for a particular block (if visited previously) can be printed from the BBA website, or be sent to you upon request.

I found a bird showing signs of nesting before/after the "early date/late date" suggested on the Species Breeding Date and Habitats sheet. What should I do?

If you are seeing clear signs of potential breeding such as nest building, distraction displays, occupied nests, etc. before/after the suggested dates, you should definitely record this information. The dates given are general breeding dates and aren't set in stone. Throughout the Atlas project, we will be able to use dates entered by volun-

teers and generate a more precise list of breeding dates.

If I don't have a computer, or don't feel comfortable with data entry, does that pretty much exclude me from helping with the project?

Absolutely not! The BBA Coordinator will do everything in his/her power to make sure you get everything you need to participate in Atlas work. The Coordinator can send maps, field cards, brochures, etc. upon your request (See Contact Information throughout this newsletter). Also, the Coordinator will be able to enter your data onto the online database, so you will be recognized for your accomplishments!

Have questions not answered here?

Contact the BBA Coordinator via email or telephone at:

Email: bbacoordinator@iowabirds.org

Office: (515)432-2823 ext. 117

Cell: (515)378-3072

OUT AND ABOUT...

While walking through one of the blocks within Chichaqua Bottoms late last spring, I flushed an adult American Woodcock from a wet area in a restored prairie. Its odd behavior grabbed my attention immediately. When flushed, the bird flew up about 10 feet and returned to cover a very short distance away. "There's some reason she's sticking around," I thought as I decided to halt and take a look at the ground around my boots. Sure enough, just a few feet away were two chicks trying to remain hidden with the help of their coloration and the thick litter. I quickly clicked several photos and headed out so they could reunite with their mother.

-Kristin Kuennen



Woodcock chick found in BBA block within Chichaqua Bottoms in late spring by BBA atlasser Kristin Kuennen.

FROM THE FIELD

BIRDING WITH A PURPOSE

I don't consider myself that good of a birder, and I am typically not compelled to drive any great distance to add another species to my life list. What does motivate me, though, is learning, having fun, and contributing toward a larger scientific knowledge (of the Iowa landscape); so when I have the good fortune to do all those things at the same time, count me in! For me, participating in the Iowa BBA is a wonderful adventure!

Each day in the field and each new place that I have the privilege to visit is an opportunity to learn something new. For instance, if I had not been atlassing Iowa's birds, I probably would not have witnessed a Brown Thrasher nesting in an old roll of woven wire in an area dominated by cornfields and largely devoid of shrubs (in which it typically nests). On another occasion (in some southern county) I was busily writing down the identification of a number of birds I could hear singing, when it dawned on me that all those songs were coming from one bird. I soon discovered that the songster was a Northern Mockingbird, and it had given voice to the songs of 11 different species!

For those of us who were fortunate to be involved with Iowa's first Breeding Bird Atlas, it is especially interesting to return to the same areas searched 20 years earlier and observe how the landscape may have changed or what new bird species might now be present that were not found before. Pammel State Park in Madison County is one such place. This summer as I walked the high

backbone ridge of that park, I thought I heard a distant call of a Pileated Woodpecker. Moments later, I looked down to discover a wing feather from that bird – a confirmation that indeed this species now exists along the Middle River in an area where it was not found two decades ago.

About an hour later as I wandered through an older growth section of the forest, I heard the distinctive song of a Cerulean Warbler, another species not found there during Iowa's first BBA.

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Yet another aspect of atlassing that I enjoy is the people whom I meet along the way, especially landowners. While atlassing a block in Davis County this summer, I noticed a privately owned tree farm that contained a wide variety of tree species and shrubs. Seeing the (presumed) landowner working out in his yard, I stopped by for a visit about his birdlife. The elderly landowner's name is Norman Hansen, and it turned out that he knew a bunch about his birds and the habitats they inhabit. Norman looked over the bird list I had accumulated so far, and he told me stories about when and where he had last seen many of the species listed on the BBA field form.



