



# Tips for Targeting Uncommon and Secretive Species



Wisconsin  
Breeding  
Bird  
Atlas II

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What makes species uncommon or  
secretive?

Species is rare (low abundance)



What makes species uncommon or secretive?

Species may not actually be rare, but is hard to detect (low detectability)





Many species of interest have both low abundance and low detectability



# Reasons for low detectability

- Inconspicuous song





# Reasons for low detectability

- Doesn't call very often



# Reasons for low detectability

- Song is easily confused





# Reasons for low detectability

- Calls at odd hours





# Reasons for low detectability

- Favors specific, rarely visited habitat



# Your ability to counter these factors

## Abundance

Number of species is fixed

Can visit higher percentage habitats with more birds

## Detectability

Easier to improve detectability

Choose favorable, time of day, time of year, weather, wind

Audio Playback



# A word about audio playback

We do not recommend indiscriminate playback



# A word about audio playback

## Playback can be harmful when:

Used during breeding season

Used for prolonged or repeated periods

Causes bird to spend energy fighting ghost intruders or threats



# A word about audio playback

**Playback can be useful when:**

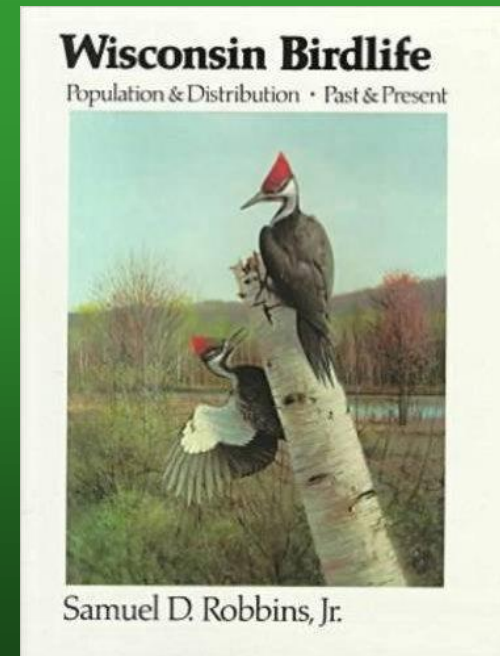
Used for a specific species

Used for short duration

Stopped immediately when bird is detected

# Despite challenges, how do you go about finding rare species?

- Awareness of abundance, distribution, of Wisconsin birds
  - Familiarize yourself with WBBA I
  - Wisconsin Birdlife
  - Birds of North America
  - eBird maps and bar charts





# How to find these species

## Atlas Species Survey Strategies on Atlas eBird front page

### [Species Survey Strategy – Irruptive Finches – 2015](#)

*23 April, 2015*

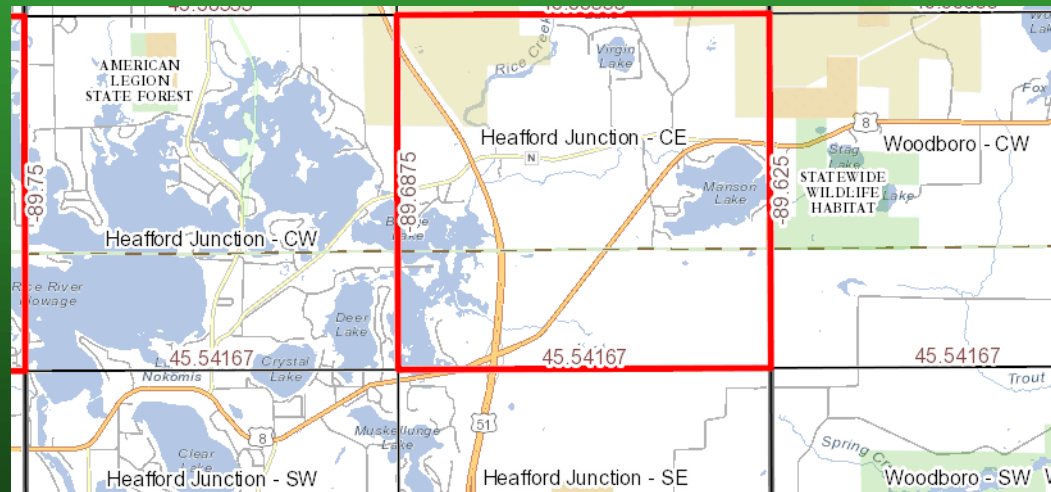
Many species of northern finches, such as redpolls, siskins, crossbills, and grosbeaks, are irruptive, that is, they stage irregular movements from year to year in and out of certain areas, especially during the non-breeding season. In some years they may be present across portions of Wisconsin in large numbers, while in others they're hard to find. Following winters with high numbers, several of these species remain to breed in the state. In 2015, two species are present that demand our attention — the Pine Siskin and Red Crossbill. We should be looking for breeding behaviors NOW because we aren't sure how many of them will be around in future years of the Atlas.



