

ATLASING IN A NUTSHELL

Welcome to 2009-2013 Loudoun County Bird Atlas! Thank you for contributing your time and knowledge to this citizen science project, organized and funded by the Loudoun Wildlife Conservancy (LWC). The atlas will establish a comprehensive list of birds in Loudoun County, including their breeding status and distribution throughout the county. Important bird areas will be identified throughout the county, allowing LWC and their partners to design conservation strategies to permanently protect and enhance these areas.

Atlasing is slow, unlike regular bird walks, and can be very rewarding. Instead of counting the number of birds and moving on, atlasing requires that you take a few minutes to really observe the behavior of each bird you encounter. This document is intended as a crash course in atlasing. The atlas website (http://www.loudounwildlife.org/Bird_Atlas.htm) covers this information in greater detail and includes all atlas forms. The current atlas results can be viewed at http://www.pwrc.usgs.gov/bba/index.cfm?fa=explore.ResultsAllSpeciesSummary&BBA_ID=VA-Lou2009. We challenge you to add a new species or upgrade a breeding status for an atlas block!

1. BECOME FAMILIAR WITH YOUR BLOCK

You'll be provided with a printed map of your block. In addition, the following link provides an overlay of the atlas block system on Google Maps: <http://data.mapchannels.com/embed/loudounbba.htm>. Use these and other maps to identify habitat, possible species (including owls and nightjars), and potential access points.

2. KNOW WHERE TO GO ATLASING

As you examine your atlas block, focus on natural public areas such as county parks. These areas often host a large number of species and are easy to access at a variety of times. Privately owned lands are more restricted, but can provide a wide range of habitats and species. If possible, obtain permission from landowners to survey private land (contact the Atlas Coordinator for assistance) and remember to obey all posted signs. Good habitats often include wooded cemeteries, wooded parks, farm buildings, brushy fields, wooded residential areas, any water, schools, churches, golf courses, transmission lines, and bridges. Bluebird boxes, martin houses, and bird feeders are also worth observing.

3. COLLECT DATA

Take a blank field card with you every time you go atlasing. Please do not put data from two or more blocks or two or more visits on the same field card. The card lists species that may be observed in Loudoun County, with potential breeders denoted by an asterisk. Species in bold and/or italics font may require completion of an Atlas Verification Form, which can be downloaded from the atlas website (refer to the field card for an explanation of which species and conditions apply). As you survey your block, you'll use the field card to record data on each species you encounter. The card has four columns to choose from when describing the behavior of a species: Observed (O), Possible Breeder (PO), Probable Breeder (PR), and Confirmed Breeder (CO). Refer to the inside front cover of the field card for a list of evidence codes for each category. Fill in the appropriate columns with the appropriate codes (not check marks or numbers), taking care to put your data on the correct line. The evidence codes are very detailed, but don't let that discourage you. If you aren't sure which code to use, write down what you observe and the Atlas Coordinator can help you determine the appropriate code. A notebook is useful to have in the field for jotting down notes and recording details of unexpected species or behaviors.

Please spend time watching the birds you encounter, especially the uncommon ones. A few extra minutes of observation may reveal a behavior that raises the species from a code in the Observed category to a code in one of the breeding categories. It's important to note that all atlasers should respect the birds and their environment, considering the effect your actions will have on the birds, their habitat, and the rights of other people.

Here is a description of the evidence codes for each of the four categories (refer to pages 9-14 of the Atlas Handbook for examples, handbook available upon request):

Observed

This category includes birds with no evidence of breeding observed. The code you use depends on whether you observe the bird within or outside the species' safe dates. **Safe dates** indicate the dates during the breeding season that a species is no longer in migration and can be presumed to be on breeding territory. These dates are not nesting or egg dates.

E – Encounter with an individual of any species that may breed in Loudoun County, but observed *outside of safe dates* and not exhibiting breeding behavior. This code also applies to birds that are not thought to breed in Loudoun County (winter birds and migrants).

O – An individual of a species observed or heard in a block *within safe dates*, but not exhibiting breeding behavior and not in suitable breeding habitat. This code includes a wide range of species such as vultures, immature raptors, colonial nesting species not at the nesting colony, and any fly-over birds not using habitat within the block, such as crows, foraging swallows, and pigeons.

Possible Breeder

This category includes birds that are possibly breeding in your block and is applicable only within safe dates. Observations of birds in this category lack specific breeding evidence necessary to assign a Probable or Confirmed code.

X – An individual of a species observed or heard in suitable breeding habitat *within safe dates*, but not exhibiting any of the breeding behaviors described in the Probable or Confirmed categories.

