



Voice of the Vireo

Delaware's 2nd Breeding Bird Atlas Team

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Beyond the Baseline...

As we begin to close down Year 2, we can begin to look back and reflect on the progress we have achieved and the challenges that still lie ahead of us. But, don't be fooled! Year 2 has been absolutely amazing!

We still have a lot of data coming in as atlasers continue to enter observations into the atlas database. Soon, we will begin to look at two-years worth of data and really get an understanding of how far we have come.

Along with more data will come a number of new questions. How many blocks still need coverage? For blocks that are covered, how much more do they need to be surveyed? Are any patterns starting to emerge? Are we missing species or finding new ones? These are just a few!

Some of those questions we know we can at least begin to answer. We can't yet say of any species has "disappeared"



Atlasers Kristin Brugger and Harry Tiebout found this young Spotted Sandpiper in late July, confirming this species for the BBA!

Photo by Kevin Kalasz



This Prothonotary Warbler took advantage of a decorative planter *inside!* Pink sheep heads are all the craze for these birds!

Photo by Marnie Pepper

from our landscape - we need to be certain before making that claim. How about new species - we found one new confirmed breeder this year! What other interesting stories do we have from Year 2?

We do know this though - Delaware's bird fauna has changed in the last 20 years. But to what extent? And, can we make any predictions?

In 2012, we will be able to address these questions. But of course, none of it would ever be possible without the dedication and hard work of all of you involved in this project! Enjoy this issue as we stray a bit from the technical news and focus a bit more on the exciting side of atlasing - NEW DISCOVERY!!

As always, with my deepest appreciation for all of your efforts,

Ant

Join Us!!

Mark your calendars! The Year-End BBA Volunteer Appreciation event will be held on Sunday, October 25 from 2:30 - 5:00. This year, our gathering will be held at the DuPont Nature Center at the Mispillion Harbor Reserve! This year's event will be pot-luck! Everyone is encouraged to attend for a great time with your fellow atlasers!

Contact Anthony at anthony.gonzon@state.de.us if you intend to bring something!

Spotted Sandpiper - CONFIRMED!

Kristin Brugger

DE BBA Block 225 is a fantastic slice of deciduous woodland, open farmland, oldfields and edificarian habitats along the north border of Delaware. Perched near the highest point in Delaware, the Ebright azimuth, a watershed drains west from Concord High School into the old retention pond of Brandywine Hunt into Harry's pond under Route 202 into Woodland Trust lands then to the Brandywine River. After a stormy week in mid-June 09, Harry Tiebout and I walked the upper watershed. Birds were active.

On the eastern shore of the retention pond our attention was grabbed by a pair of belted kingfishers and a family of mallards. A Red-winged Blackbird (RWBL) male called from blowing shrubs on an island in the pond. Then a Spotted Sandpiper (SPSA) popped up next to the RWBL. There was no territorial display on the part of the RWBL, suggesting the SPSA might have some authority on the island. Harry verified the identification. We watched the SPSA drop away from view then fly stiff winged across the pond north to the shore. That was it...My field card told me the date was right and this observation needed documentation. I filled out my forms, called my Region 1 coordinator and contacted the BBA office. The next day Kevin Kalasz and Anthony Gonzon verified the SPSA sighting and took photos.

My main learning in the first year of BBA work is to get out there...any time of day and all days of the month, no matter the weather. There is a lot to see in the great habitat of Block 225, and surely I have missed a lot. My BBA field card sets some clear goals for the next 2 yrs!

An Opportunity For Conservation - Spotted Sandpiper

Kevin Kalasz, Shorebird Biologist - DE Natural Heritage and Endangered Species Program

As we all know, Delaware is dominated by human-altered landscapes. Finding new areas that harbor rare species is particularly important and becoming less frequent all of the time. So, as with any rare nesting record, when we received word that a Spotted Sandpiper was observed in a stormwater retention basin, we hoped that we would find evidence of a nesting pair.

Not only did we find the adults, we observed two fledglings! This represents a new nesting location record for this species. What is particularly interesting is that they nested on an artificial island in a stormwater retention pond. Stormwater retention ponds are common in commercial and residential developments and are nearly always artificial. We can apply what we've learned from this record to develop conservation strategies that are easy to implement.

