



# Black-capped Chronicle



Issue 3

Newsletter of the Maine Bird Atlas

Winter 2018-19

## Maine Bird Atlas Update

These cold days are short and we have closed the door on the first year of the Maine Bird Atlas but winter provides us the opportunity to reflect on the past year. In particular, it allows us to pour through the 12,000+ checklists that you all submitted through the Maine Bird Atlas eBird Portal and process your data sheets as we gain a better understanding of the distribution of Maine's birds. Right away we can see some tremendous results thanks to the effort that you have contributed!

Listed below are highlights from season one, with a focus on species with new breeding records since the state's first atlas, *The Breeding Atlas of Maine Birds (1978-82)*:

Eight pairs of **Common Murres** successfully nested on Matinicus Rock, the first time they have successfully bred in Maine in 130 years (NAS/USFWS record).

In the first atlas, **Manx Shearwaters** vocalized for several nights in 1980 at Eastern Egg Rock, but breeding was not confirmed in Maine until 2005 when a pair nested on Matinicus Rock. Nesting has continued there and in 2018 and at least 5 chicks were produced (NAS/USFWS record).

In the first atlas, there were **American Oystercatchers** present in the Port Clyde area during 1982 and 1983, but breeding was not confirmed in Maine until 1994. In 2018,



**American Oystercatchers** successfully bred on Stratton Island and West Goose Rocks. Oystercatchers were also present on Green Island (adjacent to Petit Manan Island) but nesting was not confirmed.

One pair of **King Rail** successfully nested in southern Maine, hatching young in early July. Nesting location is being withheld in an effort to minimize disturbance to the pair.

A **Chuck-wills-widow** was present at Orland for much of June, with possibly a second bird present at the same location.

In the first atlas, there were three summer **Merlin** records in Maine, but no evidence of breeding was documented. In 2018, Merlin have been confirmed as breeders in 25 atlas blocks.

**Great Egrets** were first confirmed nesting in Maine during 1994 on Stratton Island and this colony has continued nesting here, during the summer of 2018 (NAS/USFWS record).

**Sandhill Cranes, Fish Crows, Red-bellied Woodpeckers, and Carolina Wrens** were not present in Maine during the first atlas, but all have been confirmed as breeders in Maine during 2018.

### Inside this Issue

Maine Bird Atlas Update	1
Lessons from 2018 - Common Mistakes	2
Merganser ID Tips	4
Nest Box Monitoring Programs	5
Maine Bird Atlas Store	5
Winter Finches	6
Top 50 Atlasers by Confirmed Spp	7
eBird Updates	8
Whats Next?	8

## Lessons from the 2018 Nesting Season: Common Mistakes

As we pour through the wonderful successes we also spotted some of the common mistakes that atlasers made in season one. Below is a list of a few errors that we frequently made and we hope everyone will review these and the “tips” for correcting these before we begin the 2019 breeding season.

### **Plotting locations correctly.**

Precision is one of the most important aspects of the Maine Bird Atlas. We are using blocks that are 3x3 miles, a world standard for atlasing, so that we can accurately show where birds are breeding. Keep this in mind: If you are coding a species as confirmed on a checklist, you are saying that this is confirmed breeding within the atlas block where the list was plotted. The common mistake here is that people are not watching the boundaries of the block that they started in and are inadvertently going into an adjacent block.

*Tip:* Keep your distance on traveling counts short. Since the blocks are only 3x3 miles, it is easy to wander outside of a block if you are traveling long distances. A common mistake occurs when people go for long walks around their neighborhoods, hikes up mountains, or strolls down a beach. Do not run a 5 + mile checklist that spans multiple blocks and put all results into one atlas block - remember to keep your travelling checklists to under 1 mile long.