# How to find these species

- Determine which uncommon or secretive species are likely in your region
- Determine their favored habitats and determine where those habitats might occur in your blocks

- Atlas interactive map
- Aerial photos (Bing maps)





# How to find these species

- Familiarize yourself with natural history, vocalizations of species
- Make a plan for an expedition!
  - Time of year
  - Time of day
  - Favored habitats
  - Special strategies or methods



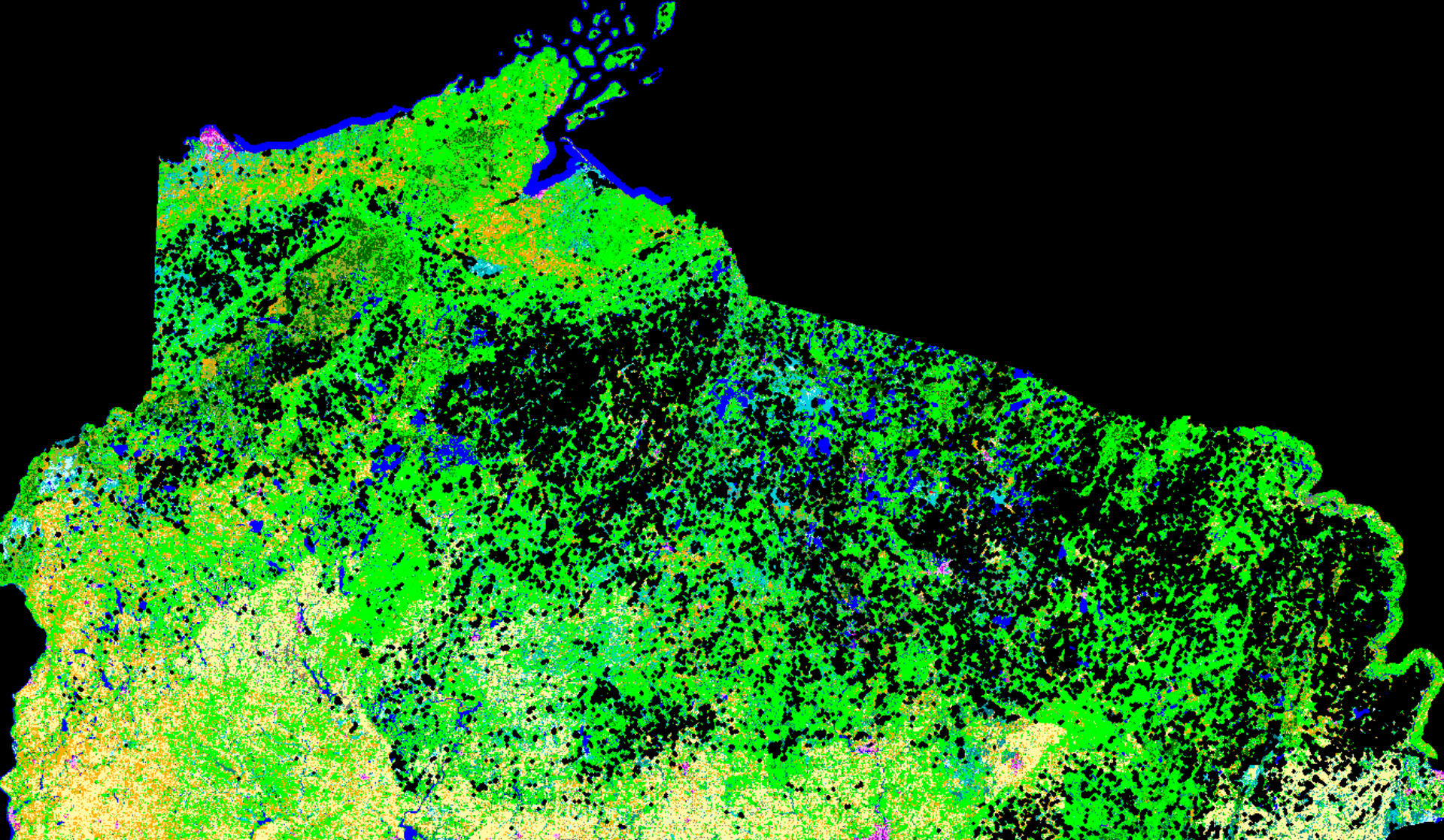
In most blocks, uncommon species are species you won't find during daytime in your dominant habitats:

