



# The Iowa Nester

Volume I, Issue 7, Spring 2012

Iowa Breeding Bird Atlas II

## Iowa BBA II: Heading into the home stretch

The Iowa Breeding Bird Atlas (BBA) is moving along nicely as we march into the final year of data collection. As of this writing, 126 participants have logged more than 7,000 BBA field hours and have submitted over 109,000 records of 193 species, including 163 confirmed as nesters. In 2011 alone, we documented nesting for 36 of the Iowa Wildlife Action Plan's species of greatest conservation need (SGCN), contributing to a total of 45 SGCN birds confirmed thus far. Among these highlights last year were American Bittern, Red-shouldered Hawk, Broad-winged Hawk, Sandhill Crane, Black Tern, Black-billed Cuckoo, Barn Owl, Loggerhead Shrike, Bell's Vireo, Veery, Blue-winged Warbler, Prothonotary Warbler, Hooded Warbler, and Henslow's Sparrow.

Some other noteworthy confirmations in '11 involved Green-winged Teal, Ruddy Duck, Red-necked Grebe, Eared Grebe, Sharp-shinned Hawk, Virginia Rail, Yellow-bellied Sapsucker, Yellow-throated Warbler, Clay-colored Sparrow, and Pine Siskin. Various summertime rarities (e.g., American Black Duck, Mississippi Kite, and Long-eared Owl) made appearances as possible or probable nesters, but a Black Rail near Coralville Reservoir stood out as the year's most exceptional discovery.



Red-shouldered Hawk fledgling, by Shane Patterson

Activity proceeded into the winter months, as multiple observers collected information on used nests and eggshells. And on the heels of this bizarrely warm winter, many of us are eagerly looking ahead to the primary atlas season. But even at the outset of spring, nature provides us with many interesting BBA opportunities. A number of birds, particularly raptors, will be engaging in nesting activities very soon, if not already. For instance, the courtship flights and pair-bonding of Red-shouldered Hawks will be quickly followed by nest-building and egg-laying in the approaching weeks. Cooper's Hawks should also be noted as breeding in April, both in rural and suburban locales. Our resident owls, which have been seemingly underrepresented on this atlas, are sure to be vocal in and along woods

through much of Iowa. (Please see Bruce Ehresman's excellent article in this issue for tips on confirming three of Iowa's nocturnal inhabitants.)

During crepuscular hours, "peenting" American Woodcocks have been delighting observers for weeks now, and females are just a short time away from incubating eggs and raising precocial young. Furthermore, when we add in the assortment of resident songbirds and newly arrived migrants, we have even more motivation to get out and atlas as spring rounds into form.

The previous coordinators (Nicki Nagl and Billy Reiter-Marolf) each did a great job with the project, and I am excited to be continuing the growing tradition that they established. Indeed, I have had a lot of fun gathering data over the last four years, and I look forward to seeing everyone out in the field again before Iowa BBA II draws to a close.

Shane Patterson

Iowa Breeding Bird Atlas Coordinator

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## Are elusive birds of the night disappearing?

By Bruce Ehresman

While evidence of breeding of most bird species is being recorded at a similar frequency during BBA II to that of the first Iowa BBA, there is one particular group of birds that seems to be eluding most atlasers. That group is the owls. The Eastern Screech-Owl, in particular, seems to be missing in many areas of the state. During BBA I, this secretive, smallish owl was documented in 221 blocks in 81 counties. During this BBA, we have only 43 records in 26 counties. In BBA I, there were 46 confirmed nesting records; in this atlas there are only seven (Fig. 1 & 2).

Because this is *at least an 80% reduction* in total records for this species, the obvious question is *why?* Granted, this species is quite secretive and seldom seen during daylight hours, but other species of owls fit that description, too.

