

ABOUT BOOKS

That was Then. This is Now.

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Massachusetts Breeding Bird Atlas. Wayne R. Petersen and W. Roger Merservey, editors. 2003. Massachusetts Audubon Society. Distributed by University of Massachusetts Press. Amherst.



1979 seems like such a very long time ago. In that year, disco reigned supreme, and the Village People's *Y.M.C.A.* was a number one hit. Folks stood in line to see movies like *Alien*, *Apocalypse Now*, and *Meatballs*. No one had even heard of the term "director's cut." On television, hit shows included *Charley's Angels*, *Laverne and Shirley*, and *Taxi*. Cellular phones had just been invented, but of course no one had one of these gadgets yet and would not for years. Joop Sinjou and Toshi Tada Doi invented the CD in 1979, but it would take fifteen more years for it to finally replace the record album. *Windows*, DVDs, and PDAs were only gleams in the imaginative brains of engineering geeks. 1979 was also the last year of collecting data for the *Massachusetts Breeding Bird Atlas*.

U.S. Geological Survey topological maps of the state divide Massachusetts into uniform quadrangles. Each of these 189 "quads" (about sixty square miles in area), was then further split by Massachusetts Audubon and Massachusetts Division of Fisheries and Wildlife into six equal "blocks." Therefore, for this breeding atlas, Massachusetts was divided into 989 blocks of ten square miles each. After a pilot year to iron out the kinks, from 1974 to 1979 over 600 volunteers, sometimes in teams, were sent out to these blocks during the breeding season. They then filled in data cards on what species of birds they found. Just reading the lengthy list of volunteers for this project is an exercise in Massachusetts birding nostalgia, and long-time state birders will recognize many names of friends no longer with us. Even with this huge effort, the coverage was not always equal from quad to quad:

Although not every block and quad in Massachusetts received equal coverage over the 1974 to 1979 period, at least some coverage was obtained in every block except for several on the borders of the state where the quad maps include only negligible Massachusetts territory [p.19].

Breeding confirmation data were coordinated and updated by Richard A. Forster, and the data finally computerized for the maps by David Stemple.

The finished book is a sumptuous volume, wonderfully designed and brilliantly augmented with color illustrations by John Sill and Barry W. Van Dusen. After introductory chapters on methodology and the ecoregions of the state, each species is

given a two-page spread with an illustration and a large map. Species accounts are written by a gaggle of participants. (I confess I had forgotten that I had written the account of the Saw-whet Owl; it was so long ago.) Different dots on the maps indicate whether a species breeding status was “confirmed,” “probable,” or “possible.”

An important appendix of “Additional Breeding Bird Atlas Species Accounts” (pp. 422-9) lists all the species that have been discovered breeding in the state since 1979 with a short account of their breeding history and status. This section includes such now-familiar breeding species as Bald Eagle, Peregrine Falcon, Common Raven, and Cerulean Warbler. A thick packet of transparent overlay maps is included at the back of the book. These include maps of the major drainages of the state, the county lines, elevations, and forest types. I found these very useful and handy in getting the most from the maps with each species account.

If the reader is very familiar with contemporary breeding bird surveys and breeding records from journals like *Bird Observer*, or regularly birds the central and western sections of the state, then it will be startling to see how the extent of the breeding range for many species has changed noticeably in the past twenty-five years. The number of species whose breeding ranges have dramatically shrunk since 1979 is unsurprisingly large. It is sobering and depressing to see how many fewer breeding locations we now have for such species as American Kestrel, Northern Bobwhite, Common Moorhen, Barn Owl, Olive-sided Flycatcher, Cliff Swallow, Golden-winged Warbler, and Vesper Sparrow. And those are only a very few of the most obvious examples. Most species show a less dramatic, more spotty and local decrease in their breeding status. In other words, it amounts to one dot less here, a new blank block there. All together these changes demonstrate the effects of the serious and dramatic loss of habitat that has occurred across the state since the last year of the atlas project.

It is therefore surprising also to learn that the breeding ranges of certain other species have rapidly increased in the last twenty-five years. Take a moment and glance at the *Breeding Bird Atlas* maps for species like Mute Swan, Wild Turkey, Red-bellied Woodpecker, and Carolina Wren. In the *Atlas*, the breeding ranges of these species are represented by a mere scattering of just a few dots. One of the oddest species in this category is Evening Grosbeak, represented in the *Atlas* with only one dot, but now known to breed in select locations in northern Worcester County, the Berkshires, and other areas. Unfortunately, this list of species on the upswing is small.

