

The Most Common Coding Mistakes and How to Avoid Them

A bald eagle is perched on a tree branch on the left side of the image. A Canada goose is sitting on a nest made of sticks on the right side of the image. The background is a dense thicket of bare tree branches.

Tom Prestby

WHEN does something deserve a code?

◆ Breeding Guideline Bar Chart

- ◆ Are you in the geographic breeding range for the species?
- ◆ Is it likely done migrating?
- ◆ Is habitat appropriate?
- ◆ How is it acting?
- ◆ Be patient if you can, especially at migrant traps

Species	January				February				March				April				May			
	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4
American Woodcock										M	M	E	B	B	B	B	B	B	B	
Wilson's Phalarope*															M	M	M	M	E	
Bonaparte's Gull												M	M	M	M	M	M	M	E	
Little Gull														M	M	M	M	M	E	
Ring-billed Gull	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	M	M	M	M	M	M	M	E	E	E	B	B	
Herring Gull	N	N	N	N	M	M	M	M	M	M	M	M	M	M	E	E	E	B	B	
Great Black-backed Gull*	N	N	N	N	N	N	M	M	M	M	M	M	M	M	E	E	E	B	B	
Caspian Tern*														M	M	M	M	M	M	
Black Tern*															M	M	E	E		
Common Tern*														M	M	M	M	E	E	
Forster's Tern*													M	M	M	M	E	E		
Rock Pigeon	N	N	N	N	N	N	B	B	B	B	B	B	B	B	B	B	B	B	B	
Eurasian Collared-Dove	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	E	E	E	E	E	B	B	B	B		
Mourning Dove	N	N	N	N	N	N	M	M	E	B	B	B	B	B	B	B	B	B		
Yellow-billed Cuckoo																M	E	E		
Black-billed Cuckoo															M	M	E			
Barn Owl	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	E	B	B	B	B		
Eastern Screech-Owl	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	E	E	E	B	B	B	B	B	B	B	B		
Great Horned Owl	N	N	E	B	B	B	B	B	B	B	B	B	B	B	B	B	B	B		
Northern Hawk Owl	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	E	E	B	B	B	B	B	B	B	B	B		
Barred Owl	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	E	B	B	B	B	B	B	B	B	B		
Great Gray Owl	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	E	E	B	B	B	B	B	B	B	B	B		
Long-eared Owl*	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	E	E	E	E	B	B	B	B	B		
Short-eared Owl*	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	E	B	B	B	B		

WHICH CODES work for which species?

Acceptable Breeding Codes Chart

Version 1.2 – 01/27/2017

*Rare or Priority Species – Additional information is required. See Atlas Handbook for details.

Black Bold – Very rare breeders in Wisconsin; **Red bold** – Could breed in WI but not confirmed.

Consult [Breeding Guideline Bar Chart](#) for seasonal guidance for each species.

1 = Likely to be witnessed in appropriate habitat and season. Use code freely.

2 = Reasonable in appropriate habitat and season if care is taken when assigning code.

3 = Only occasionally witnessed in appropriate habitat and season. Please provide comments.

4 = Very unlikely or impossible, even in appropriate habitat and season. Provide detailed comments.

F code (Flyover) – used for high flyovers, species not interacting with habitat, or active migrants, and results in species listed as Observed (no sign of breeding in area).



Wisconsin
Breeding Bird Atlas II

Species	Possible		Probable								Confirmed											
	H	S	S7	M	P	T	C	N	A	B	PE	CN	NB	DD	UN	ON	FL	CF	FY	FS	NE	NY
Canada Goose	2	4	4	4	2	2	2	1	2	4	3	3	2	4	2	1	1	4	4	4	2	3
Mute Swan	2	4	4	4	2	2	2	3	2	4	3	3	2	4	3	1	1	4	4	4	2	3
Trumpeter Swan	2	4	4	4	2	2	2	1	2	4	3	3	2	4	3	1	1	4	4	4	2	3
Wood Duck	1	4	4	4	2	2	2	1	2	4	3	4	4	3	2	2	1	4	4	4	2	3
Gadwall	2	4	4	4	2	3	3	3	3	4	3	3	3	3	4	2	2	4	4	4	3	3
American Wigeon*	3	4	4	4	3	3	3	3	3	4	3	3	3	3	4	2	2	4	4	4	3	3
American Black Duck	2	4	4	4	2	3	3	3	3	4	3	3	3	3	4	2	2	4	4	4	3	3
Mallard	1	4	4	4	2	2	2	1	2	4	3	3	2	3	3	1	1	4	4	4	2	3
Blue-winged Teal	2	4	4	4	2	2	2	3	2	4	3	3	2	3	4	1	1	4	4	4	2	3
Northern Shoveler	2	4	4	4	2	3	3	3	3	4	3	3	3	3	4	2	2	4	4	4	3	3
Northern Pintail*	3	4	4	4	2	3	3	3	3	4	3	3	3	3	4	2	2	4	4	4	3	3
Green-winged Teal	2	4	4	4	2	3	3	3	3	4	3	3	3	3	4	2	2	4	4	4	3	3
Canvasback	3	4	4	4	3	3	3	3	3	4	3	3	3	3	4	3	3	4	4	4	3	3
Redhead	2	4	4	4	2	3	3	3	3	4	3	3	3	3	4	1	1	4	4	4	2	3
Ring-necked Duck	2	4	4	4	2	3	3	3	3	4	3	3	3	3	4	1	1	4	4	4	2	3
Lesser Scaup	3	4	4	4	3	3	3	3	3	4	3	3	3	4	4	3	3	4	4	4	3	3
Black Scoter	4	4	4	4	3	3	3	3	3	4	4	4	3	3	4	4	3	4	4	4	3	3
Bufflehead*	3	4	4	4	3	3	3	3	3	4	3	4	4	3	4	3	3	4	4	4	3	3