Barred Owl records for BBA I (279 records) and BBA II (228 records) are actually quite comparable (Fig. 3 & 4), given that we have one more year to collect data for this species. But as we look at Great Horned Owl records, we again see a shortage of records when the two atlas periods are compared. During BBA I, Great Horned Owls were located in 420 blocks in all 99 counties; during BBA II this species has been documented in 139 blocks in just 60 counties (Fig. 5 & 6). This is a *66% reduction* in total records for this species.

Considering that work has been done in all 791 blocks during this Atlas project, compared to work in only 717 blocks in BBA I, the lack of coverage does not seem to be the main reason for lack of records for our more nocturnal bird species. Rather, perhaps the lack of time spent atlasing during crepuscular and nocturnal hours is a factor. As I am not aware of data that show any of these three species declining significantly, it seems that we atlasers might do better in documenting them if we would spend more time within owl habitat during evening and night-time hours. There are a number of people who already seem to be doing this. In particular, I wish to recognize Rita Goranson, who has documented most of the confirmed and probable nest records in the entire state for Eastern Screech-Owl, as well as most of the confirmed and probable nest records in north-central Iowa for both Great Horned Owl and Barred Owl. It appears, from her efforts, that all three of these species are where we might expect them to be.



Eastern Screech-Owl. Photo by Tom Schilke

**So when can we start looking and listening for these owls? *Right now!*** I am pleased to say that the owl nesting season is already underway, and Great Horned Owls, in many cases, are presently sitting on eggs. In fact, I saw a Great Horned Owl, apparently incubating eggs, in a former Red-tailed Hawk nest on Feb. 10. On April 4, 2010, I witnessed three Great Horned Owl fledglings, meaning that egg incubation for that family had begun in early January. Barred Owls are also on their nesting territories by now, although they typically will not begin laying eggs (usually in a tree cavity) before late March or early April. Like the Barred Owl, Eastern Screech-Owls typically are on territory now, and they also can begin egg-laying in late March-early April. During the first atlas, this species was often found nesting in Wood Duck nest boxes, so if you or someone you know maintains Wood Duck nest boxes within a BBA block, keep an eye out for use of these structures by screech-owls.

Certainly, the easiest way to confirm all owl species is to document families during fledging. From experience, I've found May to be the very best month to find family groups of all three species. During that time, it is not unusual to come across newly fledged owls in the day-time. Often these youngsters can be seen on very low perches or even on the ground. Some people who could have nesting information within blocks include county naturalists (who scope habitats for opportunities to show wild creatures in action) and raptor rehabilitators (who scope habitats for active nests that might accept foster nestlings).

**Because this is the last year of this atlas,** I highly encourage fellow bird-data collectors to get outside during evenings, especially on moonlit nights, over these next few months to listen to the night music performed by owls. If you pinpoint where this music is coming from, you should then have the information that you need to locate baby owls in the spring or summer.



*Barred Owl. Photo by Tom Schilke*



*Eastern Screech-Owls. Photo by Tom Schilke*

# Resident owls: BBA I vs. BBA II

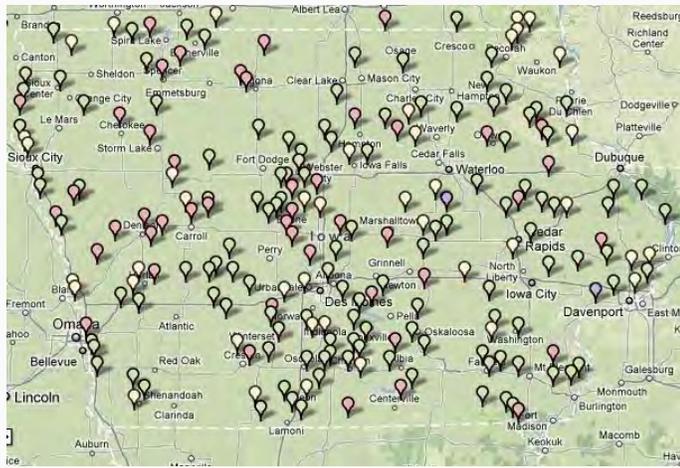
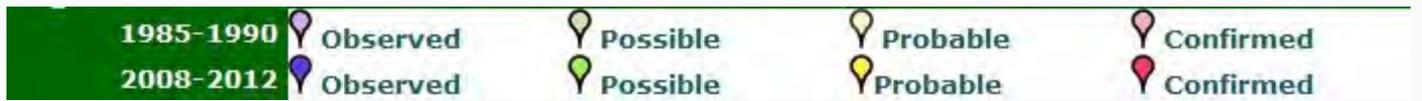


