



Black-capped Chronicle



Issue 9

Newsletter of the Maine Bird Atlas

Winter 2021-22

Year 4 Update & Winter Atlasing Overview

by Glen Mittelhauser, Project Coordinator

There are some impressive numbers I want to share with all of you regarding all of the volunteer effort each of you have contributed to the Maine Bird Atlas. To date, 4,334 volunteers have contributed nearly 5 million records to the legacy of baseline data we are all creating. For the breeding season, 68% of our priority blocks are completed (exceeding our goal for 2021), documenting the status and distribution of over 200 breeding species in Maine. For the wintering season, volunteers have contributed 58,714 hours of survey effort, completed 767 atlas blocks (18% of all blocks), and documented 216 species wintering in Maine. These are indeed impressive numbers, particularly when you consider that we have been through a time with unprecedented change being reported in bird populations in North America, with more change being predicted in the future.

But our work is not done yet. As we head into the second to last winter of field work for the wintering bird atlas, we definitely need all of your help. We need volunteers to go out and build species lists in their area, and that in turn will put a dot on the map for those species. It's that simple. This is something that cannot be done by one or two people, but with the coordinated efforts of thousands of volunteers, we are setting an amazing legacy of baseline data on wintering birds in Maine.



Canada Jays are a resident species in Maine, restricted to the Boreal forest and always a highlight of those entering their domain.

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With the winter atlas season upon us, now is a great time to take stock of what has already been accomplished in previous winters regarding the winter bird atlas and start planning your upcoming winter field season. Identify which species are still needed for an atlas block and think about the specific habitats where those species are typically found. Remember, just because someone has atlased somewhere already doesn't necessarily mean they have detected all of the species present.

Continues on page 3

Winter Atlasing Primer



2021/2022

Maine Winter Bird Atlas

December 14 - March 15

Overview The Basics of Winter Atlasing



Find Birds

- At your feeder
- While skiing, hiking, ice fishing...
- While exploring an Atlas block



Collect info

- **What** species?
- **Where** were they?
- **When** did you see them?
- **How many** of each species were there?



Report

Submit sightings to ebird.org/me or **Mail** or **email** your observations*



Repeat!

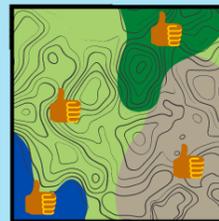
We need all the observations we can get to create a legacy of data on wintering birds in Maine!

4 Ways to be a Winter Atlas Blockbuster



Finish 1 Block in a Topo Quad

The goal this year is to complete 1 block in every accessible Topo Quad (outlined in green at tinyurl.com/MEWinterBirdMap).



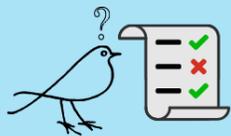
Understand the Winter Block Completion System

- Visit all accessible habitats in the block in early winter (Dec 14 - Jan 31) and again in late winter (Feb 1 - Mar 15).
- Spend a minimum of 3 hours in the block in early winter and another 3 or more hours in late winter.

Travel...but Be Safe!



- Travel to blocks that are further afield, but know your limits!
- Always check the weather forecast, bring enough warm clothes, and plan ahead.



Be a Species Detective

Explore block species lists at: tinyurl.com/MEWinterBirdMap

Is a common species for that habitat absent from the list? Go check it out!

Overview continued

See the infographic on Page 2 for a simple rundown of “The Basics of Winter Atlasing.” Use the map here (tinyurl.com/MEWinterBirdMap) for finding the blocks that need effort and to plan your winter atlasing outings.

For those willing to dig in a little further to help raise the scientific value of your observations, the following details will be helpful to be mindful of during your upcoming winter birding adventures.

When to Survey: 14 December through 15 March.

Where to Survey: Maine is split up into over 4,000 atlas blocks that are roughly 3 x 3 mile squares. Each of your winter atlasing lists should include birds from only one atlas block. If your birding track puts you into another atlas block, stop your checklist and start a new checklist. A good way to keep track of exactly where you are, relative to atlas block boundaries, is to download the Google Earth app to your phone. On the atlas website, we have a [KML file](#) showing the block boundaries, that you can save to your phone and then view in the Google Earth app.

