

Atlasing takes birding from tic-listing to birding with a purpose. It directs birders to look closely, study behavior, and search for the clues that may lead to the ultimate objective: to confirm breeding.

THE BUS WOULD DROP us off at the end of Washington Avenue, and my left foot would race my right all the way...

"Home!" I'd announce, and a hard-slammed screen door would confirm it. It took less than a minute to shed "school clothes," thirty seconds to don jeans, and maybe another minute to locate the other sneaker. Then, binoculars in hand, I'd sprint through the kitchen, hit the back door like Red Grange deflecting a tackler, only slowing to a gallop...to a jog...to a walk when the tree that held the nest was in view.

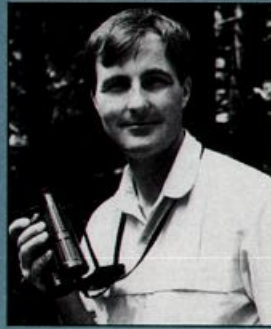
The last dozen steps were stealth itself.

Sometimes the olive tail of the incubating adult was visible, sometimes it was the thrush bill. Most days I would just sit and watch the bird on its nest. But every third day or so, curiosity would overcome good sense, and I would impose myself, flush the adult, and peer down on the woven cradle and its clutch of porcelain fine eggs. Despite a nagging fear that the old wives' tales were true, despite the tempered protest of incubating Wood Thrushes, I'd reach a testing finger into the nest to touch the tiny eggs, feel their cool texture, and savor the warm miracle.

Reassured, I'd retreat, resume my vigil, and hold my breath until the adult returned. That was in the *Summer of Looking Close*—one of the greatest summers of my life.

Pete Dunne

AMERICAN BIRDING



Atlasing and the Art of Bird Watching

*Illustration
by Keith Hansen*

"Hi," I said to the figure rearranging an amalgam of trash and gear in a Jeep Durango. "Gerry Adams?"

An extended hand and smile that tugged at the halters of bemusement confirmed my guess. The car was plainly a birder's car—a cross between a waste basket and a storage bin. The man wearing jeans and a creaseless flannel shirt was plainly a birder.

Besides, Gerry Adams had said that he would meet us here, now, and good bird atlasers tend to be precise.

Twenty years ago, the notion of atlasing, mapping the distribution of a state's nesting birds, was foreign to most North American birders. The idea and its methodology were imported from England. But since the first North American Breeding Bird Atlas, dozens of states have followed suit and

thousands of North American birders have applied their skills to this activity. As Gerry puts it, "atlasing is the ultimate thing to do with your birding skills." The Washington State Atlas Project, initiated in 1987 by the Seattle Audubon Society, with funding from the Washington Department of Wildlife, was in its fourth year. Most atlas projects run five years to completion.

Thirty years ago, the need for a statewide atlas project was not deemed acute. But this has changed, too, and Washington is a case in point. Human populations are fluid. They shift, and they grow. Habitat

and its wild inhabitants suffer in measure. For example, King County, staging area for Seattle's commuters, grew by half a million people in the '80s and an additional half a million are anticipated. A bird atlas project is an important mechanism for gathering information that can be used to accommodate the needs of both people and birds.

Our route bisected the usual concentric human life zones that ring large cities. We passed through the Upscale Urban core, then the Tired Urban Band, then the Traffic Congestion Belt, then the Affluent Mall Belt, and finally the Kiwi and Croissant Belt. Thirty-five minutes out of the city, when we turned off for rural Washington, oncoming commuter traffic was *still* heavy.

"And it's just going to get worse," Gerry said of the traffic, and this time the half-smile tended toward a grimace. He is a Washington native, and an ardent environmentalist in addition to being one of the Washington State Breeding Bird Atlas's top guns.

Atlas projects, wherever they are found, are dependent upon the eyes and ears of volunteer birders who donate their talents to the cause. The mechanics of atlasing are basically simple. States are segmented into atlas blocks, three miles to a side. Volunteers stake a claim to these blocks and canvas them during the nesting season recording the birds they find there.

Some people may take just one block, usually the one that straddles their home turf, and over the course of five years, they may spend dozens of hours scouring it. Most birders canvas several blocks, but in a state the size of Washington, the blocks more than outnumber birders. What usually happens is that blocks in populated areas receive ample coverage; blocks that lie in a state's underpopulated, outer reaches receive little or none.

So, atlas projects often rely on



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people like Gerry, professional “Block Busters,” who travel to remote areas, and who may canvas 14-20 blocks in a weekend. They are paid of course. A whopping \$30./day (plus camping fees).

There are 7800 blocks in Washington. After three years of atlasing, roughly half have been covered at least once. But today's target blocks did not lie in the Great Basin or along the Columbia River. Today's blocks were closer to Gerry's home in Carnation, Washington. They'd been surveyed once, earlier in the season. This foray in June was for confirmation. This one was for keeps.

