

Possible, probable, confirmed!

Three authors publish Illinois Breeding Bird Atlas

by Christine Williamson

The long-awaited Illinois Breeding Bird Atlas was published in August with little fanfare in the media, but with a great deal of anticipation from the state's birding community. The Illinois Breeding Bird Atlas (IBBA) is the result of the cooperative efforts of nearly 1,000 volunteer birders and numerous professional ornithologists who surveyed the state's breeding bird populations over six years from 1986 to 1991.

The Atlas' co-authors are Liane Cordle, a research scientist from the Illinois Natural History Survey (INHS), Champaign; Vernon Kleen, a retired avian ecologist and Avian Program Manager for the Illinois Department of Natural Resources (IDNR), Springfield; and Robert A. Montgomery Jr., the retired director of the Max McGraw Wildlife Foundation, East Dundee, IL.

The 459-page book includes analysis, species accounts, photos and distribution maps for the 183 species (172 confirmed) breeding in Illinois during this period; comparisons of breeding atlas information with trends gleaned from the nationwide Breeding Bird Survey; an historical section on Illinois breeding bird populations; and many tables, charts, and appendices.

Tradition

The tradition of surveying an area's breeding bird populations and producing an atlas of bird distribution began in Europe and has been slowly spreading across the United States since the mid 1980s, said Cordle. Some states, including New York, that have already produced their atlases have begun another survey. The Illinois Breeding Bird



A bird in a nest is as good as confirmed! If atlas volunteers were lucky, they found birds such as this Yellow Warbler in a nest to confirm the species in their block for the Illinois Breeding Bird Atlas. This photo of a Yellow Warbler in her nest was taken 31 May 2004 near Montrose Point, Cook County, by Kanae Hirabayashi.

Atlas grew out of a statewide mid-June birding challenge Kleen became involved in during the early to mid 1980s. After a few years of good participation, a core of ornithology professionals and volunteers realized they could use the for-fun event as a springboard to start the state's first breeding bird atlas project, which sought to document the status and distribution of Illinois' breeding birds.

Kleen organized the project under the auspices of the IDNR, then the Department of Conservation, which used a standardized methodology to divide the state into 6,151 topographical quadrangles of 7.5 minutes (average area about nine square miles). About 1,200 of these quads were designated as priority sites for bird survey purposes.

Each of these priority areas was divided into sixths and the same one-sixth block (the west central block) was surveyed using standardized census protocols during the breeding season. The resulting distribution maps accordingly show fairly even census coverage across the state, Cordle said.

Three levels of breeding status were determined by surveyors: Possible (singing male in suitable nesting habitat, presence in suitable nesting habitat): Probable (agitated behavior, probable nest site, courtship behavior, etc.); and Confirmed (as evidenced by occupied nest, fledged young, used nest, distraction display, etc.).

Volunteers

In the first year of the breeding bird atlas project — 1986 — Kleen said most of the work was done by volunteers from Illinois bird clubs. The priority survey blocks selected for that year were near areas with active bird clubs, and many volunteers hit the field running, spending hundreds of hours in the field collecting data.

In the later years of the project, Kleen said that while many volunteers continued to survey their assigned plots within their counties annually, the IDNR needed to hire bird surveyors to census priority quad blocks where volunteers were scarcer. All in all, the IDNR funded the IBBA to the tune of about \$20,000 per year for a total of \$100,000 from the Wildlife Preservation Fund (funded through the Non-Game Check-Off program on Illinois tax returns).

Adopting a kind of blitz mentality, the IDNR organized block-

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