How to Survey: It’s not just a species tally—all individual birds are counted, giving an indication of the total number of birds in your location on the day of your count. Consider making a strategy for how you will complete an atlas block before heading out in the field. Some species are found only in specific habitats, so by visiting multiple habitat types within an atlas block, you are likely to encounter and detect more species. This is critical to capture as much of the diversity as possible.



Project Coordinator, Glen Mittelhauser, doing offshore surveys during last winter.

Respect for the Birds: Birds are living creatures that deserve our respect. Their welfare is always of paramount importance. When we are out collecting atlas data, it is important that we all remain mindful of the need to minimize any disturbance we cause to the birds we are observing. Be quiet and unobtrusive, don’t repeatedly flush birds, and do not use playbacks to attract birds.

Respect for habitat: Do not disturb vegetation, carry out your trash and any trash left by others, and keep vehicles on established roads and parking areas.

Safety: Plan ahead for any weather conditions, invite a friend to join you, and stick to the plowed roads unless you have experience working remotely.

Complete checklists: During the winter atlas, we are encouraging all volunteers to submit “complete” checklists rather than incidental observations. A complete checklist means it contains all birds you were able to identify by sight and sound without intentionally leaving any species out. We still need information on common species as well as introduced species, so don’t leave any species off of your checklists.

Data resolution: Ensure your checklist: 1. last for no less than 5 minutes and no more than an hour or two; 2. are no more than 1 mile long, and you start a new checklist if you cross into a new atlas block; and 3. contain counts or estimates the numbers of individuals present for each species - even giving your best estimate to the closest 100 of a flock of flying birds overhead is far more valuable than not giving any number at all.

Submitting data: Submit all winter atlasing records to the Maine eBird portal.

The Maine Bird Atlas is important because it enables us to get a snapshot of bird populations over a precise period of time that sets down a marker for exactly where we are with birds at the moment in Maine. The Maine Bird Atlas provides an opportunity for every Mainer to help set this legacy of baseline data on the status of birds for the next generation of Maine people and visitors.



Remember, every bird counts. From common species, like this American Robin, to the rare and unusual, each bird record you submit is a value piece to the puzzle we’re trying to finish.

Year 4 Breeding Season Highlights from the Field

With COVID restrictions making it easier to travel this summer, many of our volunteers were able to get further afield, especially helping complete remote priority blocks. Here are some of the fun photos sent in to us through the year:



An early morning view in Caratunk NW from Regional Coordinator, Kate Weatherby.



Regional Coordinator, Tom Aversa covered areas of Baxter State Park in 2021. Despite the popularity of this park, there are still six priority blocks within it yet to be completed.



Owls are typically very hard to detect breeding, but these recently fledged Great Horned Owls became local celebrities in Portland. Photo by Doug Hitchcox



Providing notes is always helpful, but adding photos to your eBird checklists is a great way to include documentation with any records, especially of species that are rare or uncommon. Regional Coordinator, John Wyatt, added this recently fledged Brown Thrasher photo to a checklist at his home, and it was one of the “top rated” photos in the Maine Bird Atlas this summer!



Doug Suitor either doing a wetland survey or cooling his feet off while surveying remote blocks. Photo by Bill Sheehan.

Highlights continued



Regional Coordinator, Bill Sheehan, seen here examining the remains of an old school bus found while surveying remote blocks in Aroostook County. Perhaps a leftover from his school days!



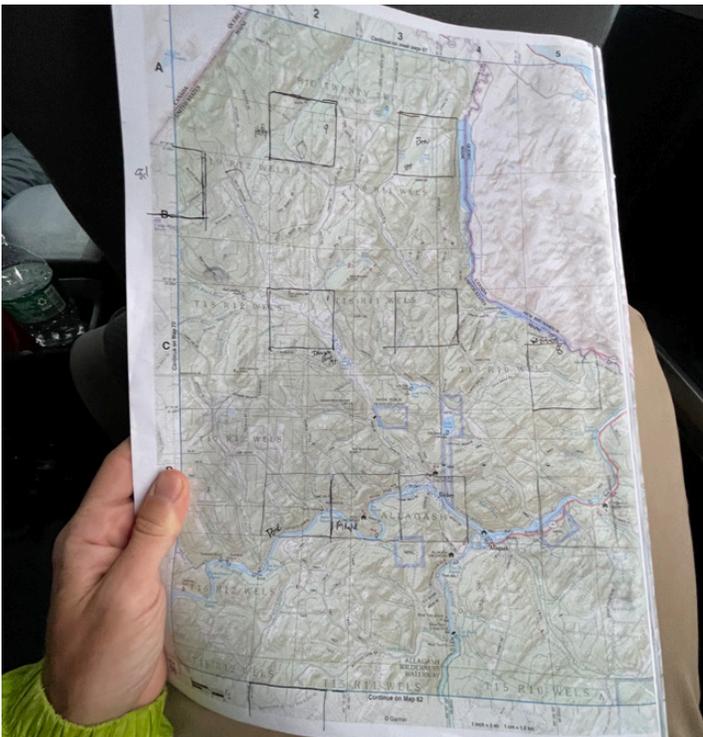
Michael Boardman and Tom Danielson staying out of the mud at Mud Pond in T19 R11. Photo by Bill Sheehan.



