The Bird Atlas GAZETTE

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The newsletter of the
Breeding Bird Atlas of Alberta: Update Project

A project sponsored by the
Federation of Alberta Naturalists

Spring is sprung,
The grass is riz,
I'm lookin' for where
the birdies is...

This little poem (plagiarized freely from the great Greek poet Anonymous) pretty much sums up the general attitude at this time of year. The hard-core birders are up with the sun, racing from wood to slough and back, ticking off birds at a furious pace. The rest of us are moseying along after a coffee or two, watching for birds while keeping an eye out for an accommodating patch of soft grass, just in case it's needed for some serious cloud gazing.

And therein lies the beauty and simplicity of bird atlas surveys; you can approach them from either angle. Some people want specific atlas squares which they survey with intensity, seeking to quickly flush out every last species so they can move on to another square. Other people approach their atlas square in a more relaxed way, still trying to get every species but not rushing through to the next objective. And still others would rather not to be tied down to any one area, preferring to do surveys wherever the wind blows them. Whichever way you do it, the data is still valid and just as important to a Bird Atlas project.

Although it can be fun to rise in the dark, fumble around for binoculars and socks, and rush out to get four hours of solid survey work done before breakfast, it's not absolutely necessary. You can take your time, find matching socks and take a leisurely breakfast along with you. Birding is one of those rare activities where the junction of social activity and scientific inquiry is one of easy compatibility, and populated by good-natured folks.

Of course, the birding is better in the early morning and, let's face it, the world feels good right after sunrise. And on some days, coffee just tastes better from a thermos.

Happy Birding.

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ATLASSERS NEEDED FOR REMOTE AREAS

The biggest challenge with the first Alberta Breeding Bird Atlas was the lack of survey coverage in the more remote areas of Northern Alberta. To increase the amount of data from these remote areas, FAN is looking for volunteer birders to do atlas surveys in the little-visited regions of the province.

For the period of mid-May until mid-August, atlas surveyors who travel to remote locations will be required to collect field data on the occurrence, breeding behaviour and abundance of all bird species, using Alberta Birdlist forms. The exact areas to be surveyed will be determined by FAN.

Birders interested in this opportunity should have the following qualifications:

- ability to identify Alberta birds by sound and sight.
- advanced map-reading and navigating skills.
- good observation and note-taking skills.
- good communication skills (written and verbal).
- camping skills will be required as these will be remote areas far from hotels.

In return, these atlassers will be provided with an honorarium for their extra efforts. Please contact Philip Penner at FAN for more information (see the back page for Philip's telephone number and e-mail address).

COMMITTEE MEMBERSHIP CHANGES

There have been a few changes to the committees which oversee the Bird Atlas. We wish to thank outgoing members J. Bruce Kennedy (Management Committee) as well as Drs. Mark Boyce and Gord Court (Technical Committee) for their work on the Bird Atlas. We welcome a new member to the Management Committee:

Loney Dickson
Chief, Non-game Division
Prairie and Northern Region
Canadian Wildlife Service

RARE OPPORTUNITY FOR BIRDERS

Clio Smeeton and Ken Weagle of the Cochrane Ecological Institute (CEI) are conducting a biophysical inventory of the Blood Indian Reserve on behalf of the Blood (Kainai) Tribe. They are seeking additional eyes and ears for the bird survey portion of this study. Public access to the Reserve is typically restricted, making this a rare opportunity for birders to gain access to a unique prairie habitat. All access will be arranged through the CEI and only authorised under individual permits issued by Blood Tribe Land Management.

In addition to helping complete the biophysical aspect of this natural area, all information collected on bird species will become an important contribution to the Bird Atlas Project. The Federation of Alberta Naturalists and the Cochrane Ecological Institute encourages the participation of volunteer bird surveyors in this important field survey.

Time frame: June, 2004 to March, 2005

Location: Blood Indian Reserve (southwest of Lethbridge)

Required duties: Volunteer birders will collect field data on the occurrence, breeding behaviour and abundance of birds. Field surveyors will use Alberta Birdlist forms to document their observations.

If you are interested, please contact the FAN office for more details (see page 16)

A FEW REMINDERS...

Atlasser Registration

All volunteer atlassers involved with the Bird Atlas Project are being asked to officially register themselves with the Project, for several reasons:

- it will help the Project administration keep track of the many volunteers located throughout the province.
- registered atlassers will qualify for tax receipts on all expenses related to Bird Atlas activities.
- all registered atlassers will be automatically entered into a draw for prizes as part of the Atlasser Recognition Program.

Application for Atlasser Tax Receipt

FAN is both a non-profit group and is registered as a charitable organization, so it can provide tax receipts for donations. Volunteer atlassers can take advantage of FAN's status by applying for tax receipts for the expenses they incur while completing surveys for the Bird Atlas Project. Please contact the FAN office for a tax receipt form.

Atlasser Recognition Program

The Bird Atlas Project would like to show its appreciation to all the atlassers who devote so much of their time recording bird survey information. To show its gratitude, the Atlas will randomly select

names of atlassers throughout 2004 for a draw for prizes such as binoculars, birdhouses and field guides. In order to qualify for the draw, an atlasser must submit checklists electronically or by mail.

Access to Bird Atlas Observations

Bird observations which have been catalogued in FAN's Natural History Database for the past decade can now be accessed through an interactive map on FAN's web site. You can access the database through a link on the main FAN page (at www.fanweb.ca). Once the Alberta map has loaded, you simply choose an atlas square and all of the species for that square will be displayed. Bird species listed for each atlas square are based on data from a variety of bird monitoring projects in Alberta, not just the Bird Atlas Project.

BIRD ATLAS REGIONS

To facilitate administration of the Project, the province has been divided into ten separate Atlas Zones. The locations of each zone are illustrated below, along with the list of the Coordinators for each region and their contact information.

