

# The Wingbeat

A Quarterly publication of the Vermont Breeding Bird Atlas  
Volume 5 issue 2  
Spring 2007

[Click here for The Wingbeat archives](#)

## CONTENTS

1. Tasting Success
2. Finishing a Block: Tips from the Field
3. Squirrels May Make Confirmations Challenging in '07
4. Atlas t-shirts
5. Jeezum Crow Award – Allon Wildgust
6. Bird in Your Block and Raise \$ for the Atlas

### 1. TASTING SUCCESS

Okay everybody, here's where the rubber meets the road! Our final atlas season is here, and all we need is a final round of fun and dedicated birding, and we will be rewarded with a completed atlas. Can't you just taste the victory? Plans are in place, and we will complete the atlas as long as every atlaser follows through. Think of the satisfaction of finishing a block, and on those long days with few confirmations, let that serve as your motivator.

We have yet to reach safe dates for many species, but safe dates only represent the period when a species is not likely to be migratory. In other words, safe dates are usually not the same as nesting dates. That means that many individuals can be well into nesting before the safe date period. There are plenty of opportunities to start confirming birds now, and as article #2 below points out, it may be particularly important to obtain confirmations earlier this year. Also, be sure to read Ted Murin's tips below, it may make your final atlas season more efficient and rewarding!

If you break an ankle or throw out your back part way through the season, or for any reason cannot complete your block, please let your coordinator know as soon as possible. This will give them a chance to arrange a back-up plan before it's too late.

A big thanks to all of you in advance for making this a successful grand finale. In the interest of focusing on completing the atlas this summer, I will not issue a summer newsletter, but will see you on the atlas listserv instead.

One last time...Happy Atlassing!

- Rosalind Renfrew, VBBA Director

## 2. FINISHING A BLOCK: TIPS FROM THE FIELD

by Ted Murin

Most blocks are a breeze to complete. They house hundreds of species of birds all eager to present themselves for effortless confirmation. Okay, so I totally made that up. Actually, reaching the magical completion mark of 75 species with 35 confirmed requires a good deal of effort. In some blocks it can be downright challenging. So as we scheme to wrap up those unwrapped blocks, here are a few atlas-tested strategies and parlor tricks that might help.

Do you need more confirmations?

- Watch the female bird. If there is nesting activity afoot she will be in the midst of it.
- Inspect birds that are silent or only uttering occasional contact notes since they may be too busy doing some sort of wonderfully confirmable behavior to talk much.
- Check birds flying up from, or foraging around the forest floor (which is a popular spot to gather nesting material and food).
- Tracking down a singing male, particularly if he's singing emphatically, usually leads to a confirmation dry well. Warbling Vireos are probably the greatest exception to this however, since they often sing from their nests.
- Any bridge is a potential home for Rock Pigeons, Eastern Phoebes, or Barn Swallows. Pigeons like the high rises, phoebes prefer smaller, cozier digs, and swallows seem to favor a low ceiling with a wide open view.
- If you have any working farms in your block, you also have excellent potential for attaining the barnyard grand slam (along with associated bragging rights). Rock Pigeons, Barn Swallows, European Starlings, and/or House Sparrows are probably nesting somewhere thereabouts. The resident farmer can usually point you in the right direction.
- Most homeowners with bird feeders and bird boxes are happy to share information when you explain what you're up to. This might include an inventory of box inhabitants or even a tour of nests on the property.
- Bare river banks, gravel pits, and town sand piles make excellent homes for Bank Swallows and Belted Kingfishers. A bare bank tucked away in the woods will also work for a kingfisher, sometimes more than a half-mile from water. Look for the kingfisher's telltale tracks – two parallel ruts where they shuffle their feet – along the tunnel floor.

- Killdeer are renowned for distraction displays. A few other species including Common Yellowthroats and Song Sparrows are fairly quick to resort to this tactic as well. Displaying birds will drop low and flutter, flail, or drag their wings, then typically follow up with a miraculous recovery when you courteously back away. "Agitated" (probable) birds want to drive you off and usually complain from above. Birds performing a "distraction display" (confirmed) want you to chase them and usually operate at or near ground level.
- The peace and quiet of cemeteries with isolated conifers often appeals to Chipping Sparrows (which nest in the conifers).
- Blue spruces are nearly irresistible nesting magnets for many species including Mourning Doves, Chipping Sparrows, robins, grackles, and House Finches.
- Check the ideas below for finding more species, especially the ideas regarding a change of venue. Exploring for new species in a new neighborhood often leads to new confirmations as well.