*Tip:* Avoid the use of hotspots when plotting the location you surveyed. Hotspots are built into eBird to help aggregate results of checklists from frequently birded areas. This makes the data for those hotspots easy to read and explore but because of the plotted location or size of a hotspot, it can create errors in our atlas data. Some hotspots are plotted near the boundary of a block or may be so large that they span multiple blocks, so using a hotspot rather than plotting the location where you actually saw the bird could misplace an important breeding record. Read more about hotspot in our article “Birding on Borders” here: <https://ebird.org/atlasme/news/tips-borders>

### **Beware of Juveniles.**

The most commonly misused breeding code during the 2018 nesting season was FL - Recently Fledged Young. Make sure to read the breeding codes sheet (page 18 of the handbook) which has an explanation for what qualifies in each code. The Recently Fledged Young code is to be used for “recently fledged or downy young incapable of sustained flight and still dependent upon adults.” These birds are restricted to their natal area by dependence of adults or limited mobility. Obvious confusion is surfacing with juvenile birds that are being reported as recently fledged. We are seeing many birds reported “FL” because they show juvenile plumage or obvious gape lines (bold skin in the corner of their mouths) but in many cases these birds are too mature or independent to be coded as recently fledged.

*Tip:* Think about the species and how long they are going

to be dependent on their parents. For example, a crow or raven is likely to stay in a family group long after fledging. These families can cover huge distances when out foraging so just because you see a blue-eyed pink-gaped juvenile crow begging for food, stop to think about the situation: Ask yourself if there are any likely nesting sites nearby? Those birds may have come from a neighboring block if your in a city or large saltmarsh with no appropriate habitat.

*Tip:* Consider how developed a particular species is and if that should still count as “recently fledged”? For example, a juvenile Turkey Vulture maybe easy to spot in the fall thanks to their dark, nearly black heads, but they may have flown dozens or hundreds of miles from where they nested and still have that young appearance.

*Tip:* Combine appearance with behavior. Many of the mis-used “FL” codes were birds identified by plumage with no notes on behavior. As mentioned above, watch to see if the bird is struggling or incapable of flight. Or spend some time, keeping your distance, to see if an adult comes back to feed it or assist in some other way.

*Common mistakes continued:*



*This Red-winged Blackbird has fledged but was still dependent on adults for feeding. Combining visual hints with behavioral cues will help avoid reporting errors. Photo by Doug Hitchcox.*



*Merlin, Maine's medium-sized falcon, are an recent nester in Maine (see page 1 for details). Their nesting has increased across the state over the past decade and making sure we plot their locations correctly is especially important. Raptors can have a large area they are foraging in so use caution when plotting the various behaviors you see. With extra effort, you may even find their nests, often an old crow nest, usually in an evergreen. Listen for noisy nestlings to pinpoint their location. Photo by Doug Hitchcox*

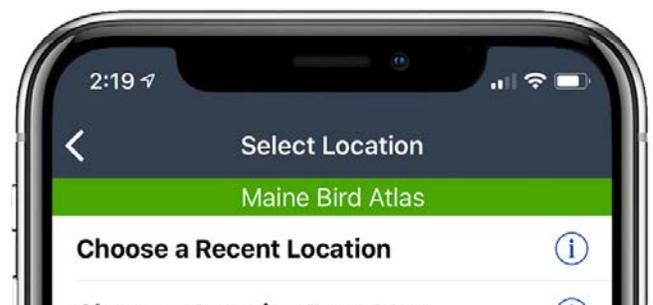
### **Data entry into the wrong eBird portal.**

Please make sure that any checklist with at least 1 breeding code for a species gets entered into the Maine Bird Atlas Portal ([ebird.org/atlasme](http://ebird.org/atlasme)). Any checklist without any breeding for any species should be submitted to the Maine eBird Portal ([ebird.org/me](http://ebird.org/me)). Nearly all winter checklists should be entered into the traditional Maine eBird portal unless you find an early nesting species like owls, pigeons, or some finches like Red Crossbills.

This matters because of the listing and calculations that are done within the Maine Bird Atlas Portal that help us know how many species are being reported in a block, county, or the state, as well as the amount of effort that has gone on in each block. As you know from the volunteer handbook, a typical block needs 20 hours of observation effort to be considered complete, however that time needs to be during the nesting season. If winter checklists are submitted with the breeding information, it could make each block look over-surveyed.

The same is true with the number of species being reported. One of our calculations to consider a block complete is the percentage of confirmed breeding species within the block. If the species count in a block is inflated with wintering species, it will drive down the percentage of confirmed (or possible and probable) breeders.

*Tip:* When viewing a checklist, the portal you are using is always displayed in the top left corner. On the mobile app the portal is listed when on the "Select Location" page (see below). Make a habit of checking these regularly!



