

Frequently Asked Questions about the 2nd Iowa Breeding Bird Atlas

1. What is the Breeding Bird Atlas?

The Breeding Bird Atlas is a five-year project beginning this year, and will continue through the 2012 breeding season. It is sponsored by the Iowa Ornithologists' Union and the Iowa Department of Natural Resources. There are a total of 791 3X3 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. However, with 861 blocks, only 611 were actually completed at the end of the five years. This time around, with a lower number of blocks and a growing "birding" community, we hope to complete ALL 791 blocks which will produce an updated catalog and current distribution of breeding birds within the state. This is a big project and its success will depend on many volunteers throughout Iowa.

2. How were blocks chosen?

Three hundred and ninety-five blocks were systematically distributed (evenly spaced) across Iowa, to provide equal coverage of the state. The remaining 396 blocks were randomly chosen on the basis of public land size and habitat. The larger (or more acres) the public land was, the higher probability it had to get chosen for the BBA project. For fairness of coverage, there were an equal number of these "habitat" blocks in each the northern half and southern half of Iowa.

3. Why are there so many blocks in some counties and only a few in others?

Every county was guaranteed to have at least two blocks in them based upon the systematic distribution. When the remaining blocks were randomly chosen, those counties with much public land had a higher probability of receiving more blocks. Hence, the reservoirs, forest tracts, and river systems were chosen more frequently than smaller public areas. We must remember that this is a STATEWIDE effort.

4. Are blocks going to be added?

As of right now, no blocks will be added.

5. 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 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. You are welcome to "atlas" as many BBA blocks as you wish.

6. What do I need to atlas?

You will need:

- Block Location/Maps
- Field Card w/ Evidence Codes
- Binoculars
- Bird Guide
- YOU!

7. Where do I find maps for blocks?

You will find county maps, block maps, and habitat maps all under the "Get Started" menu, then under "BBA Maps".

8. [Where can I find a copy of the field card?](#)

You can find the field card under the “Get Started” menu, and then under “BBA Forms”.

9. [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 confirmed 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 volunteers and generate a more precise list of breeding dates.

10. [What do I do with my field card after visiting a site?](#)

After visiting a site, you will want to enter your data onto the website database. This will update the amount of time spent, species found, and their breeding status for that particular block. This information will be helpful to other volunteers when choosing a block.

11. [Can I use the field card more than once for the same block?](#)

Yes. NOTE: Keep track of your dates! When you enter your information into the database, you should enter your species and codes by the date you recorded them while in the block. If you choose to hold off on entering data, you may enter the highest level of evidence for a species that you have at that point. (Be sure you are entering the correct evidence with its corresponding date!) This will reduce the amount of data that might need updated in the future.

12. [Why is it important to keep track of dates on my field card?](#)

Keeping track of dates, especially when you enter data, is very important. With this information, breeding dates can be analyzed easier, and a more updated list can be created.

13. [When I’m done visiting a block and have entered all of my data, what should I do with my field card?](#)

Hold on to it! Since the BBA is a five-year project, it may not be easy to remember species or information that was once recorded. You may be contacted if there is a question about a record, and only you can answer it. The field cards are a great record to refer back to when re-visiting a site in the future.

14. [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 one block. If you are traveling across the state and want to do some birding, it might be useful to print off a county map for your visits, or copy the blocks into your Sportsman’s Atlas.

15. [If a block has 20 hours, or is “completed”, can I still visit the block?](#)

Yes. The 20 hours is a minimum or baseline for visitation. If you feel the block or species within it haven’t been sufficiently sampled, you may continue to visit the site. However, if there are other blocks that have not been visited at all or have had very little time spent in them, allocating time to complete those blocks is a **higher priority** than revisiting a block recorded as completed. *The BBA committee will review block coverage annually and may encourage additional hours of work for blocks where deemed necessary for adequate coverage.*

16. [How often should I visit a block?](#)

There isn’t a number limit on the amount of visits to a block. As long as a block receives at least twenty hours of visitation, and has had good overall coverage, it will be considered complete. However, it is a good idea to visit a block more than once during a breeding season because different birds breed at different times. A good goal might be to visit a block at least three times in one breeding season.

17. I am not a very good birder, can I still participate?

Definitely. The Breeding Bird Atlas invites all those who are interested in participating, from beginning to expert birders. It's a great way to enhance your birding skills and gives you a chance to explore different parts of Iowa and its birdlife.

18. What if I'm not 100% sure about what I saw?

Be conservative! If you are pretty sure of a bird's identity, you may want to revisit the site at a later date, or do some research to confirm it. Once you enter your data, there is no way to really know what you actually saw or heard. We have to take your word for it. It's better to be conservative to save questions being asked in the future. We encourage you to take notes of the bird's description, its song or call, and even the habitat where it is observed. Take a photo or record the song to help identify the bird later.

19. If I see a bird outside the block, can I still record it?

No. Unfortunately, in order for data to count for the Breeding Bird Atlas, birds must have been seen or heard within a block. You may record it for your personal use, however, do not enter it into the BBA database. Special sightings outside of BBA blocks may be reported on the IOU listserv.

20. How often do I have to verify the habitat (or land cover) in a block?

Habitat (or land cover) should be verified at least **once** during the Breeding Bird Atlas Project. All sections of the block must be verified.

21. When can I start atlas-ing?

The BBA goes from 2008-1012. So you can start now!

22. How do I contact the Breeding Bird Atlas Coordinator?

You may contact the BBA Coordinator via phone, email, or mail.

Office: (515) 432-2823 ext. 114

Cell: (515) 298-3072

Email: bbacoordinator@iowabirds.org

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