We pulled into Tolt River Park and found a spot beside the cars of fishermen. Two minutes later, we were straddling the walk-bridge spanning the Snoqualmie River. The habitat along the watercourse was cottonwood and maple broken by

willow. Above, on the hillside, was coniferous forest—mixed hemlock, red cedar and Douglas fir.

“Black-headed Grosbeak,” Gerry breathed, cupping his hands behind his ears, training his hyper-tuned auditory receivers on the hillside. “Hairy Woodpecker...Pacific-slope Flycatcher...Black-throated Gray Warbler.”

It was 6:55 a.m. Time for Gerry to start work.

Atlasing is different from most other types of birding. With atlasing, locating and identifying a bird is only the initial step in a process. Atlasing takes birding from tic-listing to birding with a purpose. Atlasing directs birders to *look closely* at the birds they find, makes birders study and interpret behavior; searches for the evidence and clues that may lead to the ultimate objective: to confirm breeding. Atlasing brings birders back to a time when people were bird *watchers*; back to roots.

In some respects the atlas field card we were using was standard enough. Three-fold. Species listed in A.O.U. order. Right next to the names was a column marked: OB (OBserved). But this is where the similarity between an atlas checklist and a birding checklist ends. Atlas

checklists include three other columns or categories; one marked PO (POssible breeder), one marked PR (PRobable breeder), and a final column that reads CO (COnfirmated breeder). For a bird to appear in one of these elevated categories a graduated set of criteria must be met.

For example, a species in suitable habitat during the nesting season gets a check beneath the heading of PO. A singing male in suitable habitat rates a full "X."

An apparently mated *pair* in suitable habitat wins a "P" rating in the loftier PR category. Multiple singing males (minimum 7) found during one visit rates an "M" under the PR column.

"We'll do a running tally," Gerry explained. It wasn't long before Black-throated Gray Warbler and Pacific-slope Flycatcher earned their "M."

The grandest category of them all, the prize aspired to by every atlaser, is placement of as many birds as possible in the CO category. This usually requires the maximum effort and is, accordingly, the most satisfying.

We walked a course that carried us through the riparian habitat along the river, picking up Rufous-sided Towhee, Red-eyed Vireo, Bewick's Wren, Song Sparrow, and Bushtit.

All these birds received a "T" for territory rating beneath the PR banner. All had been recorded on Gerry's previous visit and had now passed a temporal threshold. Birds still located on territory a week after initial contact move a step up the ladder of credibility.

"There," Gerry shouted, pointing. Overhead, two Rufous Hummingbirds were engaging in an aerial duel worthy of a Steven Spielberg production. "When that happens," Gerry said, reaching for his scorecard, "it means a bird is defending its territory." Another "T" fell into place.

The trail started to climb—a narrow ribbon thick with ferns and slick with banana slugs. Trees grew denser

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and taller but their trunks were dwarfed by the girth of stumps of harvested trees. An orange ribbon hung beside the trail.

"Logging company property," Gerry explained, and this time there was no smile. The company had recently applied for a permit to build 25 houses on the site, but had withdrawn the application under "public pressure."

"Stop," Gerry commanded, face strained, senses alert. Some sound beyond my ken had turned his ear. The face relaxed, but the senses remained alert, and softly he began to imitate a pygmy-owl. The canopy erupted with angry scolding.

"That's what I thought," he said. "Steller's Jay nesting up there somewhere."

"Swainson's Thrush," he whispered, putting a name to a soft, secret call note that I had indeed heard, but his atlas-trained ears had identified. The bird appeared, a shadow cast in feathers. It eyed us for a moment, then disappeared into a tangle. Only Gerry had noticed that the bird carried food in its bill. Good atlasers are attuned to these things.

Quickly Gerry edged forward, hands behind ears, his face a mask of concentration. Seconds slipped by, and suddenly a new sound filled the air—a sound that brought a full fledged smile to the face of Gerry Adams. The sound was the food-begging cries of nestlings—the ultimate evidence in the ultimate level of atlasing confirmation.

Swainson's Thrush. "C" for "Confirmed", "NY" for "Nest with Young." Mission Accomplished!

Swainson's Thrushes are not rare or even uncommon on these wooded slopes. Quite the contrary, they are, by Gerry's own admission, "the most common breeding bird" to be found in the habitat we were canvassing.

But Gerry's elation had nothing to do with relative abundance. It had to do with meeting a challenge and mastering it with acquired investigative skills. It had to do with birding with a purpose and of coming to an understanding with the world by using the ancient art of bird watching.

But for those whose interest in birds must be whet by paucity, there is hope. If atlases fail in their ultimate objective, if human ambitions eclipse the needs of other living things, there is a very real possibility that the *Summers of Looking Close* will assume greater significance in the future. They will serve those who follow us as a yardstick to measure loss.

It has been many years, you see, since Wood Thrushes nested within earshot of my parents' house. They exist now only in memory. A memory planted during the *Summer of Looking Close*. ■

—Pete Dunne is the author of *Tales of a Low-Rent Birder*, coauthor of *Hawks in Flight*, and director of natural history information for the New Jersey Audubon Society