## Bird ID Tips: Red-breasted vs Common Merganser

*This slow winter season is also a good time to practice some identifications of species that are more abundant, or at least easier to observe, during the winter than when they are nesting. Atlas volunteer Fyn Kynd wrote us this article comparing the natural histories and identifications of Red-breasted and Common Merganser; The former being a very rare breeder but common winter resident in the state. Here is Fyn's take:*

Red-breasted and Common Mergansers are two closely related diving ducks that are both present in Maine, just typically at different places and times.

Along the coast in winter, you are most likely to encounter Red-breasted Mergansers, as they are a winter resident in Maine. Common Mergansers are a breeding species, nesting on lakes and ponds in much of western, northern, and eastern Maine. Most Common Mergansers exit the state before winter hits, although small numbers will remain, usually on freshwater; such as small creeks or ponds free of ice, rather than the saltwater preferred by Red-breasted.

Identification of the two species can be a challenge, as the females are rather similar. This has caused some errors in the records being submitted to the atlas so here are some helpful tips: In the field, a Common will come off as a larger, chunkier bird. Female Commons have a rounder

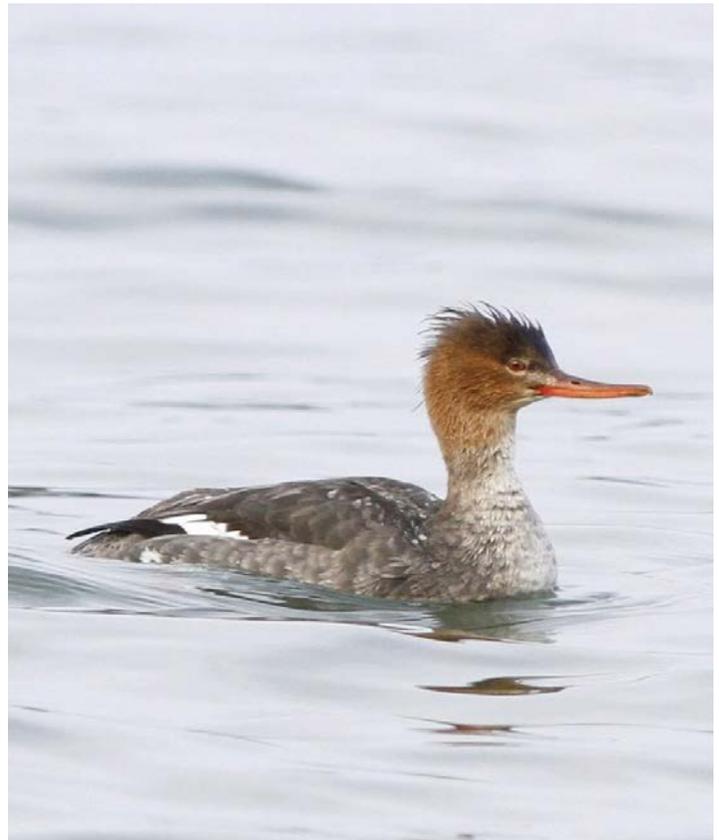
*Superficially similar, using Fyn's recommendations above you should be able to tell the Common Merganser (Photo by Doug Hitchcox) on the left thanks to its white chin and clear demarcation between the reddish head and pale chest, compared to the Red-breasted Merganser (Photo by Kyle Lima) on the right.*

head, less of a wispy crest than Red-breasted shows, with a darker brown base color, and a white chin. This white chin, restricted to below the lower base of the bill and above the throat, is one of the best ways to differentiate the females of these two species at close range. By comparison, Red-breasted females have a solid light orange head. Another thing to note is the cleaner, lighter gray body of female Commons, with a sharper transition from the dark head to pale gray breast.

Males are very visually distinct though, with Common being a much whiter bird overall, with a solid green head and dark back. Drake Red-breasteds have a dark head as well, but with a white neck band and dark breast, along with gray flanks, instead of Common's white.

Any summer sightings of Red-breasted Mergansers should be scrutinized. The paucity of breeding records and ease of mistaking these two species means we should be especially careful to not jump to conclusions based on brief observations. As stated, Red-breasted Mergansers are a common winter resident to our coast so most Maine birders may be more familiar with that species, but Common becomes the dominant bird in our summer. Use slow days in the winter to study female mergansers so you are ready to ID them this coming nesting season!