Figure 1: Eastern Screech-Owl, BBA I



Figure 2: Eastern Screech-Owl, BBA II



Figure 3: Barred Owl, BBA I

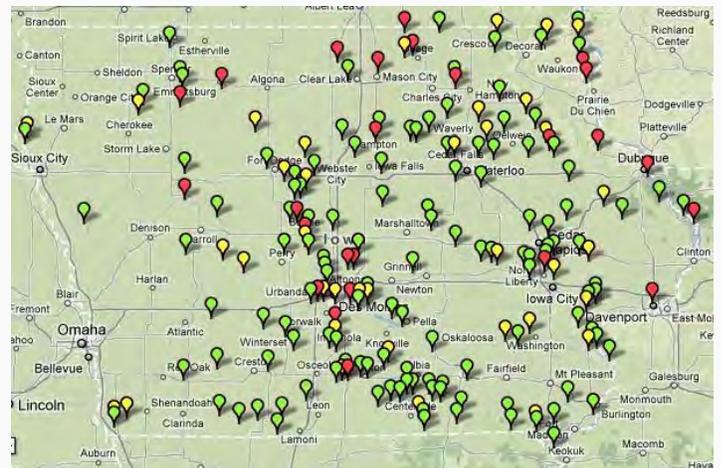


Figure 4: Barred Owl, BBA II

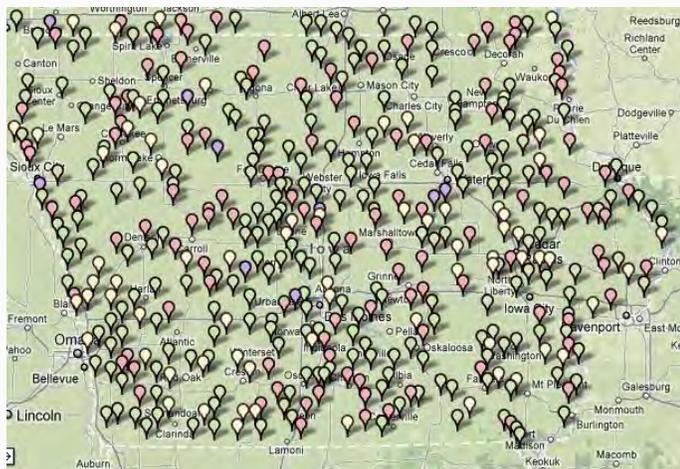


Figure 5: Great Horned Owl, BBA I



Figure 6: Great Horned Owl, BBA II

## East meets west through the Iowa BBA

*By Kirsten Winter*

I live in the San Diego area and work as a biologist for the Forest Service, so I have the pleasure of seeing some interesting birds at home and at work. At my house, there are a couple of California Quail families and a pair of Greater Roadrunners in residence. There's a Rock Wren that thinks it owns the place; it often flies inside the house to explore and check for insects.

From 1997 to 2002 my husband (Charlie) and I worked on the San Diego County Bird Atlas (<http://www.sdnhm.org/science/birds-and-mammals/projects/san-diego-county-bird-atlas>). Charlie honed his passion for bird photography, and I had my first bout of "atlas fever." We pored over books about bird behavior, distribution, nests and eggs. Among our references was the first edition of *The Iowa Breeding Bird Atlas*. In 2008, I was excited to learn that the Iowa atlas was being repeated. My mom (Carol Winter) and I started surveying. Poised at the boundary between the eastern hardwood forests and the windy sweep of the western prairies, Iowa has a remarkable mix of birds. There are some familiar western birds and eastern relatives that are more challenging. I've enjoyed finding connections between Iowa birds and species I see in western states. Here are a few of my favorite east-west bird connections.