With the help of private landowners, developers who create these ponds, and regulatory agencies, we can now recommend site designs that would not add anything, if at all, to the cost of creating these ponds and would improve the quantity and quality of nesting habitat for this species. Over time and if done correctly, we could have Spotted Sandpipers become a common nesting species in Delaware. This is yet another example of how we are using BBA data to conserve species.



Spotted Sandpiper - Continued!

Anthony Gonzon

Spotted Sandpiper in Delaware? Really? Amazing! But this certainly must be a very uncommon occurrence. So it was that the species was confirmed for the DE BBA. Immediately, I thought, "Maybe there are others. I should get the word out!". That afternoon, after the young ones had been documented, I sent an email to BBA volunteers. Ironically, just a few days earlier I had heard from Sally O'Byrne that she had received a report from Colin Campbell of a Spotted Sandpiper near the Cherry Island Landfill. Colin and Sally obtained permission to enter private property there and sure enough - another confirmed record of Spotted Sandpiper! Two in less than a weeks time, let alone 2009! You never know where a record might turn up and if I can do nothing else, I urge you to never dismiss even the most unlikely of records! Never know what might come out of it!

Rose-breasted Grosbeak - Nesting in DE??

Sally O'Byrne



Robin Doody is not well known in birding circles, but he is notable for birding the byways and highways of Wilmington, finding nuggets where others don't bother to even look. On May 27, Robin let me know that he had found a Rose-breasted Grosbeak nest in Alapocas Woods State Park. Not only had he found a great nest, but it was in great location (for birders) in a tree next to a path. I went the next day to confirm the nest. Here are my notes from my first visit: "Today at 1 pm, Robin Doody took me and Alan Dages to a Rose-breasted Grosbeak nest he found yesterday at Alapocas Woods. Yesterday he heard the male singing along the path and followed it to the nest. The nest is about 10 feet off the ground in a young hickory tree that has grapevine growing over it. The nest appeared to be made of dried grape vine pieces. It was loosely constructed.

What struck me was the presence of the male. It stayed close to the nest - within 20 feet. It was sitting in the nearby tree, very calm, preening, sitting, still. I have never seen a male so close or so calm. The nest is quite near the path."

The next day, Jim White came with me to photograph the bird, and we watched as the parents switched places on the nest. He also corrected me on the nest height - closer to 17 feet - the height of a basketball rim.

A Rose-breasted Grosbeak nest is a rare find. The only other RBGR nest to be found was in 1988 at the University of Delaware Woodlot in Newark by Dr. Roland Roth, UD professor of ornithology. In that nest, the parents were caring for a cowbird chick, and when last observed on June 21, the cowbird was a fledgling outside of the nest (Hess, Gene K. 1989. Rose-breasted Grosbeak breeding in Delaware. *Delmarva Ornithologist* 22:62-63.)

We hoped that this nest would produce RBGR chicks, and on June 7 Robin reported that he heard chicks and watched for 20 minutes as the male brought food to the nest and sang nearby. However, he never saw the female. The next day, I took Anthony Gonzon and Hank Davis to see the nest, and it appeared abandoned. Robin soon joined us, and together we watched for over an hour. We heard the male singing in the distance, but no sounds came from the nest and

no adults approached. We decided it had been predated. A sad ending.

Interestingly, on July 4, Jean Woods was atlasing nearby in Alapocas Woods in the neighboring block, and saw a male RBGR carrying food. She wasn't able to relocate it, and the next day I joined her for a search of several hours with no luck. Very tantalizing, but no confirmation.

Alapocas Woods State Park is a gem of a woodland adjacent to Brandywine Creek and nestled between the duPont Experimental Station and Augustine Cut-off. Through the Breeding Bird Atlas, significantly more time has been spent exploring this mature deciduous woods. Next year, Jean and I plan to make several nighttime forays into this park, and I'm looking forward to more surprises as Alapocas reveals its nature.

Photos by Sally O'Byrne



Bank Swallow Colony – Re-found!

Joe Sebastiani

On Saturday, June 13, 2009, I led a group of four on a Breeding Bird Atlas field trip for the Delmarva Ornithological Society. The goal was to visit a block that has not had much attention and try to put a dent in the breeding species total for that area. I will admit, I did not do any scouting, and only looked over some maps to try to figure out a route for our half-day outing.