**- Fyn Kynd, Maine Bird Atlas Volunteer**



## Targeting Species Via Nest Box Monitoring Programs

Cavity nesting species provide an easy opportunity to document breeding because we can readily monitor their nests, especially when we give them the place to raise their young! Integrated into the atlas will be nest box monitoring programs targeting four species: American Kestrels, Eastern Bluebirds, Northern Saw-whet Owls, and Eastern Screech-Owls.

Each of these species are secondary cavity nesters, meaning they nest in cavities but do not excavate their own. They instead rely species like woodpeckers to create a cavity that they would use in subsequent years. Unfortunately, land-use changes have made natural cavities less common. How often do you see dead trees full of holes left standing?

By putting up boxes we can supplement that available nesting sites and easily monitor these birds. More information on joining one of these nest box monitoring programs will soon be on the atlas blog: [maine.gov/wordpress/ifwbirdatlas/](http://maine.gov/wordpress/ifwbirdatlas/)



*Just a few of the screech-owl boxes made by our woodworking volunteer Ralph Thurston!*

## Introducing the Maine Bird Atlas store!

Now is your chance to own the beautiful Maine Bird Atlas logo, designed by Maine artist Jada Fitch, on a large variety of items thanks to the launch of a new web store. The Black-capped Chickadee was chosen not only as the state bird but a widespread breeder that we all know and love. Items with this design range from t-shirts to sweaters, totes to mugs, and come in a variety of sizes and colors to match any of your favorites!

You can shop around and place orders at:

[www.mainenaturalhistory.org/maine-bird-atlas](http://www.mainenaturalhistory.org/maine-bird-atlas)

Profits from the sale of these items help expand the coverage and range of work that can be done for the atlas. This is similar to our “Sponsor a Species” pro-

gram where funds will be used to create a small grants program to provide incentives to volunteers, assist volunteers with travel expenses to survey remote areas of the state, and support specialty surveys of difficult to study species

Speaking of Sponsor a Species... Have you sponsored your favorite species yet? Or perhaps given a gift sponsorship to someone you know? Each of Maine's 224 breeding bird species have been divided into sponsorship levels ranging from \$30-\$2,000 and are available to sponsor for each year of the project, and wintering species have recently been added to the list of species that can be sponsored. You can sponsor a species for one, several, or all five years. You are welcome to sponsor a species in memory or in honor of a person or name of an organization. See what species are still available at:

[www.mainenaturalhistory.org/sponsor-a-species](http://www.mainenaturalhistory.org/sponsor-a-species)



## Irruptive Winter Finches: a guide to attracting and atlasing this winter's stars

Winter can be a drab time for songbirds in Maine as our dazzling warblers and tanagers have migrated south to warmer climates. Fortunately, there is a group of birds that occasionally grace our yards in these colder months and bring a flash of color to our typically white landscape: the winter finches.

Every fall, birders anxiously await the release of Ron Pittaway's "Winter Finch Forecast", which reports on the abundance and quality of food sources for these northern birds and how that will alter their winter movements. Here is an excerpt from the 2018-19 report:

*"This is an irruption (flight) year for winter finches in the East. Cone and birch seed crops are poor to low in most of Ontario and the Northeast, with a few exceptions such as Newfoundland which has an excellent spruce crop. It will be a quiet winter in the North Woods. Expect flights of winter finches into southern Ontario, southern Quebec, Maritime Provinces, New York and New England States, with some finches going farther south into the United States."*  
Read the full report at: [jeaniron.ca/2018/wff18.htm](http://jeaniron.ca/2018/wff18.htm)

### Wait, what is an irruption?

There is a figurative *eruption* of finches heading our way this winter but a literal *irruption* of finches coming south. Not all irruptive species are migratory in the traditional sense of the word. A typical migratory species makes an



*Pine Siskins have small and very pointed bills, similar to goldfinches, which are ideal for eating smaller seeds. Try adding thistle seeds at your feeding station this winter to attract these birds! Photo by Doug Hitchcox.*

annual movement from *Point A* to *Point B* and irruptions occur when a species has to go to *Point C* because of a lack of resources (generally food). In subsequent years, that species will return to the *A-B-A-B* pattern, or remain sedentary (in the case of non-traditional migrant species.) Snowy Owls are another irruptive species that are tied to the cyclical population booms of lemming and voles which occurs roughly every four years.

