

PRESS RELEASE

BREEDING BIRD ATLAS
IOWA ORNITHOLOGISTS UNION
IOWA DEPT. OF NAT. RESOURCES
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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

January 1, 1987

Do you enjoy watching birds particularly on a nice summer day? You can volunteer to be a part of the Iowa Breeding Bird Atlas Project. The atlas is a five year project sponsored by the Iowa Ornithological Union and the Iowa Department of Natural Resources. Its purpose is to determine the distribution of Iowa's breeding birds. Such information is useful for making habitat associations which may lead to the preservation of natural areas. With a baseline study such as this we will also be able to monitor the effects of human activities on bird populations. In addition, the information will be useful for documentation of range expansion and contraction.

Iowa has been divided into 860 blocks. Each block is nine square miles in size. Participants record the observations of breeding behavior for each species identified. This is an excellent way to acquaint yourself with Iowa's birds while at the same time contributing to a worthwhile effort. There are breeding blocks in every county, so much of the work can be done close to home. Usually about 20-25 hours are spent in a block throughout the course of a year. Field trips to a block could be arranged by bird clubs, environmental groups or nature centers. Coordinators are also needed to help assign blocks and collect and organize the data. For more information contact Doug Reeves, 515-432-2823.

S W I B B A N

I am typing this issue of the SouthWest Iowa Breeding Bird Atlas Newsletter in my basement to avoid the heat. The birds are still outside, though, and most are still breeding.

To encourage you continue looking for birds breeding, I quote from the introduction to Britain's Atlas:

"Experience showed that, with the obvious exception of early breeders, it was far easier to obtain evidence of breeding for most species late in the season--by observing adults carrying food, or recently fledged young--than early in the season. In one example, the proportion of proved breeding records obtained in a day's field work increased from 35% in late April and early May to over 70% in July. . . The actual finding of nests was therefore a relatively minor part of Atlas fieldwork, which was lucky since this is an aspect of ornithology at which few birdwatchers are proficient and one which can cause excessive disturbance." p. 19



Let's find those breeding birds!

- Britain's Atlas -

Field work for this project was done from 1968 through 1972. The results have been published in book form. I am impressed with the book. On one page is a map of Great Britain with dots to show the areas where the birds were found and the degree of certainty that they were breeding. On the facing page are a picture and information about the species, including any problems with interpreting the map.

Few libraries around here will have the book on the shelf, though the university libraries should. However, any library can order it through interlibrary loan service if you want to see it.

Sharrock, J. T. R., ed. 1976. The Atlas of Breeding Birds in Britain and Ireland. British Trust for Ornithology, Beech Grove, Station Road, Tring, Hertfordshire, England.

What about "possibles"?

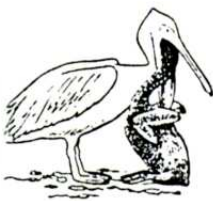
I have been asked if reports should be sent in about birds that are not proven to have bred, the probables and possibles. Certainly send them in! There just isn't enough time in five years to confirm all the fifty or more breeding species in each of our over 900 study blocks. Confirm all the species you can, but report everything present. The British Atlas has a useful comment:

"The fact that a species has not been known to breed in your county before is not a valid reason for (failing to report a possible). Summering non-breeding birds should be included, provided there is suitable habitat." p. 21

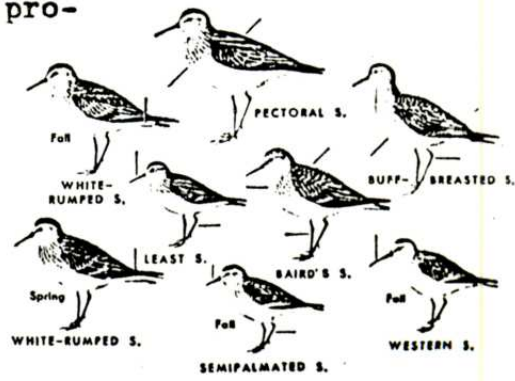
What about species that just couldn't breed here? Report them as "observed". However, unless you can be completely certain that the bird did not breed, report it as a possible. "The Atlas must, so far as possible, contain facts and not opinions." - Britain's Atlas, p. 21.



WILSON'S PHALAROPE
Spring



Redhead





HORNED LARK - Breeds very early in the year (even late March) in bare, cultivated fields. Nest in a hollow, eggs speckled.