- Nocturnal
- Grassland
- Boreal
- Marsh



# Boreal Species

- Identifying potential habitat



# Boreal Species

- Identifying habitat





# Boreal Species

- Identifying habitat





# Boreal Species

- Spruce/tamarack is best





# Boreal Species

- Upland conifers can be good for some species





# Boreal Species

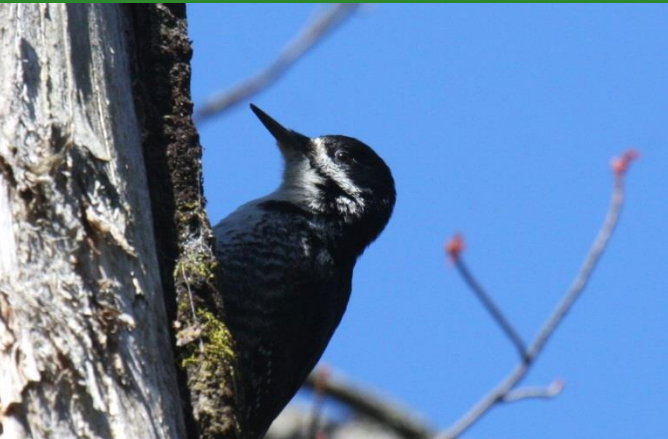
- Rubber boots are helpful





# Resident Boreal Species

- Early season surveys
- Larger swamps best
- Playback can be helpful



# Neotropical Migrant Boreal Species

- Open bogs for some species
  - Palm Warbler & Lincoln's Sparrow
- Bogs with prominent snags
  - Olive-sided Flycatcher & Black-backed Woodpecker
- Bog edges
  - Magnolia Warbler, Northern Parula, Blue-headed Vireo, Kinglets





A photograph of a dense forest with many tall, thin trees. The trees have light-colored bark and some are bare, while others have green needles. The ground is covered in low-lying vegetation. A semi-transparent dark grey bar is at the bottom of the image, containing white text.

A habitat worth experiencing regardless  
of birdlife!



# Nocturnal species

- Owls
- Nightjars
- Yellow Rails
- Sparrows
- Surprises!

# Owls

- Calling is variable
- Variable habitats
- Best time of year:
  - Apr-May for most species
  - Barred and GHOW earlier



# Owl Species

- EASO: Deciduous forests/ravines
- LEOW: Try conifer forests with openings
  - Example: Christmas Tree farms, Swamp edges
- SEOW: Large grasslands
  - Dawn or dusk
  - Won't respond to playback
- NSWO: Conifer/mixed forest
  - Beware of spring migrants
- Begging GHOW & BADO
  - Easy way to get confirmations in mid/late summer
  - Study begging calls, can be confusing





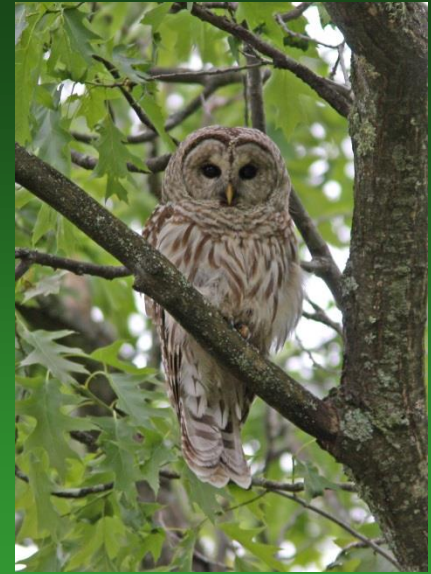
# Owl Strategy

- Easier to hear than you think
- Driving route, stop periodically and listen for 5–10 minutes, cover ground
- Stop in safe spots at night
- Usually calm weather
- Response to moon is variable



# Owl Playback

- Playback can be effective
  - Start with small species, then larger
    - Give each a few minutes
  - Don't play GHOW!
  - Study non-traditional calls
    - EX: Alarm notes & bill-snapping