Probable Breeder

This category includes birds with evidence suggesting they are probably breeding in your block, but not confirmed. With the exception of the P code, safe dates do NOT apply to the Probable category. Many species exhibit breeding behavior well outside of safe dates.

A – Agitated behavior or anxiety calls from adult. Parent birds respond to threats from other species with distress calls or by attacking intruders. This does not include response to “pishing” or tape playing.

P – Pair (male and female) of a species observed in suitable breeding habitat *within safe dates* in close proximity to and/or interacting non-aggressively with one another. Use this code with caution and try to use it infrequently. *This code cannot be used for species where the sexes are not separable (Blue Jay, Chickadee, etc.).*

T – Territorial behavior observed, including counter-singing, woodpecker drumming, aggressive interaction between individuals of the same species, or a singing male in the same location on visits separated by at least five days.

C – Courtship behavior or copulation observed between two birds. This includes displays, courtship feeding, and birds mating. *This code does not apply to raptors* (use code RC in the Confirmed category for observations of courtship behavior in raptors).

N – Bird visiting a probable nest site. *Primarily applies to cavity nesters.* This code applies when a bird is repeatedly observed flying into and out of a particular area where the bird may potentially nest, but no further evidence is seen. Use this code with caution and after repeated visits in cases where no other breeding evidence is available.

B – Adult wrens carrying nesting material or nest building or woodpeckers excavating holes. Both groups build dummy or roosting nests at the same time they are building a real one. However, an unmated male will exhibit the same behavior, so this code is in the Probable category.

Confirmed Breeder
The Confirmed category is applicable whenever evidence is found that indicates actual breeding or a breeding attempt by a species in your block. Safe dates do NOT apply to this category.
NB – Adult carrying nesting material, such as sticks or grass, or nest building. Carrying sticks is part of the courtship ritual (code C in the Probable category) for some species, so be cautious with this code. <i>This code cannot be used for wrens or woodpeckers (use code B in the Probable category). This code does not apply to raptors, crows, or colonial waterbirds unless they are observed building or returning to a nest.</i>
DD – Distraction display (especially injury-feigning) or apparent direct defense of unobserved nest and/or young. Agitated behavior can be mistaken for distraction, but is code A in the Probable category.
UN – Used nest or eggshells found. Use this code very seldom and with caution – nests of many species are difficult to identify, and used nests (especially in protected settings) can persist for years. If unsure, do not record anything. Do not collect the nest or shells (a permit is required).
FL – Recently fledged young or downy young incapable of sustained flight and restricted to an area through limited mobility. Be cautious of species that range widely soon after fledging. Young Brown-headed Cowbirds begging for food confirm both the Cowbird and the host species.
CF – Adult carrying food for young, feeding young, or removing fecal sacs from the nest site. <i>This code does not apply to raptors, gulls, terns, or crows unless they are observed returning to a nest.</i> These species feed their young long after wandering from the nest site or carry food a long distance. Keep in mind that some birds engage in courtship feeding, which should be recorded as code C in the Probable category.
RC – Raptor performing a courting display or <i>repeated</i> observations of a raptor carrying food to a specific area. Many raptors are prone to abandon their nest when disturbed by human activity, even if young are present. Please do not disturb raptors, especially if either one of these observations is made.
ON – Occupied nest, including parents entering and leaving the nest cavity and sitting birds which may be brooding young or incubating eggs. This code is intended for cavity nesters and nests too high to see the contents.
NE – Nest with eggs, including parents incubating eggs. Caution – the eggs must be carefully identified. A nest containing Brown-headed Cowbird eggs should count as code NE for both host species and Cowbird.
NY – Nest with young seen or heard. A Brown-headed Cowbird chick in a nest confirms the Cowbird and the host species.

Colonial waterbirds and Bald Eagles are known to forage far from the nest site. The only valid evidence codes for these species are in the Observed (E, O) and Confirmed (NB, UN, ON, NE, NY) categories.

4. REPORT DATA

Submit all field cards (and any notes or verification forms) for entry into the atlas database. Mail cards to:
 Loudoun County Bird Atlas Project
 4615 Newington Road
 Jefferson, MD 21755

Please don't hesitate to contact Spring Ligi, Atlas Coordinator, at sligi@loudounwildlife.org or 301-694-5628 with any questions or concerns. We encourage you to view the current atlas results on BBA (Breeding Bird Atlas) Explorer: <http://www.pwrc.usgs.gov/bba/>. Happy Atlasing!