Contact Information

There are a variety of people you can contact to either volunteer for the Bird Atlas Update Project or to simply obtain more information. We suggest that you start with the Regional Coordinator for your area. Other organizations or people you can contact include the following:

Philip Penner
Assistant Project Coordinator
The Federation of Alberta Naturalists
11759 Groat Road, Edmonton
Alberta, T5M 3K6
Ph: (780) 427-8124
Fx: (780) 422-2663
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Philip Penner (780) 427-8124
philipp@fanweb.ca

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Chuck Priestley (780) 427-8124
charles@ualberta.ca

Zone 6 *(Jasper-Hinton)*
Beth McCallum (780) 865-3390
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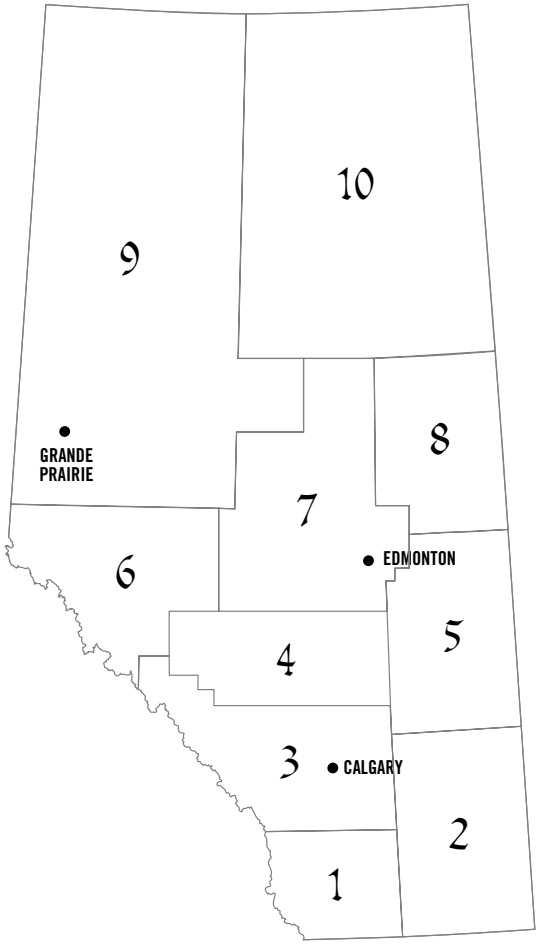
Zone 4 *(Red Deer)*
Lois Burkinshaw (403) 728-0008
lo-phi@telusplanet.net

Zone 3 *(Calgary-Banff)*
Don Stiles (403) 271-4689
stilesdj@shaw.ca

Zone 1 *(Lethbridge-Waterton)*
Philip Penner (780) 427-8124
philipp@fanweb.ca



Zone 10 *(Northeastern Alberta)*
Robert Grey (780) 743-2191
greygdns@telusplanet.net

Zone 8 *(Lac La Biche)*
Jennifer Okrainec (780) 623-7247
jenegammon@hotmail.com
Richard Klauke (780) 614-9085
(780) 636-1473
nnvideo@mcsnet.ca

Zone 5 *(Wainwright- Hanna)*
Iris Davies (780) 847-2677
ridavies@telusplanet.net

Zone 2 *(Medicine Hat – Taber)*
Michael O'Shea (403) 504-1662
michael.oshea@prrd.ab.ca

The Federation of Alberta Naturalists

BIRD ATLAS SURVEYS IN NATURAL AREAS

While geographic coverage for the Atlas Project is increasing throughout Alberta, much of the province has yet to be surveyed. Specifically, the Bird Atlas Project would like to encourage atlassers to consider birding in areas which are designated as provincial parks, national parks, wildlands, recreation areas, ecological reserves, wilderness areas and natural areas.

There are several reasons for concentrating on these areas:

1. Habitat in protected areas is generally more ecologically sensitive, so bird data from these areas is especially significant.
2. With varying degrees of protection provided to these different types of natural areas, bird diversity can often be higher than in unprotected areas. This will often result in valuable information regarding the abundance and breeding status of some of the provinces' rarer species.
3. Roads to the natural areas are often in better condition than roads in wilderness areas, and access to accommodations (usually campgrounds) is also better. Furthermore, while people are required to respect the environment in protected areas, public access is allowed and even encouraged, as opposed to private property, which dominates the southern half of the province.
4. Alberta's protected areas hold some of the most beautiful landscapes in the province. The diverse habitat and terrain offer atlassers many wonderful birding and outdoor experiences.

The following is a list of provincial and national parks within each Bird Atlas region that have yet to be surveyed for the Bird Atlas. If you are interested in doing surveys in any of these areas, please contact the Regional Coordinator responsible for that region (See previous page) and they will provide you with information and maps for those areas.

Region (Zone) 1 *(Lethbridge)*
Beehive P.P.
Chain Lakes P.P.
Little Bow P.P.
Park Lake P.P.
Waterton Lakes N.P.
Willow Creek P.P.

Region (Zone) 2 *(Medicine Hat)*
Cypress Hills P.P.
Dinosaur P.P.
Kinbrook Island P.P.
Taber P.P.
Tillebrook P.P.
Writing-on-Stone P.P.

Region (Zone) 3 *(Calgary)*
Banff N.P.
Big Hill Springs P.P.
Bow Valley P.P.
Bragg Creek P.P.
Fish Creek P.P.
Jasper N.P.
Midland P.P.
Peter Lougheed P.P.

Region (Zone) 4 *(Red Deer)*
Aspen Beach P.P.
Crimson Lake P.P.
Jarvis Bay P.P.
Red Lodge P.P.
Rochon Sands P.P.
Sylvan Lake P.P.

Region (Zone) 5 *(Wainwright- Hanna)*
Big Knife P.P.
Dillberry Lake P.P.
Gooseberry Lake P.P.
Vermilion P.P.

Region (Zone) 6 *(Jasper-Hinton)*
Jasper N.P.
Kakwa Wildland P.P.
Obed Lake P.P.
Sundance P.P.
William A. Switzer P.P.
Willmore Wilderness P.P.

Region (Zone) 7 *(Edmonton)*
Calling Lake P.P.
Cross Lake P.P.
Elk Island N.P.
Hasse Lake P.P.
Long Lake P.P.
Ma-Me-O Beach P.P.
Miquelon Lake P.P.
Pigeon Lake P.P.

Region (Zone) 8 *(Lac La Biche)*
Cold Lake)
Cold Lake P.P.
Crow Lake P.P.
Garner Lake P.P.
Lakeland P.P.
Sir Winston Churchill P.P.
Whitney Lakes P.P.

Region (Zone) 9 *(Grande Prairie - Lesser Slave Lake)*
Carson-Pegasus P.P.
Dunvegan P.P.
Greene Valley P.P.
Hilliard's Bay P.P.
Lesser Slave Lake P.P.
Moonshine Lake P.P.
Notikewin P.P.
Saskatoon Island P.P.
Winagami P.P.
Williamson P.P.
Wood Buffalo N.P.