Our destination was the St. Georges – NE block, #26. This block includes a lot of good habitat, much of it off-limits to us, since a huge portion is owned by the Valero refinery. Unfortunately, our day was mostly roadside birding, and finding a quiet road anywhere in New Castle County can be a challenge. If you've ever stood next to the Valero refinery, it makes a LOT of noise, drowning out

birdsong, so that didn't help matters.

As we atlassed, our day was shaping up nicely. Green Heron was a good find along St. Georges creek, as were White-breasted Nuthatch (on the coastal plain!), and Yellow-breasted Chat. We confirmed Eastern Kingbird, Brown Thrasher, Common Yellowthroat, Indigo Bunting, and had a lot of other good records.

At Tybout's Corner, we stopped into a storage unit business that let us in to overlook the neighboring meadows that were posted as private property. Immediately, we saw lots of swallows feeding over the meadow which turned out to be Bank Swallows. We HAD to find the colony! Ron Sinclair suggested we go to the sand mine behind the nearby Blue Diamond

Amusement Park which also contains an off-road motorcycle park. This site is private property, and the motorcycle track owners let us look around a little bit as long as we stayed out of the motorcycle paths. If you plan to visit here, you must check in with them to gain permission for entry.

Among bulldozers and buzzing motorcycles, we scanned for the colony. Meanwhile, we found two Grasshopper Sparrows singing nearby, a Horned Lark with a recently fledged youngster, and a Killdeer nest. This was fantastic, but we still couldn't find the colony.

In a short while, we scanned a distant ravine. Along the upper edge, we could see lots of little holes, and sure enough, birds were busily entering and exiting them. We hurried

over and got about 100 yards away and identified the birds as Bank Swallows, counting over 60 nest holes. There were high-fives all around! Bob Strahorn got some photos, including the one pictured below!

To further the drama, the colony was at the edge of block #26. We did not GPS the colony and decided to look at aerial maps online to determine the exact location. Here is a little advice...don't do this for birds in an active sand mine. Things change quickly in that kind of place, and we could not tell where the colony was exactly on aerial maps a few years old. Bob returned to the site a few days later, took the GPS coordinates, and the colony turned out to be located, barely, within the block to our north, Newark East – SE #22.



Bank Swallow Colony – Reaction!

John Janowski

As a subscriber to the *DE Bird List Serve*, I read Joe's discovery of the Bank Swallow colony the day he posted it! It meant a lot to me, maybe more than most birders/atlasers given my interest with this species and having birded Delaware since the early 1980's, much of it in central New Castle County.

My immediate reaction was: I knew it! I had postponed a search visit to that extractive use (quarry) location, thinking there was still plenty of time - 3 more years left of Atlas activity. If you snooze - you lose. Never the less I was happy to hear of this find given the recent history of this bird in Delaware. The best breeding evidence I had so far was a Bank Swallow engaged in courtship - that is

of a bird carrying a large white feather in its beak. This occurred at Veteran's Point in Delaware City on Memorial Day, 2008, less than three miles from Joe's discovery.

Here is a species, like many, that is taken for granted. Not that it is a widespread breeder in Delaware, but on any given summer day, a birder could feel pretty confident about finding this bird in appropriate habitat, definitely along the C&D Canal. That was the case up until about 9 years ago. A typical spring count in this area would yield well over 200 individuals, namely because the state's largest colony was located on a sandy cliff on the north shore of the Canal by Lum's Pond State Park. Not only was this one of 5 sites in Delaware where breeding was confirmed during the first Breeding Bird Atlas (1983-1987), but it was the only site on public property. I once had a fascinating natural history moment watching a Black Snake try to make its way "unsuccessfully" into the colony. Commotion was the rule as hundreds of Bank Swallows were stirred up by this invader.

