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Breeding bird atlases began in Europe in the 1950s and in the U.S. in the 1970s. Six states have already published their atlases; in most others including Illinois, the projects are currently underway. Compilers divide an area, such as the state of Illinois, into sections according to a standardized grid, and determine which species are breeding in which sections.

The atlas provides a snapshot of a region's bird life. Volunteers gather information with sufficient scientific rigor so that it may usefully be compared to data gathered in the future.

Vernon M. Kleen, an avian ecologist in the Department of Conservation's Natural Heritage Division, has been gathering data on Illinois' breeding birds since the mid-1970s. The introduction of the state Nongame Wildlife Checkoff Fund in 1984 provided dollars for a more elaborate statewide project.

Kleen established a grid of 281 squares on a map of the state. He then divided the sections into four quadrangles and then into six blocks of about ten square miles each. Since it wouldn't be feasible to survey every one of the more than 6,000 resulting blocks, Kleen designated one priority block out of the six that should be canvassed. Other blocks containing unique habitats or species richness would be surveyed if time and energy allowed.

Kleen relied almost entirely on the 700-plus volunteers mustered through Audubon chapters and birding clubs to perform the field work. "Without the volunteers, this project would not have worked," he

## Vermilion County Team Confirms 121 Species

Mary Jane Easterday of Danville has been getting to know the birds of Vermilion County for 20 years now, so it's no surprise that she and a few other dedicated birders were able to confirm 121 nesting species in the county during the Illinois Breeding Bird Atlas project. Easterday says Vermilion County's diversity of habitats including grasslands, forest, and wetlands helped her team confirm the highest number in the state.

But her favorite birding technique was also ideally suited to the close observation the atlas required. "I'm a lazy birder," she said. "I go somewhere and sit, and I don't mind sitting there for three or four hours. That's when it's great, because the birds go back to doing what they do. It works really well, especially when looking for hummingbird or hawk nests. The hawks are really sneaky."

Sitting quietly and patiently for a good portion of the day enabled Easterday to discover a Cooper's Hawk nesting in one sparsely wooded tract.

County coordinator Marilyn Campbell said local birders logged 1,681 hours of field work during the project's six years, observing a total of 137 species. The team put in almost 250 hours on one rich block on the Vermilion River.

Easterday, who works in

the Danville Public Library, began surveying for Great Horned Owl nests in February. But she took her vacation in June just so she could spend time in the field everyday.

Easterday doesn't drive, so she talked fellow birder and library employee Vonna Bley into driving her to atlas sites and retrieving her several hours later. When Easterday wasn't on vacation, she and Bley birded after work until dusk.

Easterday also learned that some of the least desirable sights for bird watching - fields of corn and soybeans and railroad tracks - produced some of the best atlas finds. "Now that a lot of the railroads are abandoned, a lot of birds are there," she said. "We've seen everything from hawks to cuckoos to warblers - birds you don't expect to see in the middle of a farming community."

Her proudest moment came when she was finally able to confirm the nesting of a shy Henslow's Sparrow. Easterday sat for two hours in 90-degree heat waiting for the sparrow to muster the courage to run to its grass-land nest.

"I got stung by seven bees while I was waiting," she said, adding that the Henslow's Sparrow was the highlight of her atlas career even if she did end up with welts.

--Peter Friederici