DICKCISSEL - Size of House Sparrow, with Yellow breast and black bib. Hayfields, roadsides, rarely cultivated fields. Nest bulky, low above the ground. Eggs, unusual for open-country birds, are blue.

BOBOLINK - Male easily identified as it sits on a tall weed to sing. Black below, white, brown, and yellow above. May sing in flight. Prefers low moist meadows, pastures with long grass. Uncommon. Female brown. Eggs glossy, with red-brown speckles.

RED-WINGED BLACKBIRD - Abundant and versatile. Nests in marshes, fields, pastures, road ditches, hayfields. Nest may be placed in grass or other vegetation just above the ground, or up higher, even to 15 or 20 feet up in a bush. Eggs blue with brown spots and scrawls.

MEADOWLARKS - Nest in grass. Note that it has a roof. Eggs speckled with brown and purple. **PROBLEM:** Eastern and Western Meadowlarks both nest here. Nests and eggs similar. Easterns prefer a lush growth of grass, but habitats overlap. Distinguish them by song or call note.

BROWN-HEADED COWBIRD - This nest parasite lays its eggs (which have brown and white speckles) in the nests of the birds on this page and Yellowthroat. Eggs larger than those of Yellowthroat or sparrows, differ in color from Red-winged Blackbird and Dickcissel eggs.



Open-country sparrows build small nests of plant fibers or grass on or just above the ground in low vegetation. The eggs are small and speckled. Nests and young are best identified by the adults nearby. Adults differ in habitat and song as well as appearance. These are listed below.

SONG SPARROW - Brushy area, usually near a stream. Song begins with three or four clear introductory notes, then a variable warble.

VESPER SPARROW - Cultivated fields. Song begins with 2 introductory notes, then two on a different pitch, then a warble, all in a minor key.

LARK SPARROW - Beautiful sparrow. Habitat is cultivated fields and sparse pastures. Song a series of warbles, trills, notes, buzzes, with pauses.

GRASSHOPPER SPARROW - Flat-headed sparrow of pastures, prairie. Song a very high-pitched, insect-like buzz.

SAVANNAH SPARROW - Uncommon in pastures, grassy roadsides. Song "tsit, tsit, tsit, tseeee, tsaaaaay."

AMERICAN GOLDFINCH - Nest a densely packed cup in a tall weed or low shrub, lined with thistle down. Eggs blue or green, pale, unmarked.

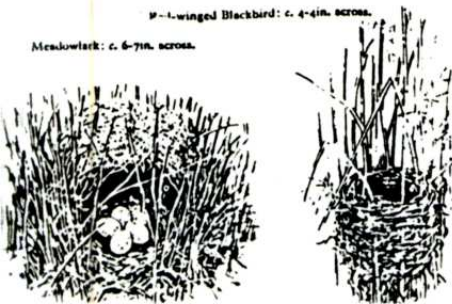
FIELD SPARROW - Brushy fields, edges. Song simple notes, speeding up, all on one pitch or descending. Almost forgot this one!



AMERICAN GOLDFINCH

Red-winged Blackbird: c. 4-6in. across.

Meadowlark: c. 6-7in. across.





SWIBBAN



BOB-WHITE



HUNGARIAN PARTRIDGE

July 5, 1985. This SWIBBAN is devoted to those frustrating birds that nest on the ground in open country. The nests are truly difficult to find, for they are well-hidden in the kind of habitat that puts birders to sleep. For this reason, nests are usually found by farmers or soil conservation workers. (Next year you might want to xerox this and pass out copies among your farming friends. On the other hand, that might confirm in their minds your insanity.) If birders find evidence that these birds are breeding, it is usually by seeing the parents carrying food or by finding the young birds. (Note that young sparrows are streaky brown nothingnesses, best identified by the parents.)

Birds covered here inhabit dry fields. Birds of marshes and wet fields will be covered in another issue.



Ring-necked Pheasant

DUCKS - Ducks will nest in dry fields near water. The nests are made of plant material and lined with feathers. Best identified by the mother, but Blue-winged Teal eggs are small, 46 mm long compared to 58 mm for Mallard.



RING-NECKED PHEASANT

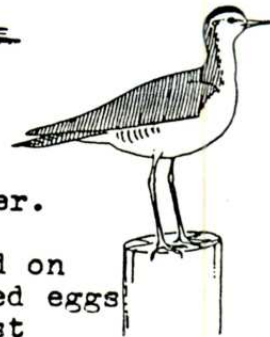
RING-NECKED PHEASANT - Hollow in ground, perhaps lined with plant material. Eggs olive. Young are often seen on the road in mid- to late summer.