A stunning view of Hedgehog Mtn from Black Brook Pond in Little Bigelow Mtn NE by Kate Weatherby.



Great Cormorants, a Threatened Species in Maine, has only been confirmed breeding in three blocks. Keenan Yakola, Project Puffin's Supervisor on Seal Island provided this Great Cormorant family portrait.



When atlasing with no cellular reception, having a handy DeLorme Atlas is always helpful. It is even more useful when you can plan ahead and draw boxes around the priority blocks in the areas that you'll be covering!



Some areas are easier to survey by boat! Here a couple volunteers are atlasing via canoe on Webster Lake in T6 R10. Photo by Glen Mittelhauser.

Species Spotlight: Red-breasted Nuthatch



by Weston Barker, Maine Bird Atlas Volunteer

The nasal yapping calls of the tiny but pugnacious and plucky Red-breasted Nuthatch are a familiar sound to many birders in the winter woods of Maine. With about half the body mass and twice the attitude of their cousin the White-breasted Nuthatch, Red-breasted Nuthatches are a hardy species that both breeds and winters in Maine. These birds, identifiable by their small size, orange underparts, and skunk-like striped facial pattern, are sometimes abundant in southern Maine during the winter - such as visiting yards and feeders - but are less common at other times. Although an unrelated group of birds, the so-called “winter finches”, get most of the attention, Red-breasted Nuthatches are what is known as an irruptive species; they periodically undergo sudden southward movements following a crash in food supplies in the northern forests, moving into areas where they are not normally present in the fall and winter.

Because of its sporadic and variable dispersal patterns triggered by availability of food and resulting population fluctuations, both the extent of Maine they inhabit and the number of nuthatches present in the state changes from year to year. Comparing sightings maps from eBird (ebird.org/map/rebnut) from the span of a few years shows obvious changes in Red-breasted Nuthatch distribution and abundance across the state,

ranging from somewhat limited numbers to being very widespread and abundant throughout the region. Try playing around with the date range on the eBird species maps (e.g., setting it to winter 2020-2021 versus winter 2016-2017) and comparing the distribution of Red-breasted Nuthatches in Maine during different years.

When viewing these eBird maps you may notice that the sightings peter out towards the northwestern part of the state. It should be perfect habitat for Red-breasted Nuthatches in that area, so why are sightings of the species so few? The most likely answer: lack of coverage by birders! The western portion of Aroostook county and the northern reaches of Somerset and Piscataquis counties are rather remote areas of Maine that don't get as much visitation by birders (or have as many birders who live there). Consequently, we have spotty coverage for assessing the species' breeding and wintering distribution in that region. Penobscot and northern Washington counties (in eastern ME) are similarly lacking in reports during the winter, though perhaps to a lesser extent than northwestern Maine.

Red-breasted Nuthatches favor coniferous forests for nesting and generally like to stick to coniferous trees in the winter as well, foraging on seeds extracted from the cones of pines and spruces or taken from bird feeders. They often cache their food for later - a hab-

Species Spotlight continued:

it also shared by other nuthatch species - by tucking seeds into small crevices in tree bark or other suitable surfaces, retrieving them later to eat. This is a valuable method for surviving long, cold winters with potentially unreliable food sources. They roam more freely during the nonbreeding season and show up in a wider selection of habitats, and will visit bird feeders more readily to take sunflower seeds, peanuts, and other nuts as well as suet.



The long pointed beak on a nuthatch is perfect for extracting seeds from cones.