Bruce Ehresman, DNR Wildlife Diversity employee and BBA atlasser, holding a Red-Shouldered Hawk.

It turns out that Norman had Dr. Paul Errington (a pioneer of Animal Ecology) as his instructor some 6 decades earlier at Iowa State University, where Norman majored in Forestry. Norman told me of how Dr. Errington taught his ornithology class but did not take his students into the field. Norman said that this class did help him develop quite an interest in birds but that he learned to identify most of the birds on his own, after he graduated from college. Norman was very fond of the trees that he cared for and the birds that inhabited them, and we added 19 bird species during my visit. At one point in our conversation, he was lamenting that he especially missed seeing and hearing the Carolina Wren that once inhabited his yard; but as he walked me to my car to leave, a Carolina Wren was heartily singing from a crabapple tree just 50 feet from his house. What a good day in the field that was!

-Bruce Ehresman



Photo Credit: Doug Harr

Northern Mocking Bird in tree.

FROM THE FIELD

BLOCK 487 — CAMP DODGE SOUTH

The place where I work, Pioneer Hi-Bred Int'l, Inc. in Johnston, just happens to sit within a BBA block. This made it very easy and convenient for me to survey the block during my lunch hours. This block has varied habitats, including residential neighborhoods, a pond/wetland area, wooded areas, crop production fields, a small park, and the Beaver Creek floodplain. In 2008, I made 8 trips for a total of 8.5 hours of atlas work. During those trips I was able to record 53 species of birds (2 Observed, 19 Possible, 10 Probable, and 22 Confirmed nesting species).

Most of the birds were common nesting species, but one of the highlights was when I confirmed nesting of Western Kingbirds. Western Kingbirds have been observed on and off over the past several years around Terra Park in Johnston. I made a couple of trips to the area and observed the kingbirds hunting for insects over Terra Lake but I couldn't find their nest. Finally one day I just stood on the dam and waited to see where they flew to with their mouthfuls of bugs. Sure enough, one flew right over my head and headed straight to the high-tension electrical wire supports behind me and landed. It then proceeded to feed nestlings! That

was a good bird to get confirmation of nesting on.

The biggest highlight for me happened right where I work. Over the years I've observed Common Nighthawks performing courtship displays and flying around our buildings on campus. I knew they were probably nesting on one of our rooftops. I have a friend in the maintenance department at Pioneer and I talked him into taking me up on all of the rooftops to look for nesting nighthawks. We checked almost every rooftop but I couldn't find any nests. There was one rooftop left--- a roof on a one story building that had a second story patio adjacent to it. I doubted a nighthawk would nest there because the patio is heavily used by employees as a lunch area but I checked it anyway. I walked past the tables of people and looked over the railing to find a nighthawk just ten feet away from everybody. It "hissed" at me, flared its wings, and stood up and right below it was a newly-hatched chick! Over the next few weeks I checked on the nighthawk chick every day during the work week and I got to photo-document it growing up until it finally fledged.

I will be spending much more time in the next few years checking out this



Adult nighthawk with 1-2 day old nestling underneath it.

block over my lunch hour. There are still many species left to confirm nesting on. I would encourage everybody to look at the block maps to see if any blocks are near where you live or work. These blocks are easy to spend an hour or two a week in and record a lot of species!
-Jay Gilliam

Have a story to share?

Please send stories, artwork, and photos to:

BBA Coordinator
Boone Wildlife Research Station
1436 255th Street
Boone, IA 50036

-or-
bbacoordinator@iowabirds.org



5-6 day old chick



13-14 day old chick



17-18 day old chick just starting to get tail feathers

FEATURED FEATHERS: THE HENSLOW'S SPARROW



Photo Credit: Jim Durbin

Scientific Name: *Ammodramus henslowii*

Habitat: Open grassy fields, thick litter, with little to no woody plants

Food: Insects

Nest: A loosely woven cup of thin grasses, often a few inches off the ground. Often nest colonially.

