

AVIAN ATLAS

Breeding Study Provides Insights, Valuable Data

by Peter Friederici



Hundreds of Illinois birders searched for signs of nesting birds during the past six years. (Bill Oakes photo)

They spent 38,000 hours for six years trudging through scratchy fields, swatting mosquitos, sloshing through wetlands, tripping over branches, and peering into thorny thickets in the summer heat. But now, 700 bird watchers participating in the Illinois Breeding Bird Atlas can relax while their data is analyzed, computerized and published. They can also revel in the fact that they have confirmed the nesting success of 176 species out of 220 observed in the state and that along the way they've gained

new insights into bird behavior.

"Some of the surveyors were initially interested mainly in listing," said Bob Montgomery, senior staff biologist at the Max McGraw Wildlife Foundation in Dundee and statewide data compiler for the project. "Their main concern was if a particular species was present or not," he recalled. "But once the hardcore birders got exposed to it, they weren't just interested in checking off lists anymore. They learned to tell what the bird was doing by watching it," he said. "They started asking

why the birds were doing what they were doing. Is it showing courtship behavior? Is it carrying off fecal sacs?"

Montgomery is compiling 67,000 occurrence records from 1,300 surveyed blocks, entering the data into the foundation's computer system and checking results with the coordinators who oversaw the surveys of every county. He expects to tabulate final results by fall when work will begin on producing the definitive book on breeding birds in Illinois that will make the reams of data