

Potential Findings of the Upcoming Breeding Bird Atlas

by Rick Blom

Now that there are plans to redo the Maryland/DC Breeding Bird Atlas starting in the spring of 2002 there are undoubtedly a lot of MOS members saying to themselves: "Wait a minute. We just finished one. I just got the book. It's too soon."

Memory is a fragile vessel. It is approaching the twentieth anniversary of the initiation of field work from the last Atlas. It may not seem that long because of the delay in getting the first one in print, but it has been two decades.

Two decades may seem like a lot to most of us (in my case it stretches from the birth of my daughter at the beginning of the project to now, when she is in college), but it isn't much in evolutionary terms. Could there really have been enough change in so short a period of time that it justifies another massive commitment by the MOS and its members? Sure, a lot of things will not have changed: Starlings and Rock Doves and American Robins and Mourning Doves will still be in nearly every block. Black-throated Blue and Magnolia Warblers will still be confined to the mountains of Garrett County. Whatever Piping Plovers are left will still be confined to the beaches of Worcester County.

There will be changes though, important ones. Some birds are increasing and spreading, some are headed in the other direction. What follows is a list of the birds for which there will probably be significant changes from the first atlas to the next. It is a bit quirky because it is mine, and the only thing that is absolutely certain is that there will be surprises. By the time you have finished the list you should be impatient to get to the field work and you will have probably thought of at least one bird that I missed.

Mute Swan: The results of the first atlas show it largely confined to the Chesapeake Bay edges of the central Eastern Shore. It has since spread north and south, across the Bay, and up the Potomac River. The emerging controversy over how to deal with Mute Swans means that a complete understanding of the current range is critical.

Canada Goose: A lot of people are beginning to think of them as starlings with webbed feet. They were widespread by the end of the atlas, but there were a lot of gaps, especially in Baltimore and Carroll Counties. Now they are a candidate to appear in virtually every block.

Black Duck: Possible declines may be reflected in a more restricted range and in occurrence in fewer blocks. It is important to clarify the status away from the Bay by being cautious of hybrids and identification problems.

Black Vulture: Has been increasing and spreading for more than a century. May now be more widespread in Allegany County, and there are hints that it may have gained a foothold in Garrett.

Ring-necked Pheasant: Fast disappearing as a breeding bird in Maryland. It may be virtually extirpated in many areas and will be found in far fewer blocks in its traditional stronghold in the Piedmont and Ridge and Valley sections.

Wild Turkey: Re-introduction efforts mean it should be found in every county this time, a dramatic change from twenty years ago.

Northern Bobwhite: Serious long-term declines continue and it may now be absent everywhere except the Coastal Plain.

Common Nighthawk: Continent-wide declines continue and it is probable that they will be found in fewer blocks. It has been decades since a nest on the ground was found and any occurrence away from roof-tops will be notable.

Whip-poor-will/Chuck-will's-widow: Atlas results showed that Chucks were replacing Whips on the lower Eastern Shore and along the edges of the Bay. The pattern appears to be continuing and range extension by Chucks and range contraction by Whips is anticipated.

Red-headed Woodpecker: Anecdotal evidence suggests that some traditional sites may no longer be occupied. Expect a slightly contracted range and fewer sites. It is possible that the declines will be bigger than we expect.

Alder Flycatcher: Some observers feel it is getting harder to find in Garrett County, perhaps being replaced by Willow Flycatcher.

Willow Flycatcher: The atlas found the first evidence of spread onto the Coastal Plain. The question is whether the pattern has continued and if the species is still expanding.

Least Flycatcher: Long-term declines continue and it will undoubtedly be more restricted and may be quite hard to find in its traditional range in Garrett County.

Tree Swallow: The atlas recorded the initial stages of the spread from Tidewater areas across the state but field work in Baltimore and Carroll Counties was done before the birds moved in. Because of bluebird boxes the species is now a candidate to occur in almost every block.

Bank Swallow: Colonies are ephemeral. The atlas recorded a shift from traditional sites along the Bay to inland locations at quarries. There is no telling where they will be next time.

Red-breasted Nuthatch/Golden-crowned Kinglet: Both species have been spreading south for 50 years and by the end of the atlas had reached not only Garrett, but extreme northern Carroll County, using spruce plantations. Has the spread continued? Are the numbers in Garrett growing?

Brown-headed Nuthatch: Declining and the range is contracting. They are already known to be absent from many areas of the lower Eastern Shore where they previously bred.

Brown Creeper: The atlas revealed that though they were scarce they could occur anywhere in the state. Easily overlooked, they may be more common than thought, part of what seems to be a range-wide expansion southward.

Carolina Wren: Post-atlas there was a major die-off, but they may have recaptured some of the ground in the western part of the state.

Northern Mockingbird: Has it finally gotten a foothold in Garrett, the last county where it was accidental as a breeding bird?

Brown Thrasher: Long-term declines have been great and for the first time it may be that it will not be a candidate to be found in virtually every block. The percentage of blocks it is recorded in will be a key indicator for the species.

Cedar Waxwing: We were unprepared at the beginning of the atlas to get a large number of reports from the Coastal Plain but by the second year it was obvious the species had spread into the region in numbers. If the expansion has continued, they are now a candidate to be found in nearly every block.