As abundant the numbers were that year, it was but a few years later that the colony did not support a single bird. The Delmarva Ornithological Society



Bank Swallow Photo by [D. Gordon E. Robertson](#)

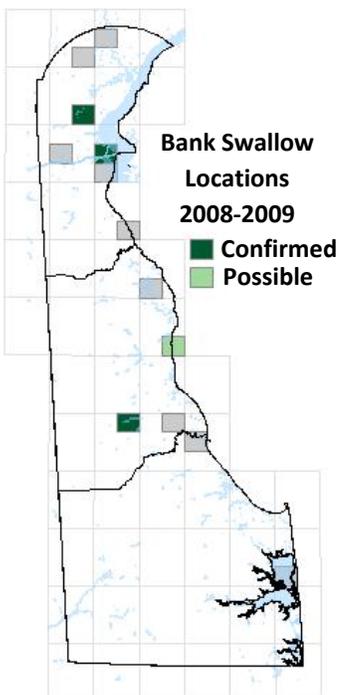
(DOS) conducts its Spring Roundup (census) annually on the 2nd Saturday of May. Beginning in 2001, only double and sometime single digit numbers were reported statewide. What caused these birds to abandon the colony and this great location?

The colony looked the same as it always did, with no obvious destruction or collapse. However, vegetation was slowly encroaching on the colony, thus enabling predation. It was not until a public notice for a bank stabilization permit was advertised in 2002 that the DOS Conservation Committee realized what had occurred. Sometime in the mid 1990's the Summit Marina was constructed several hundred feet east of the colony. A large amount of riprap was installed along the shore line to stabilize the bank. Although there was no direct impact as a result of building the marina, the shore line was no longer eroding making it easier for vegetation to

take hold. This gem was lost forever.

The former colony was located in atlas Block 29 St. George's CW, approximately 6 ½ miles from where Joe discovered the new colony.

This news will certainly encourage me and other atlasers to keep an eye out for any exposed sandy cliffs/banks along waterways. Check them carefully for swallows, and for that matter other burrowing species, like Belted Kingfisher. As Joe taught us, quarries are favored by these colonial nesters, but get permission first before accessing the location. Be very careful negotiating these sites especially watching for the large operating vehicles. Let's make it a challenge to find more Bank Swallow colonies during our 3rd year of atlasing.



Breeding at the Beach

Matthew Bailey

Piping Plover

The Piping Plover 2009 nesting season was generally successful. As has been the case in recent years, Cape Henlopen is the only place in Delaware where piping plovers nested in 2009. Although there are also other sites that have suitable habitat for plover nesting in Delaware, Cape Henlopen State Park has the greatest area and can even support more pairs of nesting plovers in future years. All of the sites suitable for nesting will continue to be monitored. Also, in 2009, productivity for the plovers was fairly good and an increase in numbers of chicks fledged is a reasonably attainable goal for future seasons.

There were ten pairs of Piping Plovers nesting at Cape Henlopen this season, which matches our record high from 2008. From these pairs, 13 chicks fledged, a vast improvement over our fledge numbers in 2008 (3 chicks fledged) but just short of the record high number of chicks fledged (14 chicks in 2003).

Least Terns

Least terns had another tough year breeding in Delaware. It has been over five years since least terns have been observed to have fledged chicks in here. This season, four small colonies of least terns established along the Delaware coastline. Two were at Cape Henlopen, one was at South Bowers Beach and one was at Fowlers Beach. All told, there were just under 20 pairs of least terns nesting in Delaware this year. A combination of frequent floods associated with tidal surges and predation caused the failures of the least tern colonies.

American Oystercatcher

American oystercatchers nested on shores of the Delaware and Inland Bays and at Cape Henlopen on the Atlantic Coast. Due to the remote nature of the nesting sites on the Delaware and Inland Bays, attaining solid data on nest success was not possible with the level of staffing currently available, although oystercatcher chicks were observed on Middle Island which is just west of the Indian River Inlet.

The two oystercatcher pairs nesting at Cape Henlopen were closely monitored while staff was in the process of monitoring piping plovers. One of these pairs lost their nest to overwash at Gordons Pond. The second pair hatched their two chicks out on the tip of the Point. The chicks were observed for about ten days and then disappeared. Their fate is unknown, but it is not thought they reached fledge age.



Photo by Joe Patson

DID YOU KNOW....

...that 2009 was the first year that Glossy Ibis have been found breeding in Delaware OUTSIDE of Pea Patch Island?? Ibis have taken up residence in the inland bays, nesting on grassy islands along with other colonial waterbirds! This year, several atlasers noted nesting ibis on these islands.

Delaware BBA Apparel Is Here!