—Least Bell's Vireo and Bell's Vireo. In San Diego, we have the Least Bell's Vireo (an endangered subspecies), which is finally recovering after cowbird trapping and habitat restoration. In Iowa, we see Bell's Vireo (nominat subspecies) in similar willow-scrub habitat, along with a very dense population of Brown-headed Cowbirds. Are the eastern Bell's Vireos better at avoiding brood-parasitism? Population-level effects are often hard to separate from other factors.

—Acorn Woodpecker and Red-headed Woodpecker. Out west, we have the entertaining and highly social Acorn Woodpecker. Some of their behaviors, like sitting around on exposed branches and calling raucously, are closely paralleled by the related Red-headed Woodpecker in Iowa. Similar to the Acorn Woodpecker, which maintains "granary trees" full of acorns, the Red-headed Woodpecker stores its more varied diet in tree crevices and has a fondness for wood utility poles.



American Redstart male. Photo by Tom Schilke

—Hutton's Vireo and Yellow-throated Vireo. In San Diego, Hutton's Vireo, a plain grayish bird that gleans insects from oak trees, is a common resident. In Iowa, the much more colorful Yellow-throated Vireo has similar feeding habits and, like the Hutton's Vireo, a very simple and repetitive song.

—Painted Redstart ("Whitestart") and American Redstart. Although not close relatives, these are favorite warblers with their confiding manner and amusing hunting methods. We spent some time in Madera Canyon, Arizona last spring where we enjoyed watching a pair of Painted Redstarts near our cabin. They foraged around the cabin eaves and on the ground, "wing-flashing" as their Iowa cousins do to startle prey.

The Iowa Breeding Bird Atlas has been an opportunity to see some remarkable birds and birding areas. It has been an education about both eastern and western birds. We are looking forward to more atlasing adventures in 2012.

## The Iowa BBA: Providing another fun perspective on birding

*By Natalie Randall*

Although interested in birds for many years, I've only recently been introduced to the Breeding Bird Atlas project. In fact, after starting a new job at the Boone Wildlife Research Station, my introduction began on day one. "Why," I inquired, "are there old bird nests on my desk?" The answer, of course, was that these nests were a training tool in my BBA education kit. That is, by learning to identify the nest of a particular bird species, I could participate in atlasing - even after the breeding season had passed - by looking for used nests in BBA blocks. An added bonus of this nest-searching: getting outdoors to enjoy the mildest winter in Iowa's recent history!

Looking for old nests has been an adventure, and every nest I approach conjures up anticipation. Did it belong to a species I haven't recorded before? Will I find eggshells - or even a mummified nestling? Some unique finds (to me, anyway!) have included nests of Willow Flycatcher, Red-eyed Vireo, Yellow Warbler, and Dickcissel. One former nest of a Yellow Warbler had eggshell fragments, as did a Dickcissel nest. A couple of American Goldfinch nests had the tiny remains of a nestling or two. I even came across a Gray Catbird nest containing a rodent's seed cache!

Suffice it to say, I've enjoyed the first leg of my atlasing journey. As spring peeks around the corner, I'm preparing for the next segment by reviewing my bird ID books and listening to recorded bird songs and calls. Better yet will be getting outside and tracking down individual species in order to make sense of the cacophony that will no doubt fill the air in several short weeks. *From one BBA newcomer to another, it's not too late to start atlasing!*