BOBWHITE - Like pheasant, but small pear-shaped eggs are white. Young rarely seen on road.



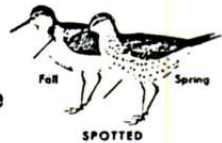
KILLDEER

GRAY PARTIDGE - The Hun is an introduced game bird. It lives in Harrison County on the Missouri River floodplain and is moving south. Nest and Eggs like Pheasant, but smaller.



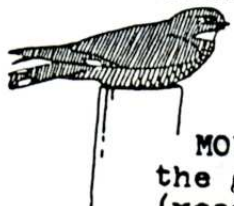
KILLDEER - This noisy brown and white bird has two black band on the breast when adult, one when immature. The well-camouflaged eggs are laid on the ground in the open. If you approach the nest the parents run about, make noise, and may stumble across the ground flashing the rusty tail.

SPOTTED SANDPIPER - Uncommon nester in fairly bare areas. Note that the adults frequently bob up and down as they walk.



SPOTTED

UPLAND SANDPIPER - Uncommon nester in prairie or meadows. Frequently sits on a fence post and gives a loud "wolf whistle". Eggs brown, speckled. Downy young mottled brown above, unlike the solid-colored young Spotted Sandpiper and Killdeer.



MOURNING DOVE - This ubiquitous bird occasionally nests on the ground. Such nests are sometimes found by those walking (weeding) soybeans. Two white eggs.



YELLOW-THROAT

COMMON NIGHTHAWK - Though nearly all Iowa's Nighthawks now nest on roofs that are flat and covered with gravel, they used to nest on the ground. No nest. Two heavily speckled eggs.

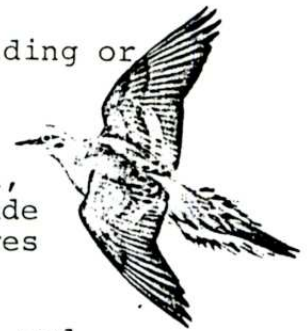
COMMON YELLOWTHROAT - An oddity; a ground-nesting warbler or grassy or weedy areas. The parents are warm brown above, yellow on the throat and breast below. Note the male's black mask. The nest is bulky for its small size, and placed just above the ground in dense grass or other vegetation.



This issue of the SouthWest Iowa Breeding Bird Atlas Newsletter is devoted to those species you could find nesting in your yard, whether you live in town or in the country.

ROCK DOVE - This familiar pigeon builds a twig nest on a building or under a bridge. It lays two white eggs.

MOURNING DOVE - This bird builds a flimsy twig nest on the ground or in a bush or tree. Like the Pigeon, it lays two white eggs. Dove nests are so poorly made that the nests sometimes just fall down, but the doves readily re-nest.



SCREECH OWL - These tiny owls nest in holes in trees, and they may nest right in town--anywhere there are trees. It is rarely found. Listen for the song, a long wavering whistle.



COMMON (YELLOW-SHAFTED) FLICKER - Like all woodpeckers, the Flicker lays white eggs in a hole in a tree. Unlike most, it may use a ready-made nest, even a nest box.



RED-HEADED and DOWNY WOODPECKERS - dig their own holes (of the appropriate size) in dead trees and lay white eggs.



BARN SWALLOW - These build nests of mud pellets. The nests are located on ledges, usually in or on buildings.



PURPLE MARTIN - These chunky dark swallows live in Martin houses. Or at least sometimes they do. More often Martin houses are inhabited by Sparrows or Starlings. Originally, Martins nested in holes in trees, but they rarely do any more.



Chimney Swift

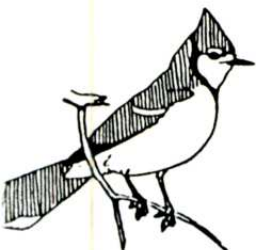


CHIMNEY SWIFT - These dark, chittering birds really do nest in chimneys.

The small nest, made of twigs glued together with saliva, does not block the escape of smoke from the chimney. Rarely the nest or the incredibly ugly nestling will fall down into a fireplace, but otherwise the only evidence of the birds nesting is the sight of them stalling out above the chimney and fluttering down it.

DOWNY WOODPECKER

BLUE JAY - This bird is so noisy it is a surprise how hard the nest can be to find. It is a fairly bulky twig nest, sometimes incorporating a little mud, lined with fine material. The eggs are speckled and variable. The nest is in a tree, usually 10 to 40 feet up.



