

Atlas Corner: The Joys of Atlasing

by Julie Hart, NY BBA III Project Coordinator

You may have heard people say how atlasing is a different way of birding and an extremely rewarding one at that. But what does this mean? How exactly is atlas birding different from normal birding? Why is it so rewarding? And you may be asking yourself, how can I become familiar with atlas birding before the project begins in 2020? In this article we'll answer these questions and more.

What is atlasing and how is it rewarding?

Atlasing is like regular birding but you slow down and observe the behaviors of individual birds. To help put this in perspective, I like to explain to people that I worked for several years doing various bird jobs around the country, but it wasn't until I atlased in my home state that I was able to observe many of the breeding behaviors you read about in books. While blockbusting for the Vermont Breeding Bird Atlas, I was finally able to really enjoy the figure-eight courtship display of a Ruby-throated Hummingbird; was chased off a road by an angry Ruffed Grouse mother with chicks scurrying in every direction at her barking and growling and feigned injury display; observed Yellow-bellied Sapsuckers wriggling in and out of birch trees; and encountered countless thrushes with overstuffed bills full of worms and insects.



*Bicknell's Thrush with bill full of food
photo by Sue Barth*

By the end of the summer I learned not only the alternate songs of most songbirds but also many of the call notes. I learned to distinguish amicable chatter between a pair from territorial squabbles. I started out knowing the large-scale habitat preferences of most species and a couple months later I recognized the small habitat differences that attract a Willow instead of an Alder Flycatcher. My understanding of bird behavior and identification skills of awkward, disheveled looking fledglings far exceeded what I thought possible. And it was all because I changed the way I birded. I slowed down and watched what the birds did. Sometimes I would sit and wait and not see any signs of breeding, but other times I had the most intimate glimpses into their daily lives. It was a continuously rewarding experience.

My experience is not unique. Many people express similar sentiments after they start atlasing; just ask your fellow bird club members who participated in the last atlas. Best of all, the delight that comes with this type of birding is open to all of us.

How do I practice atlasing and entering my observations in eBird?

The atlas doesn't start until 2020, but you don't have to wait to start enjoying this type of birding. You can practice your atlasing skills right now. Some birds are already nesting, while others are courting and setting up territories. Start small by watching the birds in your backyard or favorite park. If you see a behavior and you don't know what it means, look it up. The Cornell Lab's "[All About Birds](#)" site is a good place to start. If it turns out to be a breeding behavior, note the behavior on your checklist.

NY BBA III will be using eBird for data entry, so start getting comfortable with eBird now. Check out the free "[eBird Essentials](#)" course offered by the Cornell Lab of Ornithology, teach yourself by following the eBird tutorials for [web](#) and [mobile](#), or ask a fellow birder to show you how to get started. Once you

are familiar with eBird, start adding breeding observations to your checklists. Go to the detailed section for each species on your checklist and select the appropriate [breeding code](#). Whether you use mobile or web, it's just a few extra clicks.

We will cover more detail on the different breeding codes in future articles. We will also cover how to make sure you are entering observations within an atlas block and other tips to make your checklists more useful for data analysis. Until then, have fun exploring the joys of atlasing!

Join the Breeding Bird Atlas Community Online!

The Atlas [Website](#) is where we will provide birdwatching tips, field methods, how to use eBird, block maps, answers to frequently asked questions, news and events, you name it! The website is in the nestling stage but will be growing quickly over the next few months.

Follow us on [FaceBook](#) to share your stories, photos, and videos, ask questions, and discover events happening near you.

Share photos and videos and connect with other atlasers on [Instagram](#).

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