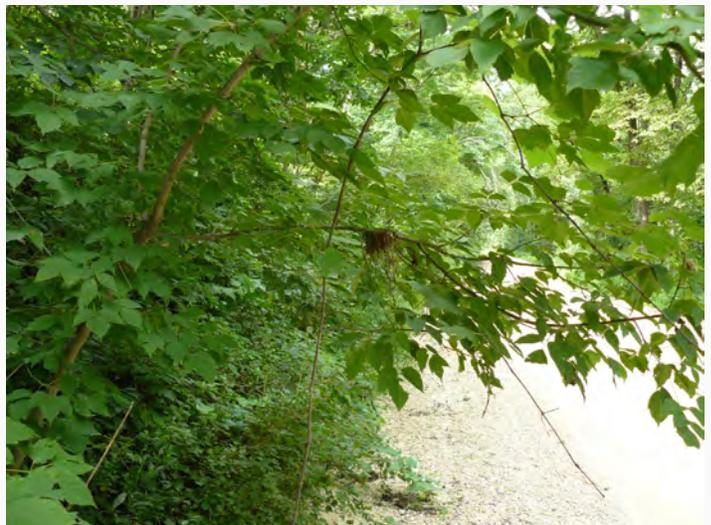
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### Nest ID Quiz: Are you up to the challenge?

The following nest was photographed in a forested block during Iowa BBA II. (Included are a closer look on the left to show some detail and a more distant view on the right to give a feel for the surrounding vegetation. The nest was located approximately 1.524 meters, or about 5 feet, above the ground.) Do you know which bird species is represented by this nest? Send your answer to Shane Patterson at [bbacoordinator@iowabirds.org](mailto:bbacoordinator@iowabirds.org). Individuals who answer correctly (one guess per person) will have their names entered into a prize drawing at the Iowa Ornithologists' Union's spring meeting. Details about the meeting are found at <http://www.iowabirds.org/Meetings/NextMeeting.aspx>.



*Photo by Shane Patterson*



*Photo by Shane Patterson*



*Snake Creek Marsh, Block #357, Greene County. Photo by Doug Harr*



*Yellow-headed Blackbird male. Photo by Doug Harr*



*Carroll Township, Block #382, Tama County. Photo by Shane Patterson*



*Red-headed Woodpecker. Photo by Tom Schilke*



*Colfax Wildlife Area, Block #496, Jasper County. Photo by Shane Patterson*



*Dickcissel carrying food (CO-AY). Photo by Tom Schilke*

## — Blockbusting 2012 —

The Iowa Department of Natural Resources and the Iowa Ornithologists' Union will be conducting three Breeding Bird Atlas (BBA) blockbusting weekends this summer (2012), beginning at the state's western boundary in June and extending to the eastern border in July. (See below for details.) Each weekend will start with a presentation about the BBA on Friday evening. Volunteers will receive a refresher on how to participate, how to determine breeding-bird status, and how to turn in observations. On Saturday and Sunday, volunteers will be out in blocks (predetermined areas to inventory) searching for nesting birds. Atlas volunteers are encouraged to visit any blocks within a reasonable driving distance, and there will be a sign-up sheet to divide up the targeted blocks. Volunteers are responsible for making arrangements for their own accommodations and meals. If you plan to participate, please RSVP to the BBA coordinator on the Monday prior to the weekend of each event. For further details, please visit the Iowa BBA website at <http://bba.iowabirds.org> or contact the BBA volunteer coordinator at [bbacoordinator@iowabirds.org](mailto:bbacoordinator@iowabirds.org).

### **June 22-24: The Loess Hills and the Big Sioux and Missouri River corridors (Sioux City area)**

—**Counties: Harrison, Monona, Plymouth, Sioux, and Woodbury**—

### **July 6-8: The river valleys and rolling hills of eastern Iowa (Iowa City area)**

—**Counties: Cedar, Iowa, Johnson, Muscatine, and Washington**—

### **July 20-22: The Upper Mississippi River bluffs and tributaries (Dubuque area)**

—**Counties: Clayton, Delaware, Dubuque, Jackson, and Jones**—



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IA-BIRD Listserv:

<http://www.iowabirds.org/Reporting/Listserv.aspx>

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