That's Right! Thanks to fellow atlaser Derek Stoner, and the Delmarva Ornithological Society, we can now offer atlasers authentic DE BBA apparel.

Currently available are adjustable-fit hats and short-sleeve knit polo shirts, shown here in khaki (hat), mint green and slight blue (shirts) and other colors are available!

Prices are as follows:

Adjustable fit hat: **\$15**

- Available in Khaki, Brown, Green

Short-sleeve pique polo shirts: **\$25**

- Light Blue, Mint Green, Clover Green, Stone, Royal

Many other items are available, such as jackets, bags, and long-sleeve shirts. These may be ordered with the DBBA logo upon request.

Contact Derek Stoner for more details.

302-893-8426

derekstoner@hotmail.com



Reminder! Its That Time of Year Again!!

If you provided time to the BBA this year and have not already done so, PLEASE get your **completed and signed** volunteer time sheets to the BBA Coordinator, Anthony Gonzon.

Remember to make a complete record of your time in the field and time spent at home entering data! You may also include any time spent driving around during your surveys!

Blank forms can be found at www.fw.delaware.gov/bba or contact Anthony or your regional complier.

Pleas Mail all time sheets to:

The Delaware Breeding Bird Atlas
4876 Hay Point Landing Rd.
Smyrna, DE 19977

A First in the First State!

Anthony Gonzon

Just two years ago, a breeding season before the DE Breeding Bird Atlas began, Delaware Nature Society staff at Ashland Nature Center near Hockessin, documented Delaware's first ever record of nesting Sharp-shinned Hawks. Afforded protection from disturbance, the pair successfully reared the first Delaware sharpies and returned in 2008 and 2009 to continue raising their broods! But these small accipiters are very lucky. They chose a great place to nest - the nest site is relatively stable and secluded. They are given every chance to succeed. Unfortunately, this can't always be the case.

The Dickcissel, a neotropical migrant, is a grassland bird with a typical breeding range that spans the central United States and appears to be expanding eastward. When I became heavily interested and involved in Delaware birding near the turn of the century, I could recall how many in the birding community would be excited to learn of Dickcissels in Delaware. Some of the sites remain "traditional sites" to find this species during May and a few new ones have blinked on and off the map since then. Although this is a species that has come to be expected in Delaware, especially during spring migration, breeding had never been confirmed. You would think that knowing where to expect a Dickcissel would lead to finding a nest or observing fledglings. So why has it not happened yet?

I am sure there are many reasons that might prevent us from confirming this grassland bird as a breeder for Delaware. Nesting in agricultural fields is not exactly the safest place to be for them, especially since these fields are often harvested and/or tilled during the time that the Dickcissels would be setting up shop. Maybe all this time they have been trying. Maybe we are just missing it. In 2008, the BBA received a report of a female Dickcissel carrying food.

This would constitute a first state record and several days were spent scoping the site, hoping for additional evidence. Unfortunately, although the bird was observed at the site, the report was never confirmed with a nest or fledglings. Good evidence that the species was breeding - yes. But for a first state record, the burden of proof is a little greater.

Then it happened - in 2009, atlaser extraordinaire Ken Bass did it. He found them! And not just one nest, but TWO!

Ken was in Ellendale NE, #128 observing some property near the center of his block when he found the Dickcissels. Over the course of several days, Ken made observations about their behavior and was confident that they were breeding at the site. This led him to request permission from the landowner to search the fields. With permission granted, Ken went about doing what he does best - finding nests! What resulted was the discovery of two Dickcissel nests!



Photo by Ken Bass

But what was it about *THIS* field? Why was it that they were successful in at least making a nest and laying eggs?

Answer: The Delaware Landowner Incentive Program! Also known as LIP, this program offers private landowners technical and financial incentives to protect, enhance and/or restore habitat to benefit species-at-risk. This may range from creating shallow water wetland habitats for migratory shorebirds to planting trees for the Delmarva Fox Squirrel. In addition to Ken's findings, LIP biologists also noted the presence of Dickcissels! These Dickcissels nested in a field that is managed as an early successional habitat with native warm-season grasses and wildflowers. Managed as grasslands, this site has proven to be a huge success for the program and the BBA! Congratulations to Ken, LIP, and the BBA!