### Which birds should we be looking for?

Evening Grosbeaks (left) are a large finch and while the males are bright yellow, the duller females may be hard to identify but both sexes have a unique large greenish bill. This may be a new species to folks new to birding, but long-time Maine residents will remember the large numbers of Evening Grosbeaks that descended on feeders through the early 70s and late 80s. The eastern population is in steep decline but a spruce budworm (*Choristoneura fumiferana*) outbreak in eastern Canada may mean we see this species more frequently in the coming decade.

Pine Siskins (above) tend to be a regular winter visitor to Maine but the drop in spruce, fir, and hemlock seeds to our north will send these birds south in higher than usual numbers. They'll often mix in flocks of goldfinches so look for their streaked chests or listen for their buzzy, zipper-like calls.

Common Redpoll is another siskin-sized finch that we are expecting to see this winter. In past irruptive years they tend to show up later than others, not being seen in large numbers in Maine until January-February. They are an



*A male Evening Grosbeak showing their stunning white secondaries and massive seed-crushing bill. Photo by Doug Hitchcox.*

## Winter Finches (continued from previous page)

appropriately named species with an obvious red “poll” or forehead.

Pine Grosbeaks are also coming south but are less likely to be around feeders because they are generally fruit eaters. These parrot-like finches are likely to be encountered at any fruit-bearing trees, especially crab-apples and sometimes in surprisingly urban areas. Interestingly, many of the early Maine reports this winter were of small flocks seen feeding on ash seeds.

Similar to the Pine Grosbeaks because of their feeding habits, Bohemian Waxwings are a non-finch that is also irruptive and expected to be present this winter. These will often share a fruiting tree with the grosbeaks.

### How do we attract them?

One great thing about most of these winter finches is that they are generally seed-eaters so they are easy to attract to a bird feeder. Talk about easy winter atlasing - these birds come to you!

Some of the larger finches, like Evening Grosbeaks, or the medium-sized Purple Finches are likely to come to black-oil sunflower seeds. The smaller finches like Pine Siskins and Common Redpolls will join goldfinches at thistle/nyger feeders. This is a good seed to put out in tube feeders or socks but beware these can require more cleaning and maintenance to avoid transmitting diseases like avian conjunctivitis.

### What should we report?

Every bird counts! While the winter protocols are being finished, we still want everyone to report the birds they are seeing to eBird (use the Maine eBird Portal for all checklists without breeding codes). This is especially true of the winter finches mentioned above as they may be absent in following years of the atlas. It never hurts to collect the data now so we can use it later!

While complete checklists provide the best data, you can enter incidental sightings of these irruptives as you encounter them. Check those crab-apples on the edge of parking lots - those causal grosbeak and siskin sightings are valuable pieces of data!

## Can you confirm 50 speices?

There are lots of different measures for effort when atlasing: number of blocks completed, number of priority blocks visited, total hours spent atlasing, and the list goes on. At the completion of the first year, we wanted to recognize the tremendous effort from atlasers who were able to confirm at least 50 species breeding in Maine. Here they are:

Birding For Bruce\* (128), Tom Aversa (92), Fyn Kynd (90), Don Reimer (89), Glenn Hodgkins (87), Michael J Good (86), Margaret Viens (83), Doug Hitchcox (81), Bill Sheehan (80), Gordon Smith (73), Jeff Cherry (69), Glen Mittelhauser (65), Marion Bates (63), Jose Ramirez (58), Logan Parker (57), Doug Suitor (57), Marian Zimmerman (57), Matthew Haviland (56), Nathaniel Sharp (54), Brad Woodward (53), Stephen Antell (52), Becky Marvil (52), Fred Yost (51), Cheryl Ring (51), Marshall Iliff (50), Dan Nickerson (50), Anna Hodgkins (50), Malcolm Hunter (50), and John Wyatt (50).

Reaching the confirmed level can be difficult with some species but often time and effort can pay off in observing confirming behaviors. Take a look at your “Atlas Target Species” through the Maine Bird Atlas eBird Portal (see page 8 for more details) and find out what species you are most likely to confirm in 2019!

