



Frequently Asked Questions

1. If Virginia conducted a statewide bird atlas from 1985-1989 why should we organize another atlas in Loudoun County?

Many changes have occurred throughout Loudoun County over the past two decades. We have observed the decline of some species, such as the Northern Bobwhite, and the increase in other species, such as the Bald Eagle. By comparing our atlas results to data from the 1985-1989 Virginia Breeding Bird Atlas, we can begin to understand how development and growth in Loudoun County is impacting the birds and their habitat. Unlike the Virginia Breeding Bird Atlas, the Loudoun County Bird Atlas will collect data year-round for both breeding and non-breeding birds. Our atlas will create a baseline of information that can be used to indicate important bird areas. We can then design conservation strategies to permanently protect these areas.

2. My block includes portions of neighboring states and/or counties. Do I cover the territory in my block that's in the neighboring state or county?

When blocks cross state or county lines, atlasers should cover only the portion in Loudoun County. The one exception to this rule involves observations of birds on or over the Potomac River, which should be entered for the atlas.

3. When should I plan to visit my block?

To ensure adequate coverage of your block, we recommend atlasing once every 10-15 days during the peak breeding months (May through August) and once a month during the remaining months (September through April). Keep in mind that some species, such as the Great Horned Owl and Bald Eagle, nest earlier in the year while other species, such as the American Goldfinch and Indigo Bunting, nest later in the year. Early morning and early evening are often the best times to go atlasing because the birds are most active then.

4. What are safe dates and why are they important?

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.* Safe dates are relevant for birds that breed here in Loudoun County and are intended as a general guideline to help determine whether an individual bird is a possible breeder or a migrant. While recognizing safe dates is important, do NOT use safe dates as a primary reference for when to atlas. Keep in mind that some of the evidence codes are only applicable within the safe dates while other codes apply regardless of the date.

5. How do I collect data?

As you survey your block, you'll use an atlas field card to record data on each species you encounter. The field card has four columns to choose from when describing the behavior of a species: Observed, Possible Breeder, Probable Breeder, and Confirmed Breeder. Each category is divided into one or more evidence codes. Please spend time watching the birds you encounter – 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. When

atlasing, please do not approach a nest too closely, flush nesting birds, or handle eggs and young. The bird's well-being comes before collecting data for the atlas.

6. What should I do if I find a Species of Special Interest (these species are listed on the field card and in the Atlas Handbook)?

If you find a Species of Special Interest please make an effort to have others document the bird and be sure to send a completed Atlas Verification Form (found in the Atlas Handbook and on the atlas website) to the Atlas Coordinator as soon as possible.

7. How and where do I report my data?

The Loudoun County Bird Atlas partnered with the USGS Patuxent Wildlife Research Center to provide atlasers with an online interactive atlas database called BBA (Breeding Bird Atlas) Explorer. All registered Loudoun County atlasers can view current atlas results and enter data directly into the database (<http://www.pwrc.usgs.gov/bba/>) using the Data Entry Guide provided in the participant packet. If you do not have access to a computer please contact the Atlas Coordinator for assistance.

8. When should I report my findings?

We highly recommend entering your data as often as possible, preferably the same day as a survey. Entering your data often allows us to update the atlas database as the atlas progresses. In addition, entering data while it's fresh in your mind will help you decipher any scribbles in your field book and recall particular behaviors you observed. Taking 15 or 20 minutes to enter your data on the day you atlas is easier than accumulating hours worth of data entry for the end of the season and will likely result in fewer errors.

9. Does everyone who works in a block report their data separately or does one person report the pooled data?

Either method is acceptable. The data can either be submitted to a block owner for entry into the online atlas database or entered separately by the non-block owners as incidental data.

10. When is a block considered complete?

Though this is a five-year project, you are not being asked to make a five-year commitment. We recommend the following as a general guideline to determine when your block is complete: at least 50 breeding species are documented for the block, 75% of the breeding species are listed as Probable or Confirmed Breeders, and 25% of the species are listed as non-breeders (migrants and winter birds). Completing a block should take between 25 and 40 hours, depending on the habitat and the atlasers' experience. These hours will be spread throughout the four seasons, since we are interested in collecting year-round data on both breeding and non-breeding birds.

11. What is a Special Area? What should I do if my block contains a Special Area?

The following seven areas have been selected as Special Areas within the county: Banshee Reeks Nature Preserve (Leesburg), Dulles Wetlands (Leesburg), Blue Ridge Center for Environmental Stewardship (Neersville), Horsepen Preserve (Sterling), Algonkian Regional Park (Sterling), Claude Moore Park (Sterling), and Bles Park (Ashburn). We want to determine which species are found within these areas, regardless of the blocks that often divide them. If your block includes a portion or all of a Special Area, you will receive notification in your participant packet and have no additional responsibilities (other than surveying the area contained within the borders of your block). Use a new field card when surveying the Special Area to prevent

data mix-ups. When entering your data online, there will be an option to indicate that you surveyed a Special Area within your block. Data entered for Special Areas will be used for both the Special Area and the block. Once data collection for the atlas is complete, we will generate a new and improved species list for each Special Area.

12. Will I be collecting abundance data for species in my block?

Block work requires that you determine the presence of a species and its nesting status, if applicable. Please record any new data you have for bird species that have already been documented as nesting, but do not go out of your way to pursue this kind of data. Other volunteers will run special surveys called mini-routes to estimate the abundance of the more common and widespread species.

13. What happens to my data if the habitat changes during the five-year atlas and some species are no longer found in my block?

All data collected from April 2009 through 2013 will be included in the results of the Loudoun County Bird Atlas Project. The addition or loss of species due to ongoing change will be reflected in future county or state-wide atlases.

14. What can I do to find out about current road, development, and habitat conditions in my block?

Review the map of your block provided in your participant packet and, if possible, obtain a detailed road map for Loudoun County (such as an ADC map). These maps will help you identify habitat, possible species, and potential access points. If you are interested in viewing terrain and satellite images of your block, check out free mapping programs and sites such as Google Maps (<http://maps.google.com>), Google Earth (<http://earth.google.com>), or MapQuest (www.mapquest.com). The following link provides an overlay of the atlas block system on Google Maps: <http://data.mapchannels.com/embed/loudounbba.htm>. You may want to use the “zoom” feature to view details of specific areas within Loudoun County.

15. How can I improve or brush up on my knowledge of bird breeding behavior and nests before surveying my atlas block?

There is a list of references on bird biology in Appendix 3 of the Atlas Handbook for you to review as needed. A helpful, web-based collection of the life histories of North American Birds by Arthur Cleveland Bent and his collaborators can be found at <http://birdsbybent.netfirms.com/>.