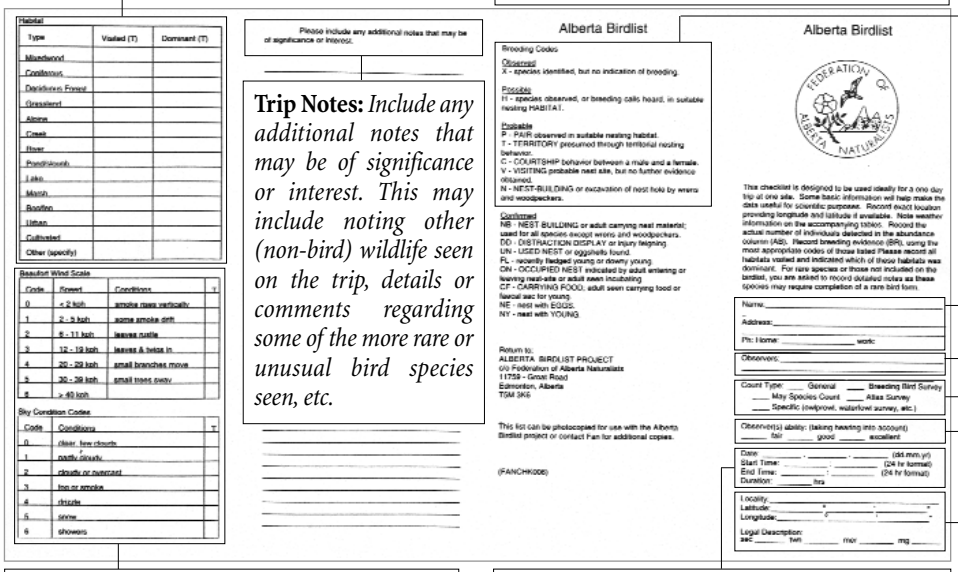
Region 10 (Zone) *(Fort McMurray)*
Birch Mountains Wildland P.P.
Stony Mountain Wildland P.P.
Colin Lakes Wildland P.P.
Gipsy Lake Wildland P.P.
Gregoire Lake P.P.
Maybell River Wildland P.P.
White Mud Fall Wildland P.P.
Wood Buffalo National Park

A FRIENDLY REMINDER REGARDING CHECKLISTS

As always, we would like to continue to encourage and remind our atlassers to send in their bird checklists to FAN in order for their birding efforts to be incorporated into the Atlas Project's database. This is the very foundation upon which all information for the project is derived, so it is extremely important to continue birding and sending in your checklist observations! This can be done either by mail or electronically via Personal Birdlist CD software and email.

When completing checklists after or during a birding excursion, remember to fill out all the parameters as best as possible. Below is a labelled diagram illustrating the components of a bird atlas checklist (for easier readability, please see full-size, actual checklist included with this newsletter):

Front Side of Checklist:



Habitat: *Be sure to indicate which habitat types you birded in ("visited") during the trip, and which type was dominant.*

Trip Notes: *Include any additional notes that may be of significance or interest. This may include noting other (non-bird) wildlife seen on the trip, details or comments regarding some of the more rare or unusual bird species seen, etc.*

Breeding Code Chart: *Use these to aid you in assigning breeding codes to species identified.*

Personal Information: *Include your name, address, home and/or work phone number, and email address (if you have one)*

Observers: *Note anyone birding along with you.*

Count Type: *This will most often be "Atlas Survey" (has breeding codes specified with each species), unless you are specifically conducting another type of count.*

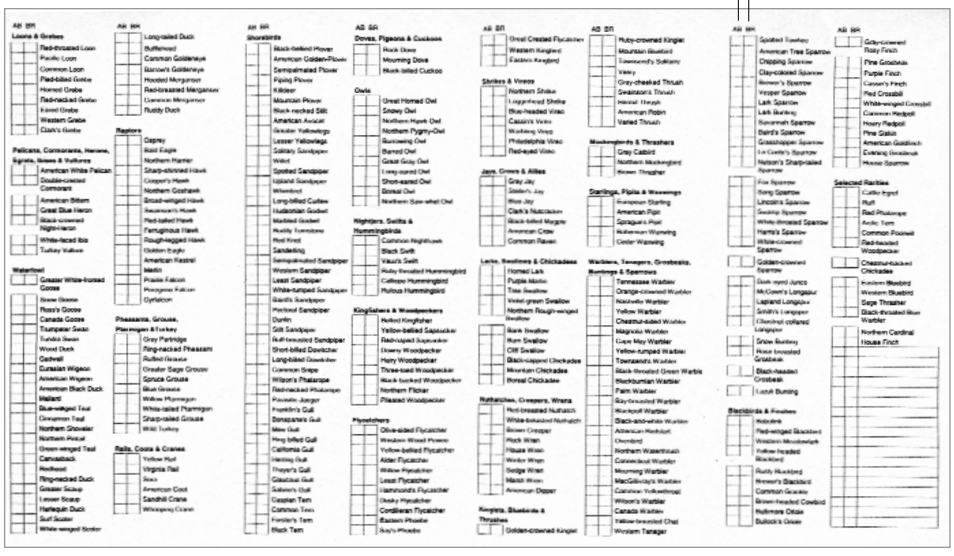
Ability: *Rate the birding ability of yourself and other observers as fair, good, or excellent.*

Location: *In addition to giving a descriptive place name, its best to be specific as you can in providing the location using either lat/long coordinates, specifying the atlas square(s), or giving the legal (township/range)*

Weather Conditions: *Of the options available, indicate the most appropriate Beaufort Wind Scale rating and Sky Conditions that were prevalent during the trip.*

The **Date** *(s),* **Time** *(s) of day, and* **Total Birding Hours (Duration)** *spent birding.*

Back/Inside Page of Checklist *(Species List):*



Abundance: *For each species identified/ observed (seen or heard), record the total number of that species observed on the trip in the* **"AB"** *column.*

Breeding Code: *in the* **"BR"** *column, record the one or two letter breeding code that best applies to what you observed regarding each species. The full list of breeding codes and what they mean is described on the back page of every checklist. Record the code with the "highest level" (i.e. most indicative of confirmed breeding) that applies to each species observed on your trip.*

ONE LAST NOTE ABOUT BREEDING CODES:

Careful observation of a bird encountered while atlassing is sometimes necessary to determine its breeding status, and therefore the Breeding Code to assign it on the checklist. It may be necessary, especially for beginner ("fair") birders, to consult a field guide or someone more knowledgeable about the birds of the area to be able to correctly determine the Breeding Status/Code.

For example, one may need to know weather the song of a bird one is hearing is territorial (that is, defending or announcing territory in which the bird has a nest or mate), or if it is for pronouncing his presence in hopes or attracting a mate. This may be a function of a variety of factors, such as which species you're dealing with and what time of year it is. However, it is important to investigate, as it may mean the difference between assigning "T" (Territory) or "H" (suitable breeding Habitat for that species) to that bird.