Photos by Doug Hitchcox



A close look at Red-breasted Nuthatches can reveal the sex of the individual: males have dark caps while females' caps are blueish.

Locating mixed-species foraging flocks in winter can be a good way to find Red-breasted Nuthatches (and vice versa) as they often join other small passerines such as chickadees, kinglets, and creepers, and sometimes non-passerines like woodpeckers.

They are usually quick to respond to pishing or other potential causes of alarm, starting up an incessant string of nasal, rapidfire *enk enk enk* calls that will sometimes draw in other curious birds.

Keep an eye out for Red-breasted nuthatches in any part of Maine this winter while you're out birding. Last year (2020) saw an irruption of this species, with an unusual amount of birds moving through Maine starting in August. This winter is not predicted to produce a nuthatch irruption, but the number and distribution of birds in Maine is not totally foreseeable. There's only one way to find out: go birding and document those Red-breasted Nuthatches for the Winter Atlas!

Atlas Director is given Employee of Year Award

The Maine Department of Inland Fisheries and Wildlife celebrates employees for their outstanding service to the Department and State through various awards. This past year, wildlife biologist and member of the Bird Group, Adrienne Leppold, received the Wildlife Division's Employee of the Year Award for her contributions on a number of projects.

Paraphrasing from her nomination, a colleague writes that "Adrienne has been working extremely long hours for the past four years primarily as the Director of the Maine Bird Atlas, a five-year project to document the distribution and breeding status of every bird species in Maine... She is responsible for supervising and coordinating with multiple collaborators, hundreds of volunteers, and dozens of paid technicians. Her energy and commitment to the project is boundless". Concurrently she juggles other avian research projects as well as being responsible for reviewing wind and solar power

projects for possible effects to bird species. Adrienne is very deserving of the recognition afforded by her colleagues at the Maine Department of Inland Fisheries and Wildlife. Congratulations, Adrienne, from the extended Maine Bird Atlas Community!



Adrienne Leppold, the Maine Bird Atlas Project Director, seen here doing wetland surveys, between many other responsibilities that keep this and other projects going!

Goals for the Upcoming Winter Atlas Season

by Glen Mittelhauser, Project Coordinator

Atlas staff have thought long and hard about developing some realistic goals for the upcoming winter atlas season. Before listing the goals and explaining them in more detail, I want to touch on how just one person can make a huge difference to the wintering bird atlas. Who knows, maybe that one person is you or someone you know. For the winter atlas, a block can be considered complete with some strategic planning and as little as 6 hours of atlasing. This means that an individual willing to spend 30 minutes a day atlasing incomplete blocks, could complete 7 atlas blocks over the course of the winter season. Imagine what this would mean if we could convince 25 atlasers like you to sign up for this level of atlasing over the upcoming winter.

3 Goals for the Upcoming Winter Atlas Season:

Fledge a New Atlaser: Recruit 1 new volunteer to contribute records to the winter atlas and assist in engaging new generations of birders in Maine or invite some fellow birders along to tackle a block together. Winter is a great time to learn birding as the birds are often not hidden in the leaves at the tops of the trees, and there are fewer species present in winter than in summer. The more folks that we can get out atlasing, the better. Birding in a group can also be a lot of fun. (See Ann Thayer's article on Page 10 for her account of atlasing with a friend in some off the beaten path areas.)



Introducing a new person to winter atlasing in a great way to help increase our efforts and can make the experience more fun for you too!

Increase and Spread Out Number of Completed

Blocks: Our goal for the upcoming winter season is to complete an additional 72 atlas blocks in topographic quads that do not have at least 1 completed block already. For what I mean by topographic quad, check out the green underlined squares on Page 9 or our Winter Atlas Results webpage: tinyurl.com/MEWinterBirdMap. At the start of this winter season, we have 278 topographic quads (40% of all topographic quads) with at least 1 atlas block completed. We want to increase this number to 350 topographic quads (that would be 50% of all topographic quads with at least 1 atlas block completed across the state).



Pileated Woodpecker is an example of a species that is easily missed in just six hours of atlasing in a block. So even if the block is labeled "complete" there may be some species still missing.