Do you need more species?

- If you have a priority 1 block (surveyed in the first atlas), check out the list of species found during the first atlas. Even some of the second priority blocks were worked, so those are worth looking up as well. Besides providing specific species ideas, this often provides excellent hints as to entire habitat types that you may have missed. (From the Vermont Atlas home page [www.uvm.edu/~vbba/](http://www.uvm.edu/~vbba/) click on "Atlas database," then "Go to atlas database." Then from the database home page click on "by block" in the results column, select your block name and number, and hit "go.")
- Are you missing any common birds? Check the most common species found in the current atlas. Again this might not only provide some specific species ideas but missed habitat thoughts as well. (From the database home page, click on "All Species" in the results column, then click on "sort" over the center columns to sort the results from most to least common.)
- Have you visited every type of habitat available in your block? The most useful blockbusting tools I've found for tracking down those missing species (and habitats) are the online aerial photos at <http://terraserver.microsoft.com/>. Enter the nearest town name on the first page and select the most recent aerial map on the next page (and note the date of the photos). Then off you go exploring your block from above. At the larger scales you can toggle between aerial and topographical maps. Almost always this reveals some interesting nook or cranny missed from the ground – such as a hidden pond or wet spot in supposedly seamless woods. (The color aerial photos at [www.mapquest.com](http://www.mapquest.com) are also quite nice.)
- Explore new country. So you've sampled every habitat type but the numbers still come up short. When you closely review a map of your block you may be surprised to see what a small percentage of the total area has been surveyed. (Try shading in the parts that you've thoroughly covered.) Exploring completely new areas often leads to completely new birds. The aerial photos can again be very helpful.

- Though owling usually has a low percentage return for your time, there is a good chance that one or more owl species live in your block. One advantage of owling is that your best chances are well before the prime atlas season begins (now). Choose a calm night and remember that some owls, particularly Vermont's most common, Barred Owl, often take a while to respond. Fifteen minutes is a reasonable time to wait. Snipe and Woodcock are possible owl adventure bonuses.

- Are there any birders who live in your block? They could be a wonderful source of information or they may even have some records that they're just waiting to turn over to you.

Hopefully there are one or two thoughts here that might help with your block. Most importantly, remember to have fun. Studies show that having fun while doing an atlas can actually increase productivity by more than 23%. Okay, so I totally made that up too.

### 3. SQUIRRELS MAY MAKE CONFIRMATIONS CHALLENGING IN '07

Those darn squirrels. They're always robbing our feeders, wreaking havoc in our attics, and scolding us relentlessly while we're trying to hear the faint song of a distant warbler. And this year, there might be one more reason to scold them back.

Most of our confirmations come from observations of adults carrying food (CF code), and most confirmations are obtained in late June and early July. This year, the CF code may not be as reliable as it has been in past atlas years. The reasoning behind this speculation is based on known patterns in nature.

In areas with conifers, local red squirrel populations cycle with cone seed production. When the cone seed crop is poor, the squirrel population is negatively affected, and there are fewer squirrels the following year. Last year was a big cone production year, which means that squirrels had an abundant food supply. Abundant food supplies result in higher survival and more successful reproduction. In other words, this spring and summer there should be relatively more squirrels around. Good news for the squirrels, bad news for the birds.

Squirrels are a common nest predator, and nests experience higher rates of predation in "good" squirrel years. If more eggs and chicks are depredated by squirrels this year, we will have a lower probability of encountering adults that are feeding young. This year, it may be riskier to rely on parents busily feeding young late in the season in order to obtain breeding confirmations.

How to avoid getting skunked? A key strategy for obtaining confirmations this year is to look for the early signs of nesting, before the predators take their toll.