Which brings up another important thing to know about species encountered while atlassing: knowing what the suitable habitat type is for bird encountered. It is often the case, even though a bird may not be singing or exhibiting any other specific signs of breeding behaviour, that it is still in suitable breeding habitat for its species. Thus, the "H" breeding code may often be more accurate to assign than "X" (which indicates that the species was identified but there was no indication of breeding). That is, try not to simply use the "X" breeding code by default. The "X" breeding code should be used as intentionally as any other. For example, one would likely indicate "X" for an observed species that is only known to migrate through the area and not known to breed there (assuming no other breeding evidence makes another

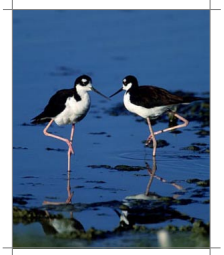
code more applicable). Another case in which "X" applies would be if a species that breeds more or less exclusively in one habitat type is observed in another; for example, if a grassland nesting species is seen in coniferous forest far from any grassland.

A FEW MORE FASCINATING BIRD FACTS

In addition to those already mentioned in the last newsletter, here are a few more remarkable facts about birds.

Longest legs: Ostrich.

Longest legs relative to body length: Black-necked Stilt at 23 cm (9 in.), which is 60% of its height.



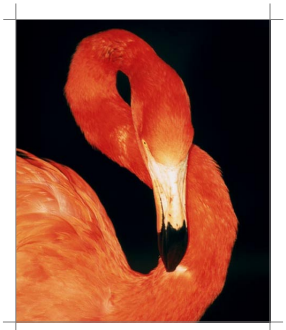
Shortest legs: virtually non-existent in Swifts (of the Apodidae family).

Longest toes relative to body length: Northern Jacana at 10 cm (4 in.)

Longest bill: Australian Pelican at 47 cm (18.5 in)

Longest bill relative to body length: Swordtailed Hummingbird at 10.5 cm (4.13 in.)

Shortest bill: Glossy Swiftlet, at just a few mm.



Largest and fleshiest tongue: Flamingo.

Longest tongue relative to body size: Wryneck (at two-thirds of its body length, excluding the tail).

Fastest running bird: Ostrich at 97.5 km/h (60 mph)

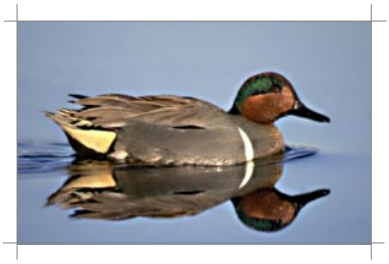
Fastest running bird which can also fly: Greater Roadrunner at 42 km/h (26 mph)

Ancient Murrelet chicks can swim underwater using their wings and feet when they are only 3-4 days old.

The Gray Catbird mimics the songs of at least 44 other species of birds, as well as the calls of gray tree frogs and a variety of mechanical sounds.

Evidence indicates the **Chestnut-sided Warbler** may learn or copy songs of other species.

The Green-winged Teal is the only species of duck known to scratch in flight.



THE ART OF PISHING

WINGS & PRAYERS

Even if you have the best binoculars and field guides that money can buy, they are useless if that bird not only won't come out of the bushes, but it also refuses to sing. And getting only occasional flashes of a grayish-brown blob slipping quietly through the dense branches is not very conducive to easy identification. So how do you get a good look at the bird? Simple; you just coax it out using your irresistible charm. And when that doesn't work, fall back on Plan B; pucker up and pish.

What is pishing?

Pishing is a term which refers to a variety of strange noises made by the mouth in order to attract birds. The usual pishing is done by puckering the lips, as if to kiss your significant other, and blowing out while making a 'psssh psssh psssh' sound. Variations include gritting the teeth to produce a 'ksssh ksssh ksssh', or holding the tongue to the roof of the mouth to produce a softer 'psss psss psss'. Regardless of how it's done, the end result is the same: the appearance of curious birds.

No one is completely certain why pishing works but there are numerous theories. One plausible explanation is that the sound resembles an alarm call from another bird who is mobbing a potential predator; birds will rush towards the sound so as to help their bird-buddies drive off the intruder. This kind of mobbing behaviour is commonplace among prey species. A common example of this behaviour involves the serene Red-tailed Hawk on the fencepost, being dive-bombed and harassed by a gaggle of excited and screaming crows.

Cooperative mobbing may not only distract a predator but it may also lessen the predator's chances of scoring a kill among the members of a bird's flock or community. For juvenile birds, the mobbing behaviour may also be a way of teaching predator recognition skills, a kind of "know thine enemy" class. So pishing may simply be evoking a strong behavioural response.

Another theory is that the pishing sound is similar to that made by young nestlings begging for food. This would explain why pishing is so successful at attracting birds during the breeding season. At other times of the year, pishing is still effective, but usually not to the same extent as during the spring and early summer seasons.

The effectiveness of pishing also varies greatly according to species. Some birds, like chickadees and nuthatches, will come quite close to you, often very quickly. Other species, especially the non-passerines, will ignore the pishing sounds or fly off. And still others, such as the warblers, will vary their response according to the species of warbler.

There are also reports that pishing has attracted Northern Harriers, ducks, rails, hummingbirds, woodpeckers, squirrels, domestic (feral) cats, coyotes and even elicited responses from frogs. And of course, pishing is a very effective way of attracting other birders to your location.

Pishing ethics

The use of pishing raises some ethical questions regarding its effect on a bird. If a bird has to be continually alert for predators, wouldn't pishing increase its' vulnerability to predation by bringing the bird out of its cover and into the open? That is certainly possible but there are several reasons why pishing may not be a cause for concern.

Most birders have found that attracting birds through pishing will hold their attention for only a moment or two before the birds return to their previous activity. Birds are constantly being 'disturbed' by sounds in their habitats, so pishing becomes just one more noise in an acoustically complicated environment.

There is also the belief that once you have pished all the birds in an area, they will not respond to your pishing in that area again for several days, if not longer. This is indicative of an ability by the bird to learn and remember which noises are important and which are nothing more than momentary distractions.

Once attracted by pishing, the first birds to arrive will often announce their presence by calling. In turn, this stimulates others to join in the commotion. This may be exciting for the birder because the birds are now very close and flitting all around, but does this trickery cause distress? Probably not. Birds are fairly intelligent and, while they may be drawn initially to the pishing, they can quickly distinguish a human from a predator. Pished birds only remain around the birder for a very short time before slipping back into the trees and bushes.