Egg: Creamy white with reddish-brown speckles and blotches.

Song/Call: Distinct call. Thin, two-syllable “se-lick”.

Once a rapidly declining species, the Henslow's Sparrow has made a small comeback in the last five to ten years thanks to projects like the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP). Currently listed as a state-threatened species in Iowa, its decline in past years has been a result of widespread grassland habitat loss and degradation.

As you can see, during the first BBA, there were very few sightings, and no confirmed breeding of the Henslow's Sparrow. In the first year alone of the BBAII, there have been three confirmations of nesting and nearly twenty probable nesting records throughout the state. What an neat thing to see! In the years to come, we hope to gather more stories like this and determine what is affecting bird populations in Iowa. To find how other species are doing, check out their maps at:

<http://bba.iowabirds.org>



Photo Credit: Kristin Kuennen

Henslow's Sparrow habitat in Clayton County.

WINTER ATLASSING

The days are getting colder. Fewer birds are out. What is an atlaser to do?

Well, I've got a few things that should keep you preoccupied for the upcoming winter months.

1. Enter Data! For all of you who were out in the field this summer searching for nests, do not let your efforts go unrecognized! You can enter your data onto the online database at <http://bba.iowabirds.org>, or send your records to the BBA Coordinator to be entered for you.
2. Look for Nests! Now that the leaves have all pretty much fallen, it gives you an opportunity to scope out what may have nested there during the breeding season. Read up on birds and the types of nests they build, and try and confirm nesting for different species. *Note:* It is a good idea to look back at your notes to see if you noticed the species during the nesting season. If unsure, make note of locations of nests (especially hawks and woodpeckers) and return there next season to see if they are being re-used.

3. Look for New Habitats and Early Nesters. Scout areas you did not notice during the breeding season. Check out the safe-dates for bird nesting in late winter and early spring.
4. Spread the Word! Breeding Bird Atlases are highly dependent on birders, like you, to gather information about our feathered friends. The more people that know about the project, the more successful it will be!! So, get out there! Tell your friends, family, neighbors.. Everyone!



Photo Credit: Marlene Ehresman

Young Great Horned Owl hunkered down in nest. These owls can nest as early as mid-February.

CHECK IT OUT!

A website has been created for your convenience as a place to house BBA forms and also a place for you to enter your data. During the first Iowa Breeding Bird Atlas, many forms had to be mailed in and processed, which took years to go through and see actual results.

The BBA website allows you to enter your data, and see your progress and that of other birders throughout the state. From field cards and maps of BBA blocks to up-to-date species lists and distribution maps, the website provides you with a plethora of information to assist you in your BBA adventures.

So, what are you waiting for?

Visit the website at

<http://bba.iowabirds.org>

Or call the BBA Coordinator to find out how you can get involved!

WANTED:

Barn Owl and Bald Eagle Nest Sightings!!

Please report Bald Eagle nest sightings at <http://www.iowadnr.gov/wildlife/diversity> and click on "Reporting Bald Eagles".



Photo Credit: Steve Ray

Iowa's Barn Owl is an endangered species. If you see this bird, please record the date and exact location, and contact the Iowa DNR's Wildlife Diversity Program at (515) 432-2823.

A SPECIAL THANKS....

On behalf of the BBA Committee, I would like to thank everyone who took part in the first year of the BBA. Whether it was one record, or hundreds, we are now a little closer to knowing the status of our state's nesting birds. I would also like to thank the bird groups who invited me to talk at their meetings, providing me a venue to spread the word about this wonderful project. I am extremely proud of our accomplishments this year, and look forward to discoveries yet to be made. Keep up the good work, Atlassers! We couldn't have done it without you!

-Nicki Nagl
BBA Volunteer Coordinator



Photo Credit: Bruce Ehresman

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Iowa Department of Natural Resources



Iowa Ornithologists' Union

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