BLACK-CAPPED CHICKADEE - This one nests in a small hole, perhaps a wren nest. The nest is made of fur, sometimes plucked from a sleeping raccoon. It may be covered with moss or other soft material. The eggs are white with brown speckles, and tiny.

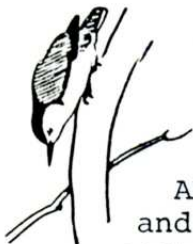


HOUSE WREN - This lively little bird nests in any small hole. Only the male sings, and he also stuffs every hole in his territory with twigs, proving to the prospective mate that the holes are suitable for homes. The female selects one of these nests and completes it by lining it with fine material, and then lays up to seven tiny eggs covered with reddish speckles.

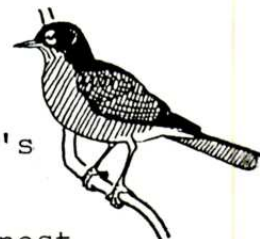


HOUSE WREN

WHITE-BREASTED NUTHATCH - The upside-down bird nests in a hole in a dead tree. The nest may be made of almost anything, including lumps of dirt, but is usually made of hair and grass. Eggs 5 - 9, white or pinkish with red and brown spots and speckles. Hard to find.



AMERICAN ROBIN - Robin nests are made of mud and grass, and located on a ledge of a building or on a tree limb. Some nest sites are odd - one fledged young from atop our drill press, for example. The eggs are, appropriately enough, Robin's egg blue. The speckled young are often seen in the lawn.



BROWN THRASHER - The "Brown Thrush" makes a bulky twig nest in a bush and lays finely speckled eggs.

GRAY CATBIRD - This gray bird may nest in the same bushes the Thrasher (its relative) uses, but the nest is smaller and the eggs are blue, a more intense blue than a Robin's.



Figure 7
Brown Thrasher

EUROPEAN STARLING - Starlings nest in holes in buildings or trees. They can often be seen in spring perched before a hole, singing away, the wings lowered and moved in circles. The eggs are light blue.

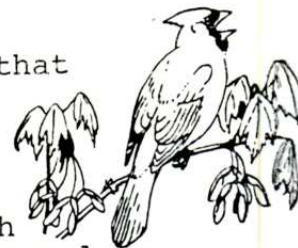


NORTHERN (BALTIMORE) ORIOLE - Though the Oriole is brightly colored, it is not seen much, as it stays in leafy trees. The husky whistled song is variable, and thus difficult to learn, but useful. The nest, of course, is unmistakable as it hangs down from its branch.

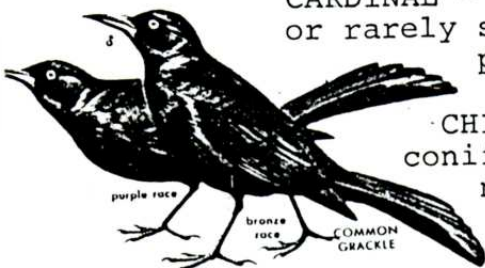


Northern Oriole: c. 3-in. across.

COMMON GRACKLE - This is the most common Blackbird that nests in town. The bulky stick nest is usually placed in a conifer tree, sometimes quite low. The eggs are blue with brown spots.



CARDINAL - This one puts a small twig nest in a bush or rarely small tree. The eggs are white with brown and purplish spots and speckles.



CHIPPING SPARROW - This territorial sparrow prefers conifers for a nest site, but will nest in bushes. The neat little nest is made of plant material and lined with hair. The tiny eggs are blue-green with chocolate spots.



HOUSE SPARROW - This introduced sparrow is actually a weaver finch. It often nests in holes in a tree or building, and then the nest may be abbreviated, but when it nests in a tree the nest is large and football-shaped, with a hole in one end. The eggs are off-white with brown and purplish spots.



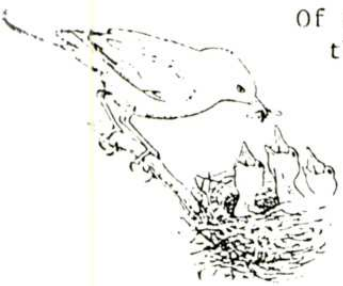
summer
CHIPPING SPARROW



HOUSE SPARROW

Fourth issue of the SouthWest Iowa Breeding Bird Atlas Newsletter, 22 May, 1985. This issue gives hints on how to proceed with the atlas study.