A note of caution about pishing and other auditory means of attracting birds. With all of the commercially available methods of enticing birds to approach closer (such as bird song recordings), birders must use care not to unnecessarily disturb the birds, especially during the breeding season when they may be guarding territories or incubating eggs.

Pishing can be useful for Bird Atlas surveys, besides attracting hidden birds.

WINGS & PRAYERS

If you encounter a male that you suspect is on his territory, move a short distance away and try to entice him to come closer by pishing. A territorial male will seldom (if ever) leave his territory just for a pishing sound. But use this practice sparingly during the breeding season; there's always the possibility that you might pull a bird off its nest, thereby exposing the eggs or young to increased risk of predation. Use your judgment when deciding whether to pish or not to pish.

Pishing methods

Although pishing from a spot beyond the cover in which the birds are found may still attract them, it has two drawbacks. First, the birds will most likely not leave their habitat, preferring to stay within protective cover and away from open areas that are favoured by potential predators. Second, birds will be unlikely to expose themselves if they can see you while they remain hidden. So, if you hide yourself within the same habitat, the birds will have to come close to find the source of the pishing.

Another tip is to stay perfectly still. Bird vision is very sharp and well-adapted to detect movement. By sitting down and/or remaining stationary, it may take the bird longer to identify you as the source of the sounds. Which, of course, means you will have a much longer view of your quarry.

One characteristic that some birders feel is important is that the pishing should be prolonged, unhurried and even-toned. The strength of the sound is not as important as the duration, or even the 'raspiness'. The more 'drawn-out raspiness' to the pish, the better. The incessant, repetitive nature of the sound may be what arouses their initial curiosity.

On the other hand, the Audubon Bird Call (that squeaky little red doohickey) does appear to be more effective than pishing. It emits high-pitched 'chirps' that can sometimes drive small passerines into a frenzy of movement. This is a sound similar to that made by placing your moist, puckered lips on the back of your

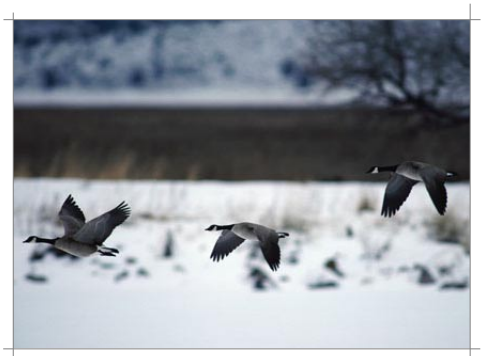
hand and sucking air in forcefully through one side of your mouth. Some birders feel this is a more effective sound than is pishing, especially since it will be heard at greater distances.

A last word about pishing methods concerns the sticky point of pishing etiquette. Often, the looser and wetter the lips during pishing, the more enticing, and successful, the sound is. In this case, maintaining a position behind an avid pisher may keep you…drier.

HOLLYWOOD GOES TO THE BIRDS

BRICKBATS & BOUQUETS

Hollywood is the place where accuracy goes to die. This is certainly evident with anything related to science or the natural realm; neither field gets much respect from the movie-making bigwigs in Tinseltown. The world of birds is no exception as directors, producers and film editors play fast and loose with the sounds and images of birds, mixing and matching them with all the finesse of a hyperactive child playing with a new chemistry set. A few movies that featured ornithologically-related blunders include…



Dances With Wolves *(1990)* – Kevin Costner claims he sees three geese flying over, when they are actually Sandhill Cranes.

Jurassic Park III *(1991)* – a Wood Thrush is heard singing in the Montana badlands even though Wood Thrushes live in forests and aren't found in Montana.

Carousel *(1956)* – Mockingbird calls are heard near the end of the movie. During the time-period in which the film is set (the 1870's), the Mockingbird range was entirely in the American south. There were no Mockingbirds in Maine — not even in the year the film was made (by which time the mockingbird's range had extended to New York and New Jersey).

Charlie's Angels *(2000)* – The secret to finding the bad guys is when Cameron Diaz identifies the sound of the "rare Pygmy Nuthatch" and claims it is only found in Carmel, California. She mis-identifies both the species and the Pygmy Nuthatchs' range.

D2: The Mighty Ducks *(1994)* – At the end of the movie a 'v' of geese is seen flying over, to the sound of quacking ducks.

Dancer in the Dark *(2000)* – Supposedly set in the USA, several European bird species can be heard, including the White Wagtail, Song Thrush, Fieldfare, Blackbird, Blackcap and Willow Warbler.

Ethan Frome *(1993)* – In a winter scene early in the film, a Red-eyed Vireo can be heard singing, in the dead of winter in Maine. These birds winter in Amazonia, and arrive in Maine in late spring.

Platoon *(1986)*– While the soldiers are on patrol deep in the mountainous jungles of Vietnam, a Common Loon can be heard calling nearby.

Dinosaur *(2000)* – In this animated family film about dinosaurs, the velociraptors (a medium-sized carnivore) sound exactly like Yellow-headed Blackbirds.

Finding Forrester *(2000)* – The bird William Forrester photographs and identifies as a Connecticut Warbler is actually a Yellow Warbler.

The Ghost and the Darkness *(1996)* – This movie is set in Africa but the birds heard include Barred Owls, Boreal Owls and the Common Nighthawk, all of which are native to North America

Girl with a Pearl Earring *(2003)* – When Griet and Vermeer look at the Dutch landscape outside the window, it is winter. However, you can hear the sound of swallows, which are not found in northern Europe in winter.

The Night of the Hunter *(1955)* – After Harry Powell disappears from in front of Ms. Cooper's yard, a barn owl swoops down on a rabbit. Again, there is the sound of flapping owl wings.

Lord of the Flies *(1990)* – Even though this movie takes place on an island in the South Pacific, a Red-tailed Hawk can be heard.

ET, The Extra Terrestrial *(1982)* – In the opening scene, which occurs in California, you can hear an Eastern Screech Owl, which is not found in western North America.

Winter of Our Discontent *(1983)* – In a snowy landscape in winter, a Hermit Thrush can be heard singing.