Managed as grasslands, this site has proven to be a huge success for the program and the BBA! Congratulations to Ken, LIP, and the BBA!



Photo by Sharon Lynn

**You can check out the Landowner Incentive Program and other Private Lands Assistance Programs at:
www.fw.delaware.gov/dplap**

WHAT'S NEXT???

So, 2009 is nearly complete. Data are flowing in, rare species reports are being completed and reviewed. Maps are being updated. And priorities will be set for 2010 and beyond.

But what else is out there? What else can we find? Certainly, Year 2 of the DE BBA was monumental with some of our great finds, but that can't be all.

Could it be the Savannah Sparrow? This grassland bird breeds not too far to our north and we have evidence



of birds present in the summer. Could they be breeding in the pastures and fields in northern DE or in bay shore habitats along our coast?

How about Swainson's Warbler? Swampy habitats and dense vegetation are the preference of this secretive warbler. Do we have that sort of habitat in Delaware - yes! Among other potential sites, areas along the Nanticoke River and its tributaries certainly appear suitable for breeding. Maybe we will know in 2010?

And then we have Henslow's Sparrow. This species is presumed extir-



Painting by [Louis Agassiz Fuertes](#)

pated from Delaware as a breeding bird. But wait - we do have appropriate habitat for this species and one



was even seen this year! Check those fields, not once, but 2, 3, 4 times if necessary!

Black Skimmer - a bird that has bred so close to Delaware! Formerly nesting at Cape Henlopen and in the Inland Bays, this species has not



been confirmed on our side of the DE/MD border in some time. Maybe in 2010 they will again nest on the small islands in the Rehoboth, Indian River or Little Assawoman Bays?

Let's look for those irruptive winter birds. Species like Pine Siskin, Purple Finch, Red-breasted Nuthatch, and

even crossbills occasionally show up in large numbers during some Delaware winters. And what of those stragglers that don't exactly head back north in spring? Are they attempting to nest here? We already



know we had some siskins hanging around in 2008 and we also have sightings of young nuthatches that were flying a bit too well to be considered confirmed records.

As we begin to ask ourselves about those rarest-of-the rare, take pause for a moment and look at how our discoveries have been made to date! It has become very apparent that any one of us could find a new breeding record or the return of an breeding species thought gone from Delaware's landscape.

But let's put this in perspective. Yes, all of these records are important and new discovery is always exciting, but don't forget that they represent only a small part of Delaware's bird fauna! So in 2010, let's focus not only on finding and protecting our rarest species, but also do our part to keep our common species common!

We appreciate your contributions to this newsletter! Please send photos, artwork or stories to:

Editor, The Voice of the Vireo
 4876 Hay Point Landing
 Smyrna, DE 19977 or
anthony.gonzon@state.de.us

CALENDAR

October 25, 2009 - BBA Volunteer Appreciation Event: 2:30-5:00 at the DuPont Nature Center at the Mispillion Harbor Reserve. Its potluck style and if you are interested in bringing something, please contact Anthony first! Come join us!!

December 1, 2009 - Start of Safe Date Period: Sundays in winter are a great time to get out and scout your block for things you might have missed this past year! Eagles and Owls are approaching safe date periods and now is the best time to find established nests! Remember, if you find a nest, especially those of birds like eagles and owls, PLEASE observe from a distance. Disturbance can be potentially harmful to some species, resulting in nest abandonment and failure! Also, please remember that active hunting occurs throughout the winter months. For information on hunting seasons, please visit www.fw.de.gov.

Christmas Bird Counts - Find those OWLS and EAGLES!!

Wilmington - Contact Jim White (hylajwhite@aol.com)

Middletown - Contact Bruce Lantz (emdb2lantz@aol.com)

Milford - Contact Chris Bennett (chris.bennett@state.de.us)

Bombay Hook - Contact Andy Ednie (ednieap@verizon.net)

Rehoboth - Contact Jeff Gordon (jeffgyr@mac.com)

Prime Hook/Cape Henlopen - Contact Frank Rohrbacher (rohrbaf@aol.com)

Seaford - Contact Glen Lovelace (glovelace@dol.net)

December 19 (Sunday)

December 20 (Sunday)

December 26 (Saturday)

December 27 (Sunday)

January 2 (Saturday)

January 3 (Sunday)

TBA