Of course, the best evidence that birds are breeding is to find the nest or the young birds. This is, however, often difficult to do. If you do find a nest, record it using these codes:



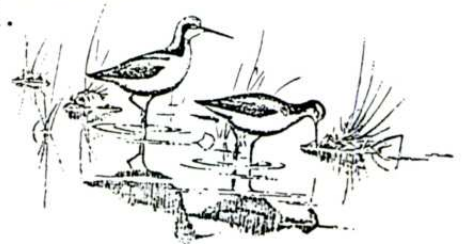
- NE - a nest with eggs
- NY - a nest with young
- UN - a used nest (rarely identifiable, but sometimes useful, as with Baltimore Oriole)
- ON - an occupied nest that you can't see into, or don't want to look for fear of scaring the birds
- FL - young birds out of the nest, but still in care of their parents, or too young to travel.

But what if you can't find the nest? In many cases, the parent's behavior leaves you certain there is a nest nearby, but you can't find it or don't have time to find it. There are Confirmed codes for this.

- NB - This code is useful for birds carrying twigs, grass, or pellets of mud. When birds do this they are building, and that's proof of nesting even if you never see the nest.
- DD - Distraction Display. Some birds call or scold or go into elaborate "broken wing" acts if you get close to the nest. This is intended to draw you away from the nest or young, and is often so successful you never find the nest. That's OK.
- AY - a bird carrying food or a fecal sac is clearly attending young - taking care of them. That's good enough proof of breeding even if you don't see the young.

In all the cases above, you could be sure that the birds were certainly building a nest or caring for a nest or young. Sometimes, however, you have reason to believe a birds is nesting, or intending to nest, but you have no good proof. The codes below are used when you know the bird intends to breed, but you don't know really if it did.

- P - a pair of birds (male and female) is seen in suitable nesting habitat.
- T - territory. I think this may be the most useful code of all. You just hear a bird singing or see it defending its territory. Since migratory birds will sing too, you must hear it sing twice a week apart. This suggests the bird is a resident.
- C - Courtship behavior. I don't know the courtship behaviors of most species, but if a male and female are together and behaving oddly, I suspect they are courting.
- N - Visiting a likely nest site (but you're not sure there is a nest)
- A - Agitated behavior, but you're not sure if there is a nest nearby or not.
- B - nest building in wrens or woodpeckers. Woodpeckers excavate holes in trees to sleep in and wrens (male wrens) build lots of extra nests in an attempt to persuade a female (or some females) that his territory is a great place to nest. Obviously, a nest alone is not proof that a wren or woodpecker succeeded in finding a mate and breeding.



Right now I am going out to the various study areas (blocks) and searching for nests or suspicious behavior (on the part of birds) but I stop from time to time at landmarks and listen. Then I write down what songs I hear at that landmark. If I come back at least a week later and hear the same kind of bird in the same place, I mark it "T". If you don't know songs, you may see the bird singing, at least in open country.

There are a couple more useful codes. These are for cases where you believe the bird must have nested but you have absolutely no evidence.

|| - "Hypothetical" - used for species seen in an area suitable for nesting, but with no evidence of nesting. I may end up using this code for a lot of common breeders like Blue Jay, White-breasted Nuthatch, Black-capped Chickadee, and so forth since their nests are often very difficult to find and they do not sing anything that I recognise as song.

X - this code is basically similar, but the birds did sing, only you didn't check to find out if they sang again a week later.

Obviously, finding nests is important, but you can provide a tremendous amount of information without ever seeing a nest. Write down the birds that sing repeatedly in your study block, and that is enough. Of course, if you then find a nest or good evidence of one, write that down too.

-- ATLAS NEWS --

Back in April, Ross Silcock and Tanya Bray visited the BBA block in Waubonsie Park. They went down to the picnic area to see if the Gnatcatchers were back. They parked the car, got out, and found a pair of Gnatcatchers building a nest near the end of a branch right over their heads. It doesn't always happen that way!



Blue-gray Gnatcatcher: c. 2-2 1/2 in. across.

The Bakehouses in the Willow Slough block have been busy with school, which does not end for them until tomorrow. They have found a Robin building a nest, an early House Wren with young in the nest, and a Barn Swallow visiting the spot about Jeanne-Marie's window where it has nested in the past. (Codes NB, NY, and N, respectively). Bobolinks and Red-winged Blackbirds are agitated when a person walks by (Code A). A pair of Barred Owls have been singing in the woods by the river (Code T or P).