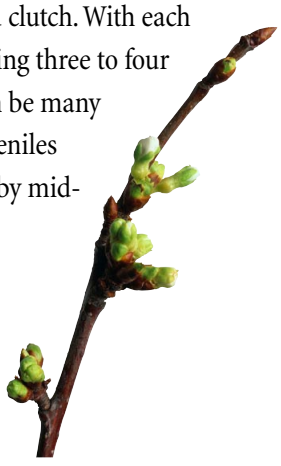
THE ROBIN

During the initial Alberta Bird Atlas Project (1987– 1991), the most commonly recorded species was the American Robin. Breeding evidence for this species was recorded in 1169 atlas squares, which represented 53% of all surveyed squares. So far in the current Update Atlas Project, the Robin has been recorded in 446 atlas squares, making it once again, the most commonly encountered species in Alberta.

What is it that makes the Robin the most common bird in the Atlas projects? As it turns out, there are numerous traits which makes this species uniquely suited to the environment in Alberta.

Life history characteristics

- Robins arrive in Alberta in early spring, sometimes even before the snow has melted. Males arrive on the breeding grounds first and establish a territory, while the females arrive a few days later.
- Robins often come back to the same area, year after year, and may even use the same nest as was used the previous year.
- In southern Alberta, the first clutch of eggs is laid in late April or early May. This early hatching allows Robin pairs to lay a second clutch. With each clutch containing three to four eggs, there can be many adults and juveniles flying around by mid-summer.



LOTS & LOTS

- When they are about 13 days old, young Robins leave the nest. They may remain in the parents' territory for the next three weeks and be fed by the adult male while his mate is already incubating the next clutch. The young become independent of the parents at four weeks.

Visibility

One reason why so many Robins are recorded is that they are highly visible, for a variety of reasons.

- The global and provincial status of this species is rated as very common.
- The Robin is the largest thrush in North America, with a striking plumage. The cinnamon to brick-red breast, black head, white eye-rings and yellow bill makes this an instantly recognizable bird.
- Robins often feed on lawns – the short grass and abundant insects make yards a good foraging site.
- Robins are often the most boisterous singers during the morning, singing long choruses of rhythmic paired phrases that alternately rise and fall in pitch. It also has a large repertoire of songs and calls, and in addition to being one of the first birds to begin singing in the morning, it is often the last to be heard at night. It can occasionally be heard throughout the day.
- In addition to singing, robins make a variety of calls; the alarm cheep, a harsh tuktuk when disturbed and a scolding chirp. Besides singing during the breeding season, some birds sing through July and August, when they are moulting, with a brief resurgence during the September migration. Most singing stops by the onset of winter but occasional calls can be heard during the winter months.
- Once the breeding season for Robins is over, large nomadic flocks will wander in response to seasonal availability of their main foods, insects and fruit. This is also when their diet shifts from the insects and earthworms of summer to the vegetarian diet of winter. They begin to migrate south in earnest in early September but large numbers are still present in Alberta in October. The birds usually migrate in small flocks, but may sometimes travel in groups of several hundred, frequently with other birds such as Blue Jays.

- Roosting is common, especially once the breeding season is over. Robin roosts usually contain from 20 to 200 birds but can sometimes be much larger. They will occasionally roost with other species, such as European Starlings and Common Grackles.

Habitat

- The Robin was originally a forest species, but it has adapted well to urban areas, where it feeds on lawns and nests in gardens and city parks. As trees and windbreaks have been planted by farmers, the Robin has invaded the prairies.

- The Robin is also found in sub-alpine forests and in meadows above the treeline, so there is scarcely any type of habitat in Alberta where the Robin will not nest (marshes being the main exception).

Food

- Robins eat a very wide variety of food types. Most of us have seen Robins pulling up large worms on out lawns. However, earthworms and other invertebrates provide only about 40 percent of its diet; the robin is chiefly a fruit-eating species. Favourite fruits include chokecherries and mountain ash berries.

- Occasionally, robins will eat small snakes and shrews, and have even been known to comb lakeshores for snails and go belly-deep in the water to pick up fish fry.
- Their food gathering methods include gleaning insects off the ground or from tree trucks, stripping fruit from small branches and catching flying insects on the wing.

Nesting

- Although they prefer to nest above 3m in conifer, aspen and poplar trees, they will nest in a wide range of vegetation types and on built structures. They will occasionally even nest on the ground.

- Robins make an average of 180 trips a day when it builds its nest.
- Robins will reuse nests from the previous year, either their own or those of other species such as the Eastern Phoebe, the Catbird, the Common Grackle, and the Northern Oriole. Sometimes they build a new nest on top of an old one, which may have yet another nest under it, and lay the eggs in the newest nest.
- Robins will eject other species' eggs, including those snuck into the nest by the parasitic Brown-headed Cowbird.

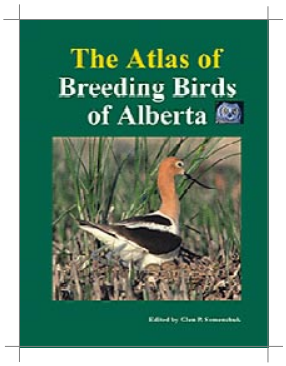
Association with humans

- Robins have adapted very well to cities and towns, feeding from lawns and building nests on almost any kind of human-built platform, from window ledges to electrical junction boxes.
- The loss of forests coupled with the growth of urban areas, have created, rather than degraded, breeding habitat for this bird. Thus, the Robin's response to human society has been quite the opposite to that of most bird species.

RARE BIRD ATLAS HIGHLIGHTS

By Dave Bruinsma – Bird Atlas Technician

Summer 2004



With nearly four years worth of field data collected (2000 - present), the Update Atlas Project's database is developing into a powerful birding and scientific resource, containing a wealth of information on the geographic distribution, relative abundance, and breeding status of the province's birds. As expected, the Atlas database contains many records of common species – robins, crows, chickadees, etcetera. It also has a wide variety of other species, including some of the province's less commonly encountered species. A number of unusual vagrant species (that is, unusual for Alberta) have been reported, such as the Black Scoter, Dickcissel, and Tricolored Heron, to name a few.

While these vagrants might seem very exotic and special, of perhaps more interest are the rare species that are historically known to be residents and/or breed in Alberta. Some of these species are rare in the province but abundant elsewhere in North America (and South America, depending where they migrate!). For some of these species, only a small part of Alberta happens to be within their range. As such, few records for these species can be expected to show up in the Atlas simply because they are distributed through so little of the province. (For example, the Mountain Plover has been known to occur only in the extreme south-eastern corner of the province.)

That being said, there are also a number of bird species in Alberta that, historically and theoretically, have a relatively large range distribution throughout the province but that are still rare, or at least uncommonly reported. As birders and atlassers, it's important to remember that these birds are out there, and can be observed if we look (and listen!) long and carefully enough.