The Data Review Process

- ◆ One of the greatest improvements between Atlases
- ◆ Based on the BGBC and ABCC
- ◆ Custom “Filters” set by date and code
 - ◆ Thank you Nick Walton!
- ◆ All records with comments are checked
 - ◆ Importance of Comments!!!
 - ◆ No code and no comment = possibly lost forever
- ◆ Map spot-checking
- ◆ Atlas-central, County Coordinators, eBird Reviewers

Early Codes

- ◇ Could this bird be migrating?
- ◇ Species known to migrate late
 - ◇ Waterfowl
 - ◇ Some flycatchers, warblers, thrushes
- ◇ Early late-season codes
 - ◇ Is the bird just feeding itself?
 - ◇ Could that really be a FL already?



Is it more than “just” a Flyover

- ◆ **F** code is only “Observed”
- ◆ Many species hunt on the wing
- ◆ Is the bird interacting with its habitat?
- ◆ How high is the flyover?
- ◆ Any repetition in flyovers?
- ◆ Where in the block are you?
 - ◆ This dictates how lenient you can be
- ◆ Could very well be the **H** code



Who is not eligible for S and S7 codes?

- ◆ **Golden rule:** the bird has to make a sound that is unique to advertising its territory in the breeding season
- ◆ This rules out
 - ◆ Corvids
 - ◆ Waxwings & Hummingbirds
 - ◆ Most waterbirds
 - ◆ Falcons & Accipiters
- ◆ Woodpecker drumming is their “song”
- ◆ Don’t worry, there are other ways to get these species to “Probable”!



When is a noise Courtship?

- ◆ Noises birds make with feathers
 - ◆ Ruffed Grouse drumming
 - ◆ Woodcock & Snipe displays
 - ◆ Peenting only is **S**
- ◆ Plumage displays to females that involve songs are coded **C**
- ◆ Pheasants and Turkeys
 - ◆ Code **S** if only crowing/gobbling is heard
 - ◆ Code **C** if Pheasant wing-flutter is heard
 - ◆ Code **C** if seen in display posture



C



S

Times to avoid coding Pairs

- ◆ Both sexes seen at feeder
- ◆ Two non- sexually dimorphic birds seen together
- ◆ Species that don't hold pair bonds
 - ◆ Gallinaceous species
 - ◆ Hummingbirds
 - ◆ Colonial Waterbirds & Waders
- ◆ Prolonged interaction is key
- ◆ Please provide comments!



Nick Anich



Distraction Display

- ◇ **DD** is a unique display of fluttering and/or feigning injury
- ◇ Many species do not give a DD
- ◇ One of the most problematic codes
 - ◇ Extreme agitation is still **A**
 - ◇ Leading you away is **A**
 - ◇ Mobbing or harassing a predator is **T**
 - ◇ Divebombing is **A** unless the bird strikes you (except Raptors...)
- ◇ Please give comments with this code!