The Bakehouses have had a pair of Wood Ducks visiting their big hollow Sugar Maples, but they have been unable to find the bird's nest. They recorded the species with Code P. Yesterday I found a female and 6 tiny downy ducklings at Willow Slough, so now they are Confirmed breeders, Code FL.



Wood Duck

Don DeLong at Lake Manawa had already found a lot of breeding before I contacted him. The park personell have put out boxes for Wood Ducks, Kestrels, and Bluebirds, and they already found breeding Wood Ducks, Bluebirds, House Wrens, and Tree Swallows. They have found Preasant, Grackle, and Robin nests too. At the rate they are going they will have a huge list by the end of five years!



Don found one truly amazing species. Oh, its not amazing that the species is there; birders have heard it in early morning for years. It's just that you don't see them. One day Don was hunting mushrooms in the woods along the Missouri River.

THREE TIMES a flushed a Woodcock that flew a short distance away doing an oddly distracting flight. He looked each time at the place the bird had flown up from and found downy young, three in each of two broods and two in the third. This was April 26, very early for hatched young.



American Woodcock, dorsal pattern.



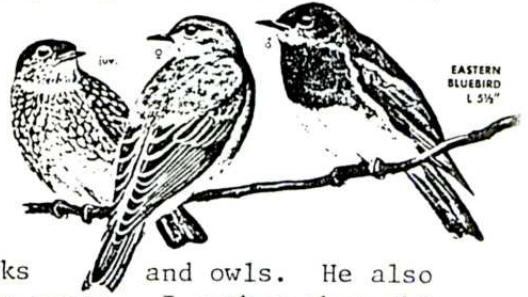
AMERICAN WOODCOCK
L 8 1/2"

At the Iowa Ornithologist's Union meeting in Marshalltown, I met Debbie Pearson's Aunt. In this indirect way I learned about a frustrating trip to Lake Anita. They got out of the car and very quickly found nests of Eastern Kingbird and Northern (Baltimore) Oriole. They found no other evidence of breeding the rest of the day.

Betty Wilson, my mother-in-law, visited Theresa Durbin near Emerson. The Durbins have an old dove-cot under the eaves of the barn. Nothing's nested there in years. This year a Great Horned Owl raised two big fluffy babies there. The Durbin's barn is about an eighth of a mile out of the Emerson BBA block, but the parents are known to spend a lot of time across the road in the block, so this was coded "NY" and Great Horned Owls living in the block are Confirmed as breeders.

The Bakehouse kids and I have put up Bluebird boxes in the Folsom Lake block, around the north end of Pony Creek. We've had three nests and banded ten young Bluebirds. (Code NY)

I was excited to find Tree Swallows visiting one of the boxes. Some people consider these birds to be problems in their Bluebird boxes, but I'd never had one in a box before, so I was happy. At the last visit, the swallows had not built a nest, but I can record them as code "N", visiting a possible nest site. Apparently they intended to breed, whether they do or not.



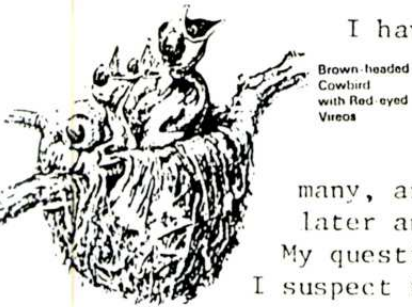
Dan Varland in Clarinda studies hawks and owls. He also puts orphaned Great Horned Owls in foster nests. I gather that this year he has been unusually busy, and filled up all his nests. I will send him a map of Page County with this newsletter, and hope to find out that some of these nests are within BBA study blocks.



On a birding trip last Thursday I got the strong (but of course incorrect) impression that this BBA work is a snap. I drove into Riverton Game Management Area in Fremont county, in a BBA block. There in a tiny bush by the road was a Red-winged Blackbird nest. It had four Blackbird and two Brown-headed Cowbird eggs, confirming breeding for both the Blackbirds and the nest parasite Cowbird (Code NE).

A little further along the road was a Mourning Dove sitting on a nest in plain sight, about four feet up in a scrawny Mulberry. Later, while I was looking at sandpipers (and loosing my field guide in the weeds) I saw a female Northern Oriole fly up with plant fibers in her beak (Code NB).