This year, focus on obtaining your confirmations earlier in the season when birds are building nests. Don't wait until young are being fed; instead, try to catch birds carrying nest material (code CN). Visiting your block throughout the rest of May and early June will score you some CN confirmations. In July, if the feeding young (FY) and carrying food (CF) codes don't come as easily, you won't be caught with too few confirmations at the end of our final atlas season.

*Editors Note: Do you have particular strategies that have helped you confirm species? I encourage you to post your ideas and success stories to the atlas listserv!*

#### 4. ATLAS T-SHIRTS

There are still atlas shirts available. These have been created for atlas volunteers and their family, and are provided at cost. They are high-quality, 100% organic cotton shirts, with the atlas logo on the upper left. View the shirt logo and download an order form (color and size availability on form) at:

[http://www.uvm.edu/~vbba/images/shirt\\_order\\_form.pdf](http://www.uvm.edu/~vbba/images/shirt_order_form.pdf)

Order now! Supplies are dwindling and these shirts will never be made again!

#### 5. JEEZUM CROW AWARD – ALLON WILDGUST, RUTLAND COUNTY

*Although Jeezum Crow Awards have already been given this year, there was one more person who was nominated and deserves recognition! Because this is the last year of the atlas, we squeezed in an "extra" award...*

Nominated by Sue Wetmore

My friend Allon Wildgust has been a longtime outdoors enthusiast and a former bird bander. When the Vermont Breeding Bird Atlas project came along he was a natural choice to participate. He is one those atlasers that coordinators dream of. Given the materials he took off in a cloud of dust and has become an obsessive about finding and confirming breeding birds in each of his blocks (see the fall 2005 issue of *The Wingbeat* on Block Attachment Disorder aka BAD). With his outdoor skills, Allon has ventured to seemly impossible to reach areas and with outstanding results. For example, Allon has just confirmed breeding red-bellied woodpeckers in one of his blocks. Two of his "completed blocks" have 53 and 49 confirmations to date.

Phone calls from Allon to myself and co-coordinator Sue Elliott usually leave us standing with our mouths agape with such messages as:

"I was in my block last night until 10:30."

"I visited three of my blocks yesterday and..."

“I’ve just picked up confirmation No. 48 and No. 49 in...”

and a personal favorite:

“I just assumed by taking on the priority block in a quad, I was agreeing to take on the secondary block.”

Allon is receiving the Jeezum Crow Award based on his perseverance, dedication and ability to withstand many perils in his enthusiasm to further the knowledge of the breeding birds of Vermont.

## 6. BIRD IN YOUR BLOCK AND RAISE \$ FOR THE ATLAS

Want more of a bang out of your birding? Easy: participate in the annual Birdathon, and raise money for the atlas at the same time that you’re out atlassing. Help us cross the finish line in this final year!

Like the Atlas itself, “Birdathon” is a birding extravaganza, but it lasts only one day. On Saturday May 19<sup>th</sup> (or a date close to that), you can bird your block, your back yard, or all over the state, and for every species you find, you raise money for the atlas. Sponsors pledge either a certain amount of money per species, or a fixed amount. Whether you’re a seasoned birder or just starting out, you can contribute!

There are two ways you can participate in the Birdathon:

1. Participate as a birder. Collect sponsors and go birding! Go birding by yourself or with fellow birders. Download a [sponsor form](#) and a [registration form](#) and be sure to check “Other” and write in “VBBA” on the line next to it.
2. Sponsor the Conservation Biology Team for their May 17<sup>th</sup> Birdathon. Just send an email Rosalind Renfrew at [rrenfrew@vinsweb.org](mailto:rrenfrew@vinsweb.org) indicating your flat pledge amount or pledge per species. Your donation will go directly towards getting blocks completed that have no volunteers to survey them. Rosalind will send you a full report of the Team’s adventures and findings.

The Atlas is the most comprehensive bird survey effort in the state, and it won’t happen again for another 25 years. You are already contributing in the most valuable way of all: with your time. If you can also lend support through Birdathon, you will be giving the atlas one more boost to meet our goals. Our reward is the priceless, large-scale information for conservation planning that only an atlas can provide. After all, the atlas is the very backbone of bird conservation.