As a matter of interest and encouragement, the following is a selection of five of the least common species to have been recorded this far into the Atlas Update project. (The "rareness" of species was determined by how few atlas squares they have been recorded in. Please note that some of the checklist data that has been submitted may not have been entered and uploaded into the database yet.)

Black-billed Cuckoo

Only one Black-billed Cuckoo has been recorded in only one square during the Update project (square WM23, roughly 80km north of Medicine Hat, on July 8, 2003). The record indicates a 'possible' breeding status for the bird, meaning that it was observed in suitable nesting habitat.

The first Atlas of the Breeding Birds of Alberta contains considerably more records for the Black-billed Cuckoo: fifty-two. Of those fifty-two, four were of confirmed breeding status, eleven probable, twenty-eight possible, and nine observed. All of the confirmed and probable breeding evidence came from the area of transition between the parkland and boreal natural regions, roughly east of and at the latitude of Edmonton . The known range of the Cuckoo in Alberta, approximately the south-eastern quarter of the province, has been relatively well surveyed in both atlas projects. Higher numbers of Cuckoos reported in the first atlas may have been related to an abundance of tent caterpillars during one or more of the summers of data collection. However, it is still not completely understood why so few of the cuckoos are being observed this time around.

When out birding in the grassland and parkland natural regions, keep an eye and ear out for the Black-billed Cuckoo, especially near alder and willow thickets along roads and riparian areas.

Whooping Crane

The worldwide population of the famed Whooping Crane increased from 21 in 1946 to 189 in 2003. Despite this conservation success story, the crane is still very rare and its population is fragile. Whooping Cranes, which breed in Wood Buffalo National Park near the Alberta-Northwest Territories border and winters in the gulf of Texas, face many survival obstacles. These include threats such as collisions with power lines during migration, limited genetic variability within the population, loss of migration habitat, and winter habitat degraded by reduced fresh water inflows and pollution. (U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, 2004).

As suggested by the four birds from two records in the Update Atlas (from August 2002 in square VQ80), birders in Alberta are most likely to see Whoopers during migration stopovers in wetlands along the east half of the province rather than in their breeding grounds in Wood Buffalo, which are very remote and have very limited access. The first Atlas reports eleven records of Whooping Cranes observed along their migration northward through the province, and one record of confirmed breeding in Wood Buffalo.

Sage Thrasher

Prior to the first Atlas Project, the Sage Thrasher was only considered a vagrant species in Alberta. However, the first Atlas Project reported two confirmed and one possible breeding record of the thrashers.

The Update Atlas project is again indicating breeding status of this species in the province. A total of five Sage Thrashers have been reported in atlas squares VL11, south of the town of Bow Island, and in WK26, just southeast of Manyberries. The four birds observed in WK26 have been assigned confirmed breeding status.

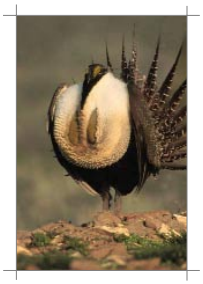
The Sage Thrasher is given a COSEWIC conservation status of endangered, and is extremely rare in Alberta. That being said, the Sage Thrasher may be encountered in semi-arid plains and coulees in the southeastern Alberta in areas where sagebrush is the dominant vegetation.

White-tailed Ptarmigan

Thus far, there are eight confirmed breeding records of the White-tiled Ptarmigan in the Update Atlas database (in squares MJ42, MJ74, MJ76, all of which are in or near Jasper National Park). While perhaps not particularly rare, the ptarmigan is probably infrequently observed by atlassers because it inhabits rugged mountainous, alpine terrain where there has been generally less atlas survey coverage in the Update project. However, despite more extensive survey coverage of the Rocky Mountain natural regions, there were still only nine confirmed, three probable, and two possible breeding records of this species in the first Atlas Project.

White-tailed Ptarmigan occur in the western edge of the province from the Willmore Wilderness Park south to Waterton Lakes National Park. In summer, look for it in alpine meadows, and in winter, look for it in open, coniferous, sub-alpine forests. Depending on seasonal plumage, the White-tailed Ptarmigan can look very similar to the Willow Ptarmigan. The best way to distinguish between the two is by their tail feathers — the Willow Ptarmigan's tail has prominent black margins, while the tail of the aptly named White-tailed Ptarmigan is white.

Greater Sage Grouse



In Alberta, the Sage Grouse is at the northern extremes of its species' range in the south of the province. Rated as endangered by COSEWIC, the Sage Grouse is likely our province's most rare native member of the order Galliformes (grouse and ptarmigan, as well as pheasant, partridges, and wild Turkey - which are introduced species to Alberta).

While there are only four records of the Sage Grouse in the Update Atlas database so far, three of these records report between 25 and 40 individual birds. These observations, from May of 2001 and 2002, are of mating leks. These leks are characterized by the gathering of many birds; males defend nesting sites and put on fascinating courtship displays with the hope of being selected by a female.

The first Atlas showed these grouse to inhabit only the south-eastern corner of the province. However, the 2001 and 2002 records in the Update Atlas reveal leks to be located in the south-west corners as well (atlas squares UK73 and QE14).

Over the last three years, the Sage Grouse population in Alberta has been hard hit by a number of factors, including the West Nile Virus, habitat destruction due to oil exploration and development, and unusually cold and wet springs for which this species is not well adapted.

Sources Cited:

Whooping Crane Population Reaches Record High. U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (2003). 23 July, 2004, <http://news.fws.gov/>

Semenchuk, Glen P., ed. The Atlas of Breeding Birds of Alberta. Edmonton: Federation of Alberta Naturalists, 1992.