Ryan Brady

DD

T



Joel Trick

DD for Raptors

- ◇ Continuous dive-bombing is a distraction display for raptors
- ◇ Almost always against humans or mammal predators
- ◇ Rather rare
- ◇ Not to be confused with...
 - ◇ Territorial actions against other raptors
 - ◇ Agitation from your presence



Confirmed codes: CF and Raptors

- ◇ Raptors naturally carry food because their prey is too large to eat on the spot
- ◇ Is it carrying it for itself?
- ◇ Hints
 - ◇ Carrying to same location multiple times
 - ◇ Carrying into likely nesting area
 - ◇ Carrying seemingly long-distance
 - ◇ Carrying with distinctly direct flight
- ◇ Same goes for Crows, Ravens, Kingfisher



Ryan Brady

Cavity-nester Madness

- ◇ The longer you can watch what is happening or the more often you can visit, the better idea you'll have
- ◇ **N**= Bird is showing interest in a cavity, may or may not be entering
- ◇ **B**= Woodpecker is drilling a hole large enough to eventually become a cavity
- ◇ **NB**= "B" activity has been happening for prolonged period
- ◇ **NB**= Bird is consistently tossing out woodchips or bringing in material
- ◇ **ON**= Bird enters cavity repeatedly
 - ◇ Bird enters cavity for prolonged periods
 - ◇ Male and female enter repeatedly
 - ◇ Bird has been entering cavity several days



N

Ryan Brady

ON



Birds to be wary of coding

- ◆ Hunting/Loafing far from where they breed
 - ◆ Herons & Egrets
 - ◆ Cormorants and Pelicans
 - ◆ Gulls & Terns
 - ◆ Eagles & Vultures
- ◆ Don't code unless you think you are at a likely breeding site



More problems with Waterbirds

- ◇ Courtship during migration
 - ◇ Most waterfowl
- ◇ Confirmations only near colonies
 - ◇ CF, FY, FL common away from colony
- ◇ Mid-summer migrants
 - ◇ Most shorebird species do not nest anywhere near Wisconsin



Dispersed Birds in Juvenile Plumage

- ◇ Not always a lock for the FL code
- ◇ Use behavior as clues
- ◇ Look for down, other subtle markings
- ◇ Are the possible parents still around?
- ◇ Is it probable the bird came from block?
- ◇ Notorious examples
 - ◇ Night-Herons
 - ◇ Hummingbirds
 - ◇ Gulls and Terns
 - ◇ Birds of Prey
 - ◇ Warblers/passerines in late summer
- ◇ H or no code if uncertain



Nick Anich

Easy Confirmations to Overlook

- ◆ Family groups
 - ◆ If 3+, be suspicious!
 - ◆ Especially July
- ◆ Full-sized fledglings
 - ◆ Look for “soft” tones, gape
 - ◆ Multiple “female-type” birds
- ◆ Track down different calls
- ◆ Always consider the date, if species has been present



Nick Anich

Special Case: Chimney Swifts

- ◇ Not hard to see one near a chimney
- ◇ Very hard to get access to check for nest
- ◇ Again, look for repetition
- ◇ Other hints
 - ◇ Does it stay in long enough where it could be incubating/brooding?
 - ◇ Do both members of pair enter?
- ◇ Can use **ON** code if you witness enough of the above to be convinced
- ◇ If not, code as **N**
- ◇ Same goes for Pigeons, Swallows in barns



Jim Edlhuber



Tom Schultz

Special Case: Turkey Vultures

- ◆ Be cautious when coding this species
- ◆ Never code flyovers unless flyover is consistent **(H)**
- ◆ Be wary of coding perched birds
 - ◆ Don't code if carrion nearby
 - ◆ In woods is better than on ground
- ◆ Code when you notice repetition
 - ◆ Same perches used over period of time
 - ◆ Flyover in same location and direction

O



Joel Trick

H



O

Comments: Man's best friend!

- ◇ Especially useful for confusing situations
- ◇ Describe the situation as best as possible
- ◇ Even brief comments are MUCH better than having no comments
- ◇ Best friend of:
 - ◇ You when you look back at your records
 - ◇ Your WBBA County Coordinator
 - ◇ Your local eBird reviewer
 - ◇ The WBBA II team

1 Red-tailed Hawk	Remove Species	Review
1 Rough-legged Hawk	Remove Species	Review
3 Rock Pigeon (Feral Pigeon)	Remove Species	Review
2 Eurasian Collared-Dove	Remove Species	Review
Two birds on powerlines singing on north side of Lulu St. Reported and photographed previously by another birder. Large gray dove with squared-off tail with more white than MODO and black collar on neck. Could have been a pair but they weren't sitting closely together and it seemed like both were singing. Bears watching for higher evidence of breeding		
Breeding Code	S Possible--Singing male	
2 American Crow		



It's OK to be confused!

- ◆ We're all still learning
- ◆ We all made mistakes every year
 - ◆ Thankfully, they're easy to fix!
- ◆ Many outlets for questions
 - ◆ Facebook WBBA II Discussion Group
 - ◆ Consult handbook/tutorials
 - ◆ Email the atlas team
 - ◆ Ask a friend



Questions/Comments?



(Don't Code Me!!)