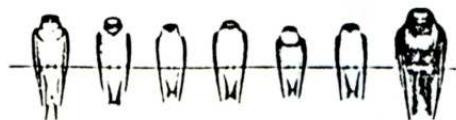
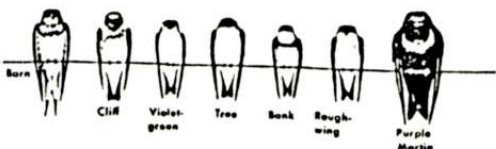
Unfortunately, it isn't always that simple.



I have a question you may be able to help me with. It concerns Cowbirds and Cardinals. The two species have very similar eggs and the young are similar in size. Cowbirds frequently lay eggs in the nests of Cardinals. In fact, they may lay two or three. These parasitized nests may end up with six or eight eggs, far too many, and several fall out or get cold and die. So I come back a week later and find four young, two with white down and two with gray down. My question is, which nestlings are Cardinals and which are Cowbirds?

I suspect that the Cardinals are gray and the Cowbirds are white (or are variable, some white and some gray). If any of your observations can help me figure this out, I'd like to know about it.

Please send me your interesting observations and what birds you are finding on your BBA blocks. My address is Rt. 1, Box 41, Hastings, Iowa 51540, and I'm Barbara Wilson. Thanks.





--- BRIDGE BIRDS ---

Certain Iowa birds can ONLY be found nesting under bridges or in similar locations. The Cliff Swallow, for example, and the Eastern Phoebe. Others are found in many habitats, including bridges. Looking under bridges is a great way to confirm nesting birds, not least because bridges are in the road's right-of-way, so you aren't trespassing.

Necessary equipment: The going is often soft under bridges, so you need a pair of rubber boots.

I recommend strongly a nest mirror. This is a mirror permanently attached to a stick, or one that can be fastened to some local branch when you need it. Notice that Iowa roads sometimes lack trees; it may be best to bring your own stick. I prefer a make-up mirror since these often magnify, but any mirror will do.



Rock Dove: Pigeons build twig nests with two white eggs. The young have ugly stringy down and (though you may not wish to spread the news) are good to eat.



Eastern Phoebe: This non-descript brown flycatcher wags its tail and says "Phoebe" in a flat, nasal voice. (Whistled "Phoebe" is a Chickadee) It prefers low wooden bridges in wooded areas and builds a compact nest of fibers and hairs on a ledge. The eggs are white or barely speckled.



Barn Swallow: This fork-tailed bird builds an open cup of mud pellets and lays speckled eggs.

Cliff Swallow: In the west these birds may prefer cliffs, but there aren't many cliffs in Iowa so the birds commonly nest under bridges. The distinctive nests are jug-shaped and made of mud pellets.

House Sparrow: If there is a protected crevice in the bridge, a House Sparrow will build its bulky straw nest.



Robin: Robin nests are built of straw and mud and contain dark blue eggs. They are placed on ledges below or occasionally even on a bridge.



--- ANOTHER HINT ---

Whether birds are breeding or not, watch them and get a feel for their normal behavior and normal shape. Then you will be able to recognise as unusual behavior that suggests that the birds are breeding.

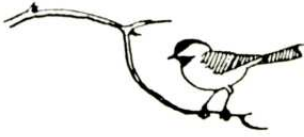
For example, you walk through the woods and a Meadowlark flushes up almost at your feet. You know that Meadowlarks usually run or fly away long before you reach them, so you search the location from which the bird flew, and you may well find the nest. This is the only way I've ever found nests of Dickcissel and Grass-hopper Sparrow.

Other clues include unusual scolding and the slightly distorted shape of a bird carrying food or plant fibers.



Phoebe nest





- - S W I B B A N - -

(The SouthWest Iowa Breeding Bird Atlas Newsletter, a semi-periodical publication in search of a better name)

This newsletter is intended to provide hints on how to find the birds we are trying to map and to let us exchange atlas news. Send in information for us!

CORRECTION: The Forney's Lake block in Fremont County is being moved east one mile. The purpose of this move is to include the entire lake in the block. This will simplify the collection of information. After all, there is no line in the center of the lake to tell us where to stop looking for nests.

Please correct your Fremont County maps. This move will exclude some of the woods right along the Missouri River that was in the original block.

WHAT'S BREEDING IN MID-MARCH?



GREAT HORNED OWL (alias Hoot Owl, alias Barn Owl, when it lives in barns)

This hardy bird laid eggs in January. The female sat tight on them through February's snow and now the little owls are hatching. Great Horned Owls do not build nests but take over an old hawk or crow nest or use a hole in a tree or lay eggs in a building, on hay, or in other odd locations. Some nests can be found by walking through woods examining the larger stick nests in trees.