PROGRESS & SUPPORT

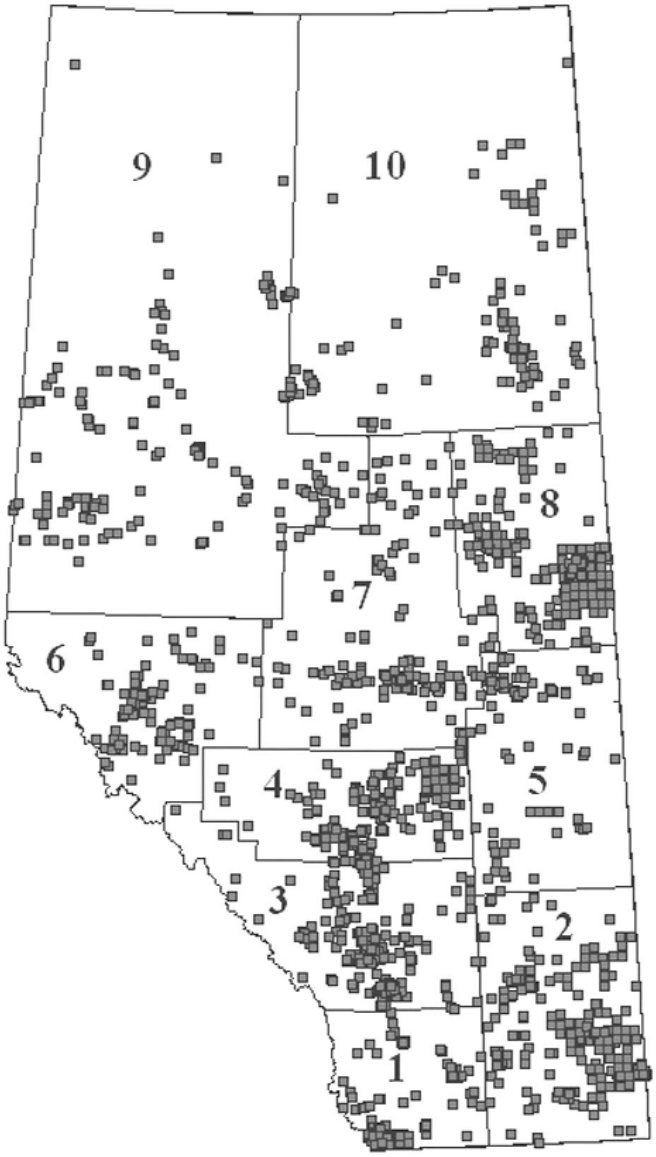
THE PROGRESS OF THE ALBERTA BIRD ATLAS UPDATE PROJECT

Initiated in 2000, the Atlas of Breeding Birds of Alberta: Update Project has now had close to four years of data collection. The vast majority of this bird data submitted by volunteer birders from across the province. Atlassers (that is, volunteer birders for the Atlas Project) collect bird data from 10km x 10km atlas squares. They visit one or more assigned squares during the breeding season and record the highest evidence of breeding and abundance of all bird species encountered.

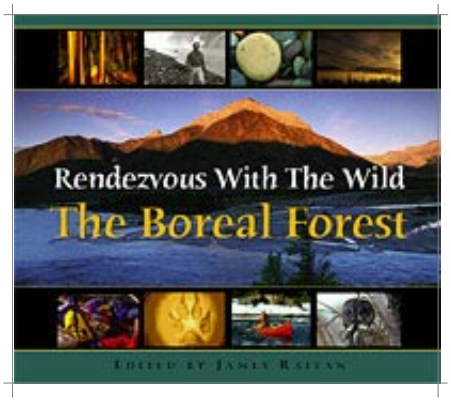
Since 2000, over 668 atlas squares have been surveyed by more than 275 registered atlassers, who have submitted more than 5,272 bird checklists for entry into the Natural History Database.

Figure 1 is a map of Alberta with Bird Atlas regions outlined and numbered. The dark squares on the map indicate surveyed Atlas squares.

Figure 1: Currently Surveyed Atlas squares



TRUE NORTH WILD AND FREE: AN ANNOUNCEMENT FROM CPAWS EDMONTON



What do His Excellency John Ralston Saul, Ken Dryden, David Suzuki, Cathy Jones, Justin Trudeau, Jimmy Rankin and Sarah Harmer have in common? They love the boreal forest, and they commemorated their sentiments in the book, Rendezvous with the Wild – The Boreal Forest, edited by best selling wilderness author, James Raffan.

Come share the experiences of over 25 high profile Canadians who contributed to the book at our celebration, True North Wild & Free – a cross-Canada book tour extravaganza starring James Raffan and a surprise celebrity guest. The tour will stop in Edmonton on November 5, 2004, at 6:30 pm, Myer Horowitz Theatre at the University of Alberta.

The book is a compilation of vignettes, stories, poems and spectacular images inspired by CPAWS' Boreal Rendezvous 2003, a summer long event that included a series of wilderness canoe trips and local celebrations organized by CPAWS chapters. CPAWS Edmonton participated by organizing a river trip along the Athabasca River with Canadian celebrities that included internationally renowned environmentalist David Suzuki, Montreal Canadians goalie Ken Dryden and well known fresh water ecologist David Schindler. Following the river trip we hosted a local celebration at Fort Edmonton Park that attracted over 500 people who came out to listen to local musicians, hear a keynote address by David Suzuki and learn more about our beloved boreal forest.

True North Wild & Free aims to support our Boreal Forest Program on a national and regional scale. Proceeds from the evening will go directly towards achieving our conservation goals.

Keep watching our website, www.cpaws-edmonton.org, for updates or contact Jill Sturdy at jill-sturdy@cpaws-edmonton.org to find out how you can participate in this inspirational event.

PROGRESS & SUPPORT

ATLAS UPDATE PROJECT PROJECT SUPPORTERS

A project of this magnitude would not be possible without the financial and in-kind support of a variety of companies and organizations. The Federation of Alberta Naturalists would like to thank the following organizations for supporting the Alberta Bird Atlas project:

Ainsworth Lumber Co Ltd.
Alberta Conservation Association
Alberta Ecotrust
Alberta Pacific Forest Industries Ltd.
Alberta Sport, Recreation, Parks and Wildlife Foundation
Alberta Sustainable Resource Development
Baillie Bird Fund
Canadian Wildlife Service
Charles Ivey Foundation
George Cedric Metcalf Charitable Foundation
Mountain Equipment Co-op
Nexen Inc.
North American Waterfowl Management Plan
Provincial Museum of Alberta
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A project sponsored by the
Federation of Alberta Naturalists

CONTACT INFORMATION

There are a variety of people you can contact to either volunteer for the Bird Atlas Update Project or to simply obtain more information. We suggest that you start with the Regional Coordinator for your area. Other organizations or people you can contact include the following:

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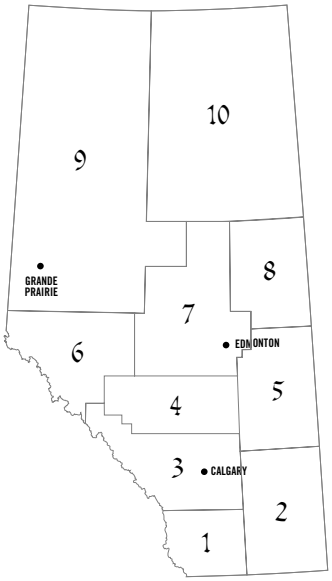

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