# Nightjars: Whip-poor-wills

- Exposed full moon is best (dusk is good too)
- Hard to confirm, but easy to S7 or M
- Stop periodically & listen while covering ground
  - Songs carry quite far!
- Dry forests with sandy soils are best
  - Pines and oaks are good clues



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# Nightjars: Nighthawks

- Often a dusk peak for calling
- Easy to C (booming)
- Late migrant- Be careful coding until June
  - Especially by water
- Open sand & cities



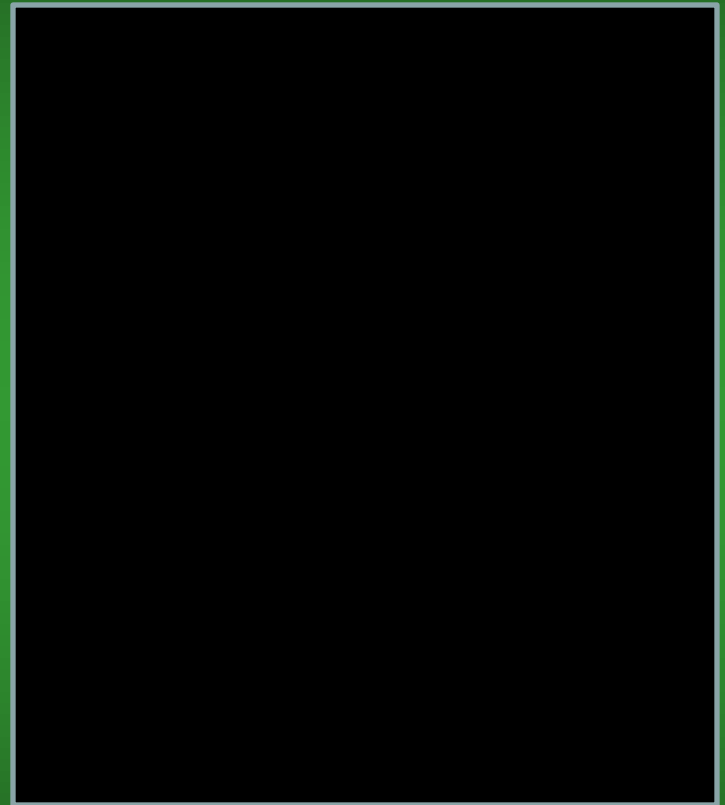


# Don't forget, there's one more

- There has to be more Chuck-wills-widows in the state than just 2 locations in a decade!!!
- Similar habitat and strategy as Whip-poor-will
- Will you be the one to find one next??
- Distinct song but can be tuned-out if a lot of Whip-poor-wills are singing

# Yellow Rails

- Nocturnal is best time
- Become silent rather early (mid-June)
- Sedge meadows are best
- Playback helpful
  - Use quarters or rocks if you don't have equipment



Yellow Rail by Tom Prestby



# Night Sparrows

- Ammodramus especially (Henslow's, Nelson's, Le Conte's)
- Worth reviewing songs, fairly inconspicuous
- Note sites you might want to visit at night
  - Large sedge meadows/ marshes or grasslands
- Dawn works well for these species too