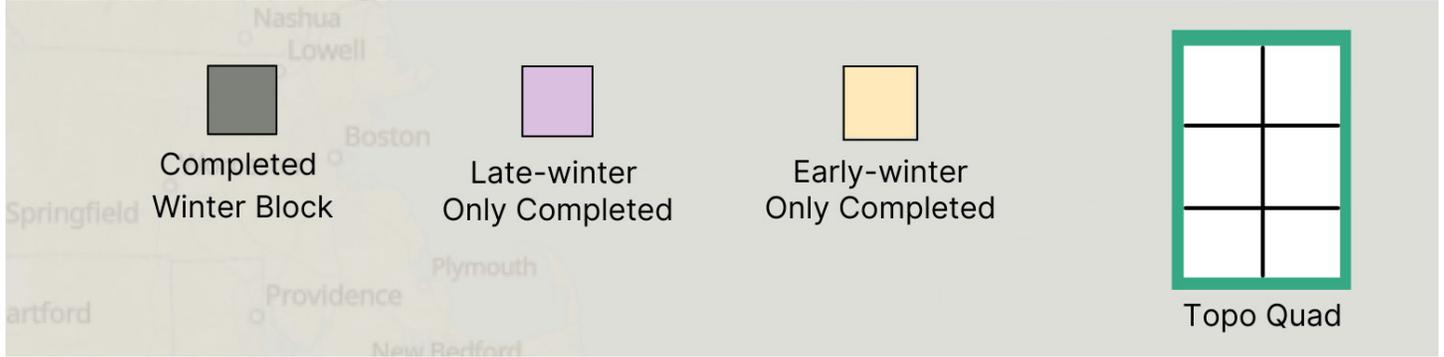
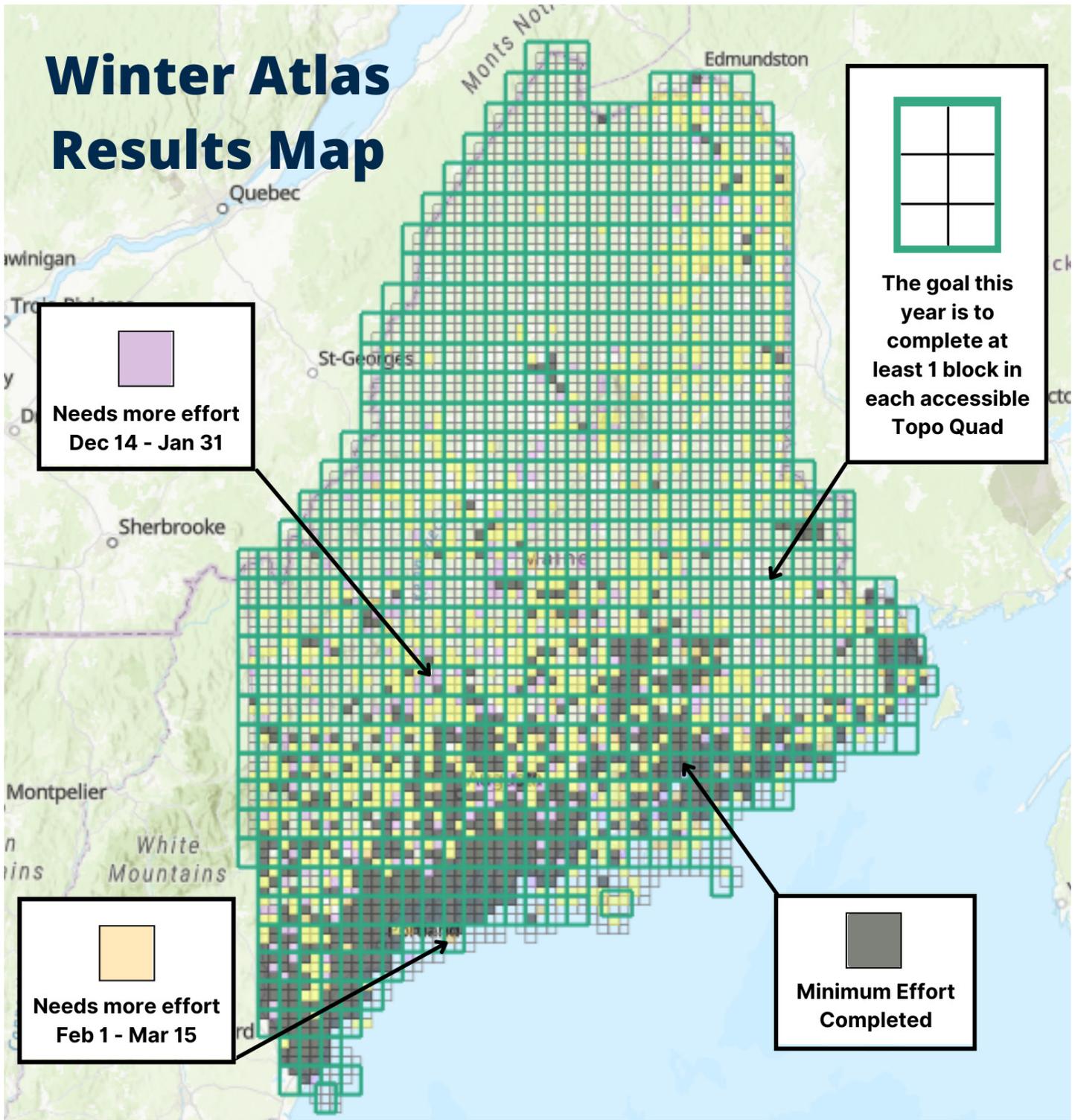
Check for incomplete species lists in completed