Remember that we can record probable breeding of Great Horned Owls as "T" if we hear them sing in one place at two times at least a week apart. This is certainly easier than finding the nest! This owl sings a syncopated series of hoots and never ends its song with a slurred, two-syllable "you-all" like the next species.

BARRED OWL -- a nearly unknown "Hoot Owl" that usually sings "Who cooks for you, who cooks for you-all" in riverbottom woods. Right now these birds are incubating eggs in tree cavities.

The nests are notoriously hard to find. In theory, pounding on a hollow tree for a while will cause the adult to come out - if it is in the first place.

ROCK DOVE - Irrepressable **PIGEONS** court year-round. In Iowa they rarely nest successfully in December or January, but they have been known to try. Nests have two white eggs and are located on ledges in buildings and under bridges.

MCURNING DOVE - Doves also have a long breeding season, from early March through September, occasionally even into October. The flimsy stick nest may be placed absolutely anywhere, from the ground well up into a tree, but bushes and low trees are preferred. They lay two white eggs.

RED-TAILED HAWK - These "Chicken Hawks," who eat mice, not chickens, build large stick nests in trees in woodlots.



HORNED LARK - Larks build small nests on the ground in open cultivated fields from March into June. The only people who find them are farmers checking cows or planting oats. The larks are sparrow-like birds, very white below, with a short black tail. They will perform a distraction display if a person closely approaches the nest or young.



TURKEY
VULTURE

SOME PROBLEM BIRDS



CHIMNEY SWIFT

Certain common birds are very difficult to confirm because they nest in inaccessible places and don't sing. Here are a few hints about them.

CHIMNEY SWIFT: Every town and most farmhouses have Chimney Swifts nesting in the chimney. It is impossible to see the nest unless it falls into a fireplace. However, you can record the birds as PROBABLE breeders if you see the courtship flights. These are chases involving two or more birds, done mainly in the evening. A distinctive characteristic is the soaring flight, usually with the wings held in a V. The birds go round and round, chittering loudly and frequently soaring. In summer (but not in migration) a swift going down a chimney is visiting a possible nest site (code N), making it a probably breeder.

COMMON NIGHTHAWK: This bird is seen in late afternoon or evening flying over towns, swooping about to eat insects. It nests on the flat roofs of the business buildings around town. It's hard to confirm unless you get up on a roof and look for it. Look carefully; it is hard to see. This time of year, fledglings with short tails sometimes sleep the day away on the ground or on a deck.



NIGHTHAWK

TURKEY VULTURE: Vultures search for dead animals in every block in Iowa, I think, but they breed in secluded places, usually in woods. By definition, secluded places do not have people so the nests are hard to find. (They do smell bad, due to the accumulated food, and are located in stumps, hollow logs, old sheds, or caves.) Vultures often nest in loose colonies. The best clue to the location of a vulture nest or colony is the presence of vultures early in the day, before the atmosphere warms up and the birds can fly on the thermals. If the trees or fence posts sprout vultures soon after dawn, please report that fact. There is not good code for it, but it's important. You could code it "P" for a pair of vultures, despite the obvious difficulty of telling male from female or whether any two of these birds at the roost really belong together.



BARN
OWL

NIGHT BIRDS: Owls, Whip-poor-wills, and (in places) Chuck-will's-widows are almost impossible to find in the daytime but can be heard at night. Owls respond well to tapes and the others will just call. Trouble is, you have to be out there at night and I'm usually home in bed then. If one of you would be willing to visit any of these blocks at night, I would be very happy.



BARRED OWL

ATLAS NEWS

Tanya Bray and I visited southeast Iowa -- Lee County -- in search of such mythical Iowa birds as Prairie Warbler, Pileated Woodpecker, and Worm-eating Warbler. Because we were on a field trip led by Bob Cecil of Keokuk, we found them!

On the way there and back, we stopped at Atlas Blocks and looked for birds. Some of our visits were brief, but we did find birds. In two blocks, we found fledgeling Barred Owls. A Northern Parula in Union County seems a bit far west.

SUMMER TRAVEL

I now have a complete set of Iowa county maps with the breeding birds atlas blocks marked on them. If you are planning a trip within Iowa this year, contact me for the appropriate maps so you can gather information on the birds as you go.



FLICKER



HAIRY



DOWNY



Red
Phase

SCREECH OWL

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