# Night surprises!

- Sedge Wrens
- Cuckoos
- Thrushes
- Others??
- Flight songs

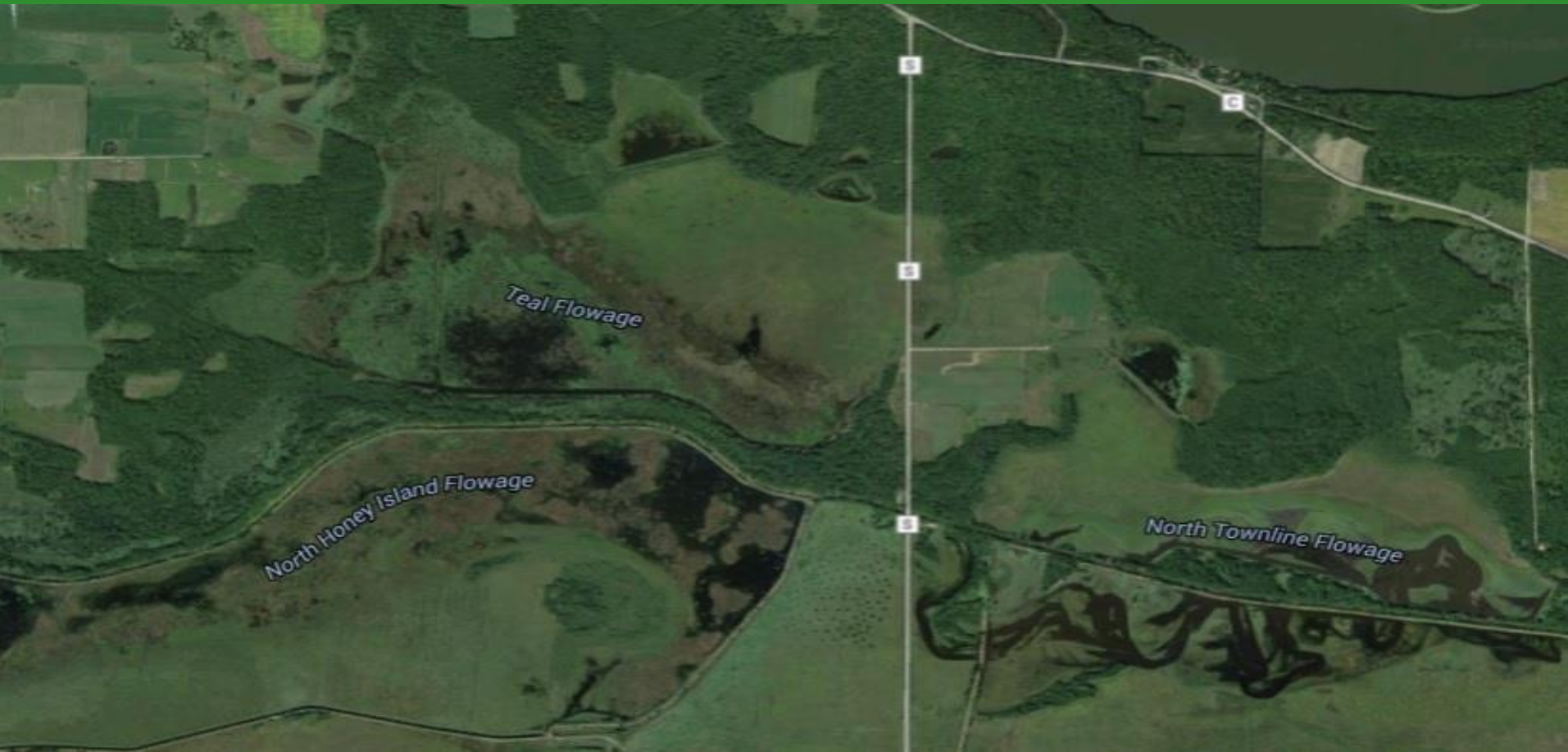


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# Marsh Birds

- Identifying habitat
  - Large productive marshes are some of the best nurseries
  - Doesn't have to be large or quality though!



# Marsh bird Species

- Deep-water Cattail marshes
  - Rails (except Yellow), MAWR
  - More open water = LEBI, PBGR, AMCO, COGA, YHBL, ducks





# Marsh bird Species

- **Wet meadows = AMBI, SEWR, VIRA, YERA, NOHA, BOBO, WISN, SACR**
- **More open water = PBGR, ducks, Loons (north), BLTE**



# Marsh bird Species

- Invasive-dominated
  - Phragmites-dominated: MAWR, Rails, YHBL
  - Reed-canary dominated: SEWR, SWSP, maybe a rail





# Rails

- Early morning/Late evening or night
- Playback can be useful
- Most vocal in May
- Best chance to confirm: FL in June/July
- King: cattail or mixed marsh, Yellow: sedge meadow



# Bitterns

- Early morning/Late evening is best
- Playback is hit or miss
- American most vocal in May, Least in June
- Best chance to confirm: FL in June/July
  - Least young are easier to find and ID