blocks: Just because someone has put in the required hours to complete an atlas block doesn't necessarily mean they have detected all of the species present. Identify which species are surprisingly absent from an atlas block's species list and think about the specific habitats where those species are typically found. Then revisit those blocks to fill out the species list. You can study the species lists for each atlas block by clicking on an atlas block on the Winter Atlas Results website and following the link for the block species list. Our goal is to get the best data that we can on the birds wintering in each atlas block, so it is important that we put in some time to see that all representative habitats in a block have been visited.

It has been very humbling working with such a skilled and dedicated crew of atlasers. 3,229 volunteers have contributed records to the winter atlas effort to date, helping to build a legacy of baseline data on wintering birds in Maine. We couldn't do it without you. Thank you for all of your efforts so far and for atlasing safely this coming winter!

How to Read the Winter Atlas Results Website

Winter Atlas Results Map



Atlaser Spotlight

by Ann Thayer, Atlas Volunteer

The forecast promised a lovely winter day with brilliant blue skies, chilly temperatures and no wind. Friend and fellow birder Becky Marvil and I planned to enjoy the day by dedicating a few hours to the Maine Bird Atlas. We had both completed blocks in our respective backyards. The objective of the day was to go further afield to some blocks to our west that were in need of attention. The first years of the Maine Bird Atlas has produced tons of data with much of it concentrated at birding hotspots and places along the coast. To get a comprehensive census of the distribution of birds throughout the state, we knew it was time to shift our own focus to some of these lesser birded blocks.



Tufted Titmouse in winter.

Photo by Fyn Kynd

In preparation for our trip, we used maps downloaded from the Maine Bird Atlas site to plan a driving route to hit various habitats. As we entered the block area, nice thickets produced a nice mixed flock including American Tree Sparrow, Northern Cardinal, Tufted Titmouse and other common birds. A single Hooded Merganser floated in a small impoundment. We eyed a sunny ridge and stopped to ask a local farmer for permission to access the area by foot. Six American Crows flew overhead. The farmer's family owns quite bit of land in the area and he indicated the extent on the map and invited us to wander wherever. As we neared the top of the ridge, we spotted a Red-tailed Hawk surveying the field from a red oak tree and we counted the chickadees, Tufted Titmice and nuthatches that chattered and scolded inside the treeline. Our next stop was to observe a rather active birdfeeder. The homeowner was quite interested to learn about the Maine Bird Atlas and we may have recruited a backyard birder for the effort.

We added a few Mourning Doves, American Goldfinch, a Red-bellied Woodpecker and even a Northern Mockingbird that popped up out of a bush. Over lunch, we caught some warmth from sunny vista and tallied a bald eagle soaring in the distance. We listened to the sounds emanating from the trees around an old church and cemetery and added a downy woodpecker and a Common Raven to our list.



Downy Woodpecker on a shepard's hook. Feeders can be helpful places to linger near in the winter as they help increase detections of birds that are harder to find otherwise.