Undoubtedly, some species were easier to count than others. Nocturnal species in particular are notoriously difficult to discover on Breeding Bird Surveys. Just based on my own local observations, I have found that the *Massachusetts Breeding Bird Atlas* shows far too few, if any, indications of breeding for Barred, Screech, and Saw-whet owls in southern Worcester County particularly in the French, Quinnebaug, Quabog, and Blackstone drainages. These are not new species for those areas, but are local and nocturnal and therefore much easier to miss when doing surveys like this. Likewise, very thinly distributed diurnal species like Orchard Oriole and Worm-eating Warbler have long been known to breed in the Blackstone Valley in areas of

Northbridge and Uxbridge, among other places, but this fact is also not represented on the *Atlas* maps. Both of these examples show how easy it is for certain species to fall through the cracks of a survey with such a wide scope.

The one serious drawback to this otherwise wonderful achievement is the considerable span of time that elapsed from the end of the surveys to the actual publishing of the data. Twenty-five years is far too long a time to have waited for this book. By way of comparison, the New Hampshire breeding bird survey was conducted between 1981 and 1986 with 390 observers logging in excess of 9,750 hours of field time. The *Atlas of Breeding Birds in New Hampshire* was published in 1994. Similarly, *The Atlas of Breeding Birds of Vermont*, covering survey years from 1976 to 1981, was published in 1985. And in Vermont the surveying for an updated edition is already in its second year. Certainly, an atlas of this nature is a “snapshot” of what bird populations were like in the mid-1970s, but the value of that snapshot diminishes as more time passes unless there is another more current picture with which to compare it. Massachusetts is being so rapidly developed that changes in distribution of species, especially in the interior of the state, need to be reevaluated every few years. Are there plans to conduct another complete breeding bird survey of the state any time soon?

Of course, for those of us who are “record mavens,” in other words the kind of person who eagerly pores over the records in every issue of *Bird Observer*, this atlas is a treasure trove of data. We “data junkies” have a sense of what the current status is of many of these species and can mentally draw numerous conclusions from the wealth of material in this book. However, I am concerned that any new birder to this state will pick up this atlas and come away with a very skewed and outdated idea of where birds are breeding. I wish a paragraph or two addressing some of the specific changes in distribution of species since the surveys were completed was included in the individual species accounts. Perhaps in the future, an ongoing breeding bird atlas can be kept as an online database, constantly updated and corrected.

It needs to be mentioned that much of the data in the *Atlas* has already been published in the 1993 book *Birds of Massachusetts* by Veit and Petersen. When that book was published, many people thought this is what the data from the years of the breeding surveys ended up becoming. But *Birds of Massachusetts* was not the intended *Atlas*. A comparison of the maps between the two books shows them to be essentially the same. *Birds of Massachusetts* did not publish the maps of species with very sparse breeding records, like Sedge Wren and Evening Grosbeak, but does mention the few breeding records in the text. Otherwise, the other species maps use the same data. Granted, the maps in the *Atlas* are larger, use different symbols, and have the set of matching overlays. The main difference between the two books is in the content of the text. In the *Atlas*, there are general species accounts, whereas in *Birds of Massachusetts* the text is concerned with details of occurrence and records of that species in the state. The *Atlas* is certainly a more attractive book with the color illustrations and a spacious layout. But if you like your data straight up with no frills, then much of it can be found in the previously published Veit and Petersen.

The *Massachusetts Breeding Bird Atlas* is an important addition to our understanding of birds in the state and should be on the shelf of anyone with even a mild interest in the changing status of our avian breeders. I was getting concerned that I would die before I finally saw the publishing of this long-overdue book, and I'm glad I made it. Let's hope I'm still around for the also long-overdue butterfly atlas.



Other Literature Cited:

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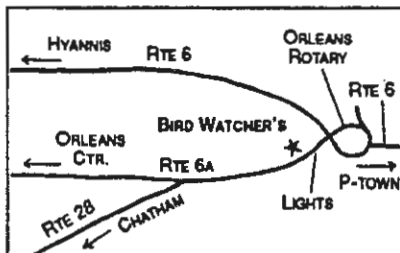
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