\*Birding for Bruce represents a cumulative effort of atlasers who made a special effort to submit checklists over 10-15 July in honor of Bruce Barker, an avid birder and atlas participant who was fighting cancer. 241 checklists were shared (including non-atlas lists from Massachusetts, Montana, Vermont, and KwaZulu-Natal) totalling 271 species, of which 128 were confirmed breeders for Maine. Thanks everyone.



*Atlantic Puffins are an iconic Maine breeder but most of their colonies are on publicly inaccessible islands. Fortunately, seabird researchers in the Gulf of Maine are documenting their breeding at these locations for the atlas. Photo by Doug Hitchcox*

## Updates to the Maine Bird Atlas Portal and eBird App

If you haven't used the web version of eBird or the mobile app since the 2018 nesting season, you may notice some changes the next time you visit.

**A facelift to the Explore page.** The Explore pages across eBird have been given a significant redesign that make them much more mobile friendly. The features to see a species' breeding map and explore regions (blocks, counties, or state-level) are still readily available but a few new tools have been added since our initial trainings:

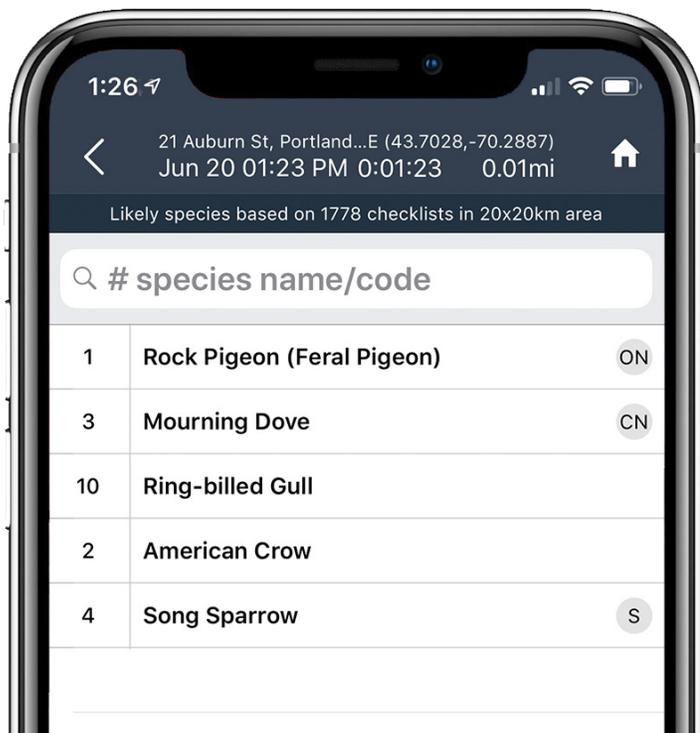
### Atlas Target Species

Since eBird knows what birds you have seen, and what breeding codes you've assigned to each, it can now tell you what "target species" you are missing for a specific area. For example, you can now have eBird generate a list of what birds are being reported within your block during the nesting season that you have not confirmed as a breeder yet.

### Atlas Effort Map

A new map showing each block and summaries of effort within each is now available. You can sort by: diurnal or nocturnal effort hours, number of complete checklists, number of confirmed species, or number of coded species. A very helpful tool as you get close to completing your block!

And new to the eBird Mobile App are visible breeding codes on the list view of the species you've reported. Now you'll be able to see the code that you've assigned to each species without needing to open each species individually. Android users had this feature earlier than iOS but everyone should look forward to it by the 2019 nesting season!



## What's Next?

Change is our way to never stop improving. Here are a few things to keep an eye out for in the coming months:

**Maine Winter Bird Atlas.** During the winter of 2018-19, we will be developing and field testing protocols for producing a winter bird atlas. In the meantime, you can help out by entering your winter bird records (December through March) directly into the Maine eBird portal.

**Additional Training Resources.** Over the winter we are putting together a group of resources to make training for the atlas easier, especially for those who cannot attend an organized training. These will include walk-through videos on how to use eBird, tips for recording sightings in the field, and advice on interpreting different behaviors you are likely to encounter.

### New Weekly Challenges And Prizes in 2019!

Throughout the 2019 breeding season we will present weekly challenges, generally a specific bird or behavior to look for, and we will have prizes including, binoculars, atlas logo gear, bird books, and more that you could win for participating. See our Facebook page for more updates!

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