Photo by Doug Hitchcox

We continued our circle through the block logging species and numbers along the way. We had a decent variety of birds over the course of the day with no unexpected rarities or vagrants. But twitching the rare and unusual wasn't the point. In order for the Maine Bird Atlas to meet its objectives, more effort needs to focus on these less birded blocks to inventory what's there. You can help by getting out this winter! Find a block that needs data, grab a friend and go birding. You might discover a new part of Maine, meet some nice people along the way, act as an ambassador for the Maine Bird Atlas or recruit a new volunteer. For details on how to contribute to the winter birding surveys, revisit the Winter Atlasing Primer on page 2.



Short-eared Owls can be pleasant winter surprise! Photo by Doug Hitchcox

Winter Atlas Kickoff and the Return of Weekly Q&As



Back by popular demand, weekly discussions on Zoom are a great opportunity to answer questions and talk about anything birds and atlas related. We are continuing these Zoom Q&A sessions through the winter!

Chat with Atlas staff about any questions you have, from the birds in your backyard, to data entry or eBird problems, or even where to best spend your time atlas-ing, we've got the answers!

Join us every Thursday night at 6:30PM beginning with a Season Kickoff on December 9th!

Kickoff: <https://us02web.zoom.us/j/81200815209>

Q&As: <https://us02web.zoom.us/j/83020017476>

Check the [Maine Bird Atlas Facebook page](#) or our Event Calendar on maine.gov/birdatlas for updates to this schedule.

Gifts that Give and Give

Give the gift of conservation this year with a species sponsorship (and maybe an atlas Tshirt too). With a species sponsorship, **your name will be in print (along with anyone you choose to sponsor in honor of) in the final Maine Bird Atlas publication.** Each of Maine's breeding and wintering bird species have been divided into sponsorship levels ranging from \$30-\$2,000 and are available to sponsor for each year of the project. You can sponsor a species for one, several, or all five years.

All proceeds from product sales and species sponsorships will help fund travel grants to support birders going to remote, isolated regions of the state.



Sample species account for Snowy Owl with Sponsor a Species example circled in yellow.



See what species are still available at:
www.mainenaturalhistory.org/sponsor-a-species

Or purchase Maine Bird Atlas logo merchandise at:
www.teepublic.com/user/mainebirdatlas

Complete Challenges Win Prizes!

Returning from last winter, we will be keeping track of the amount of time that volunteers spend helping complete blocks during the two winter periods. At the end of each week we'll tally up the hours and if you're at the top of the list then you've won a Maine Bird Atlas item of your choice from our store! (teepublic.com/user/mainebirdatlas)

This means you've got at least twelve chances to win this winter! Make sure you review Glen's article on page 8 for advice on how to find which blocks need the most effort so that your time is well spent this winter.

Keep putting in effort each week and you never know what prize will be awarded to the top place finisher... Join us at the [Kickoff Event on December 9th](#) for more details, but here is a hint...



Important Reminders for Winter Atlasing!

As we head into another Winter Atlasing season, here are a few helpful reminders for volunteers. If this is your first winter atlasing, check out our [Quick Start Guide for Winter Atlasing](#).

Watch for Block Boundaries

Our survey blocks are the same as during the breeding season, and the same rules apply for only submitting birds you see within each block. Winter birding typically involves less trail walking or traveling over long distances, but make sure you start and stop your lists within a single block.

Use the Proper Portal

While working on the Winter Atlas, it will be very rare to encounter any breeding behavior, so your lists should be entered into Maine eBird Portal (ebird.org/me). On the rare occasion you observe breeding behavior during the winter atlas season, enter your entire list into the Maine Bird Atlas Portal (ebird.org/atlasme).

Be Safe!

Safety of all atlas volunteers is a high priority. Always put your safety first! Do not enter an area that looks unsafe, for any reason. Be careful and vigilant around ice. Working in pairs or teams is strongly encouraged, particularly in remote areas.

Have you signed up as an official volunteer yet?

Just a reminder, even if you have already contributed observations to the project through eBird, make sure you sign up as an official project volunteer. This is where we need you to enter your volunteer time (inc. travel, data entry, etc.) for us to count towards the required match funding. After doing so, you can also choose to benefit from state health insurance coverage while participating in any atlas activities. Go to <https://ifw.citizenscience.maine.gov/programs/mainebirdatlas> and click 'Register'.

VOLUNTEERS NEEDED!

CONTRIBUTE OBSERVATIONS TO THE



**MAINE
BIRD
ATLAS**
2018-2022



For More Information: maine.gov/birdatlas
All Experience Levels Welcome!

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