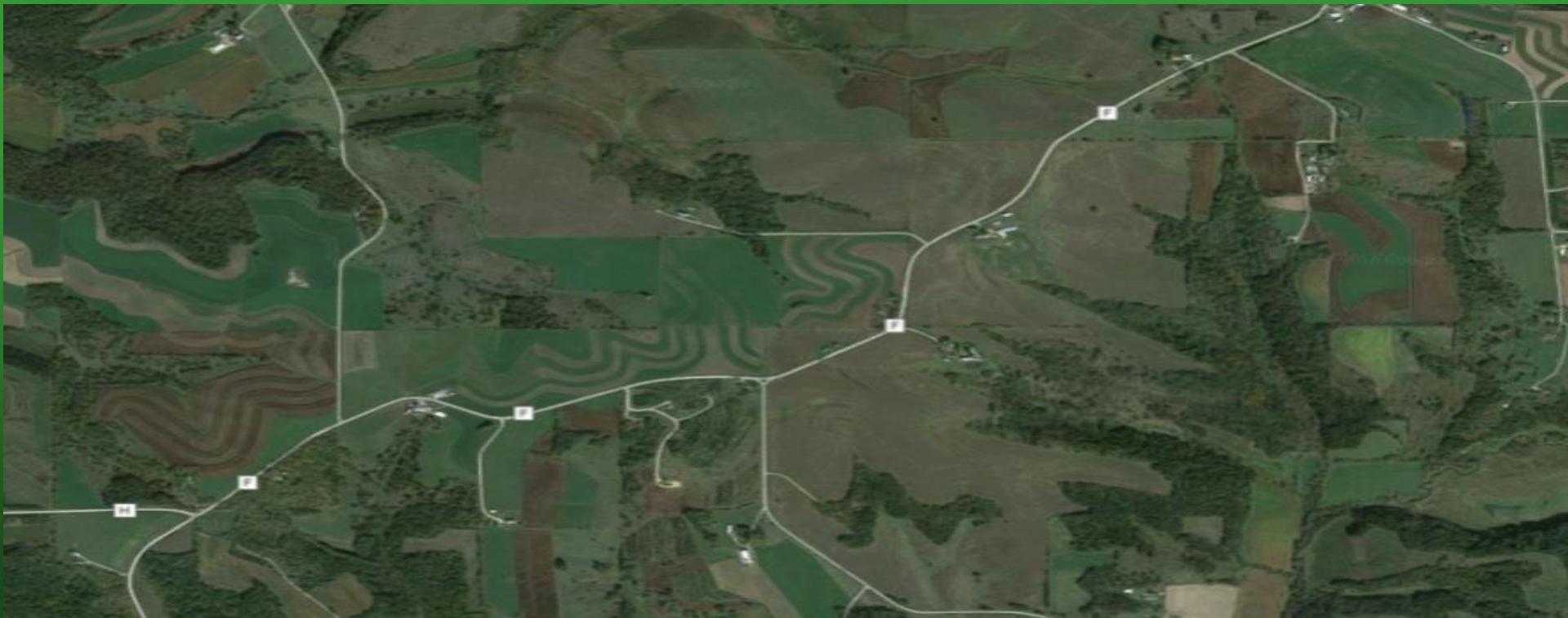


# Marsh bird Strategy

- Late-spring surveys best for poss/prob
  - Migrants still moving through in early May
  - Early morning or late evening is best
  - Playback can be very helpful
- Mid/late-summer surveys best for confirmations
  - Especially areas with openings of water
  - Patient observing is productive
    - Usually more-so than tromping
  - This is the time to get in the boat if you want to!

# Grassland Birds

- Identifying habitat
  - Large grasslands are best
  - Tallgrass vs. shortgrass prairies
  - Pastures and hay fields produce many of the same birds
  - Shrub component introduces even more species





# Grassland bird Species

- **Difference in grassland habitats**
- Shortgrass= WEME, EAME, UPSA, BRBL, GRSP
- Simulated by pastures
  - The larger the pasture, the better



# Grassland bird Species

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- A landscape photograph showing a wide, green grassy field with scattered trees and shrubs. The sky is overcast and grey. The field is filled with various green plants and some purple flowers. In the background, there are several trees of varying heights and densities, some appearing as small bushes and others as larger, more distinct trees. The overall scene is a typical grassland habitat.
- **Difference in grassland habitats**
  - Tallgrass = SEWR, HESP, EAME, BOBO, RNPH
  - Simulated sometimes by hayfields



# Grassland bird Species

- **Difference in grassland habitats**
  - **Add Forbs: DICK, COYE**
  - **Add shrubs: CCSP, BEVI, FISP, BRTH, YEWA, WIFL**
  - **Add occasional trees: RHWO, OROR, RTHA**
  - **Add water: WISN, AMBI, HESP, LCSP, WIFL, ALFL**
  - **Add sand: GRSP, LASP, VESP**

# Grassland bird Strategy

- Late-spring/early-summer surveys best for possible/probable
- Morning is best, most species vocal through June
- Summer is best for confirmations but varies
  - CN, FS best in early summer
  - FY, FL, CF easier and best in mid/late summer
- Again, patient observing is productive
  - Easier and more-productive than looking for nests
  - Stake out a spot with good view and prominent perches



Please share some of your tips!