Blue-winged/Golden-winged Warblers: Golden-wingeds have been in a range-wide decline for decades, being replaced by Blue-wingeds. Garrett is the Maryland stronghold for Golden-wingeds, but by the end of the atlas, Blue-wingeds were making inroads and mixed pairs and hybrids were being found. Have Blue-wingeds continued to gain ground and are Golden-wingeds on their way out as Maryland breeders?

Yellow-throated Warbler: An expanding species at the time of the atlas, pushing west and north along the rivers into the Piedmont and Ridge and Valley. They have apparently made it at least to the Pennsylvania border in all counties except Garrett and they may have established themselves there along the Potomac. They are also candidates to invade the northwest corner of Garrett from the west.

Cerulean Warbler: The declines have been so severe that they are now candidates for federal listing. Anecdotal evidence suggests that they will be much harder to find this time and will occur in notably fewer blocks.

Yellow-breasted Chat: Another declining species that will probably be found in notably fewer blocks as the second-growth thicket habitat it prefers continues to disappear. Other species that share the habitat and all also declining, including **Prairie Warbler**, **Eastern Towhee**, and **Field Sparrow**, may also be harder to find in many blocks.

Blue Grosbeak: An expanding species. Thirty years ago reports made the rare bird alert. Expansion into Allegany and perhaps Garrett may have already occurred and east of there they are candidates in nearly every block.

Vesper Sparrow/Grasshopper Sparrow: The two most important of a group, the grassland birds, that is the fastest declining on the continent. The results of the next atlas will undoubtedly show significantly compacted ranges and occurrence in many fewer blocks. They may already be extirpated from parts of the state where they have bred in the past. Two other grassland species, **Eastern Meadowlark** and **Red-winged Blackbird**, are also declining and while they were more widespread to start with, the change may show up this time.

Swamp Sparrow: The Coastal Plain race, *nigrescens*, may be in real trouble and studies indicate that it may be gone from many of the Bay marshes where it was found before. The difference this time may be dramatic.

Purple Finch: A Garrett County breeder that may be slowly slipping away, being replaced by House Finches.

House Finch: Going up and up and up. By the end of the atlas they had spread over most of the state but there were still gaps, especially on the Eastern Shore and in Western Maryland. Now might be found in virtually every block and may be one of the commonest breeding birds.

House Sparrow: Surprisingly, it seems to be declining as it is replaced in many suburban and urban areas by House Finches. May now be largely confined in rural areas to barns with large animals.

There are some species so rare, or that have declined so much, that they may be represented by only a few pairs. Any record of the following birds would be extremely significant: **Wilson's Plover**, **Upland Sandpiper**, **Laughing Gull**, **Yellow-bellied Sapsucker**, **Long-eared Owl**, **Short-eared owl**, **Bewick's Wren**, **Sedge Wren**, **Swainson's Thrush**, **Loggerhead Shrike**, **Swainson's Warbler**, **Nashville Warbler**, and **Henslow's Sparrow**.

Some species are fairly recent additions to the state breeding list or have returned after a long absence. A new atlas will tell us if they have settled in and are expanding or increasing or if they tested the water and reversed field. The list includes: **Brown Pelican**, **Double-crested Cormorant**, **Northern Shoveler**, **Green-winged Teal**, **Ring-necked Duck**, **Ruddy Duck**, **Northern Goshawk**, **Saw-whet Owl**, **Yellow-rumped Warbler**, and **Pine Siskin**.

Marsh Birds: There is compelling evidence of long-term declines in almost all species, but fresh marsh birds have been especially hard hit, such as **King Rail**, **Common Moorhen**, and **Least Bittern**. Atlas coverage was adequate only because of specially funded surveys. Even so, a concentrated post-atlas survey showed that we missed many birds. Normal atlas work will not provide useful data no matter how dedicated the participants.

Parklands: Two species associated with more open woods and parklands have been declining for many years: **Eastern Kingbird** and **Baltimore Oriole**. By the end of the atlas, field workers were working hard to add them to many blocks, although it could usually be done with diligence. The differences this time may not be dramatic but both species will probably be found in fewer blocks, the tip of a slowly disappearing iceberg.

The new stuff!! This is the fun part, predicting (guessing) which will be the new species added to the state's breeding list this time around. My own list of candidates is long because I have learned that successful predicting means covering almost every possibility. Still, it is by no means complete and there is a perfectly reasonable chance that at least half the new breeders won't be on here. The following are legitimate (mostly) contenders, with my five top choices underlined: Caspian Tern, Red Crossbill, Mississippi Kite, White Ibis, Olive-sided Flycatcher, American Wigeon, Yellow Rail, Common Merganser, Common Snipe, Eurasian Collared-Dove, Clay-colored Sparrow, Western Meadowlark, White-throated Sparrow, and my personal favorite quirky choice, Lesser Black-backed Gull (someone has to get out to the gull colony at Sparrow's Point)!

I think the evidence is overwhelming that not only is it time to start a new atlas, but that we will hardly have time in the five years of field work to answer all the questions that have emerged since the first one. And that doesn't even take into account the surprises that will emerge from every day's worth of field work.