



# **Birding at a Slower Pace - An Holistic Approach to Observing Birds: Why atlasing will improve your field skills AND your birding experience**

**Bill Mueller, Director,**

**Western Great Lakes Bird and Bat Observatory**

**You've seen thousands of chickadees; how many have you seen excavating a nest cavity?**



**You've seen  
lots of oriole  
nests; how  
many have  
you seen  
"under  
construction"?**



**You've heard  
countless Red-eyed  
Vireos; how many  
have you seen  
feeding young?**






## **But while you're watching these things unfold...**

- **You'll be learning new field skills**
- **You'll learn much more about the birds you're studying for the atlas**
- **In slowing down, you'll see many other aspects of the natural world you may have previously overlooked**

# Slowing down...



- ▶ According to the folks working on the Nova Scotia BBA: “The British found that even a top-notch birder could not find every breeding species in a block in 100 hours. These figures are applied as a guideline to help volunteers know when to devote most of their energy to a new block.”



Slowing down to really  
watch what a bird is  
doing will help immensely  
when you are out  
atlasing...

**Breeding codes are  
linked to birds'  
behavior**





## Probable

**S7 Singing Male Present 7+ Days:** Singing male present at same location on at least two occasions 7 or more days apart.

**M Multiple (7+) Singing Males:** Multiple (seven or more) singing or territorial birds of a species detected within a block on one day.



Remember to check your Breeding Guideline Bar Chart!

**P Pair in Suitable Habitat: Pair observed in suitable nesting habitat during the breeding season.**



**C Courtship, Display, or Copulation: Courtship behavior or copulation between a male and a female. Courtship behavior includes transfer of food, displays, and grooming between a pair of birds.**



**N Visiting Probable Nest Site:**  
This code applies when a bird is observed visiting the same likely nest site repeatedly.

**A Agitated Behavior:**  
Agitated behavior or anxiety calls from adults usually indicate a nest site or young in the vicinity.

**B Nest-Building by Wrens or Woodpeckers:** Nest-building by wrens or excavation of cavities by woodpeckers.



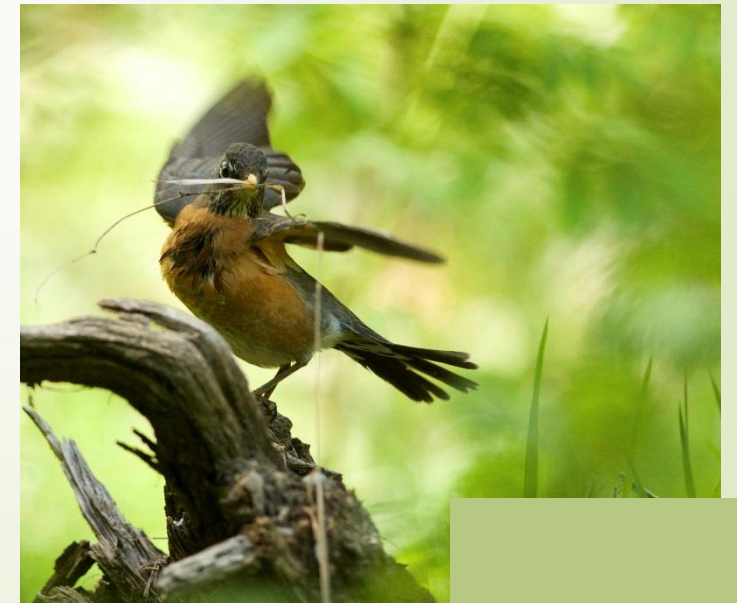
**C Courtship, Display, or Copulation: Courtship behavior or copulation between a male and a female.**



## Confirmed

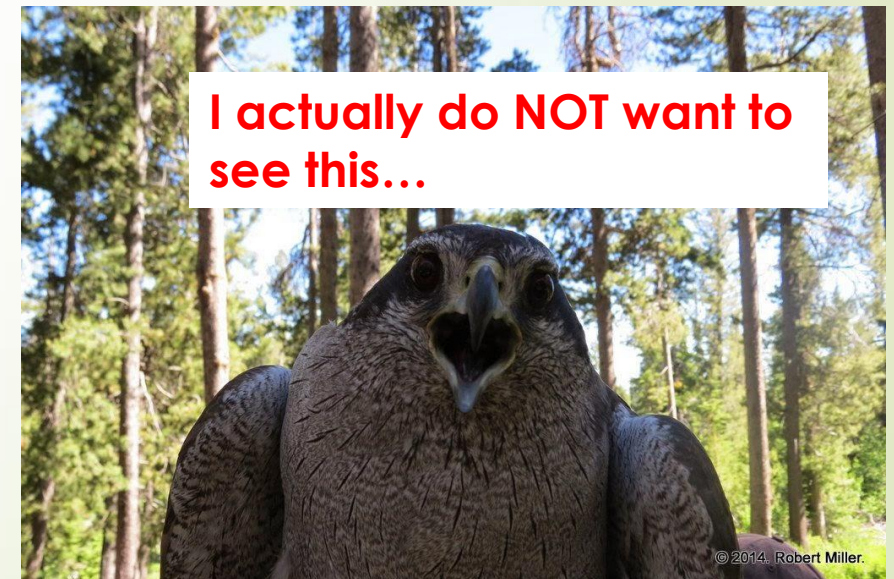
**PE Physiological Evidence: Physiological evidence of breeding based on bird in the hand.**

**CN Carrying Nesting Material: Bird seen carrying nesting material such as sticks, grass, mud, cobwebs, etc.**



**NB Nest-Building (not wrens or woodpeckers): Nest-building seen at the actual nest site, excluding wrens and woodpeckers.**

**DD Distraction Display: Distraction displays, defense of unseen nest or young, or injury feigning. Killdeer may give a “broken wing” act; a Goshawk or Cooper’s Hawk may dive at you near the nest site.**



**UN Used Nest: Used nest or eggshells found, but no adult birds were seen nearby.**



**ON Occupied Nest: Occupied nest indicated by adult in nest (incubating position) or entering or leaving nest site.**



**FL Recently Fledged Young: Recently fledged young or downy young. This includes dependent young only.**



**NE Nest with Eggs:** Nest with eggs (or eggshells on ground). Nest and eggs must be accurately identified via presence of an adult bird in order to use this code.



**NY Nest with Young:** Nest with young seen or heard. Take care not to cause premature flushing of nestlings from nest.







**Be careful of fledglings or young birds that use camouflage to conceal their presence (e.g. woodcock or ground-nesting birds). Some won't be able to fly and will be vulnerable to being stepped on.**



**CF Carrying Food: Adult carrying food for young. Use this code with caution. Some adults carry food a long distance or may be engaged in courtship feeding.**



**FY Feeding Young: Adult bird feeding recently fledged young that are not yet independent.**



**FS Carrying Fecal Sac: Adult bird seen carrying fecal sac.**









**➔ A few  
suggestions**



**Avoid visiting nests early in the day**

**Avoid visiting nests during bad weather**

**Avoid visiting nests near to dusk**

**Use binoculars to check nests high above you**

Gray Catbird nest with eggs  
(with Brown-headed Cowbird egg)  
courtesy Jack Bartholmai







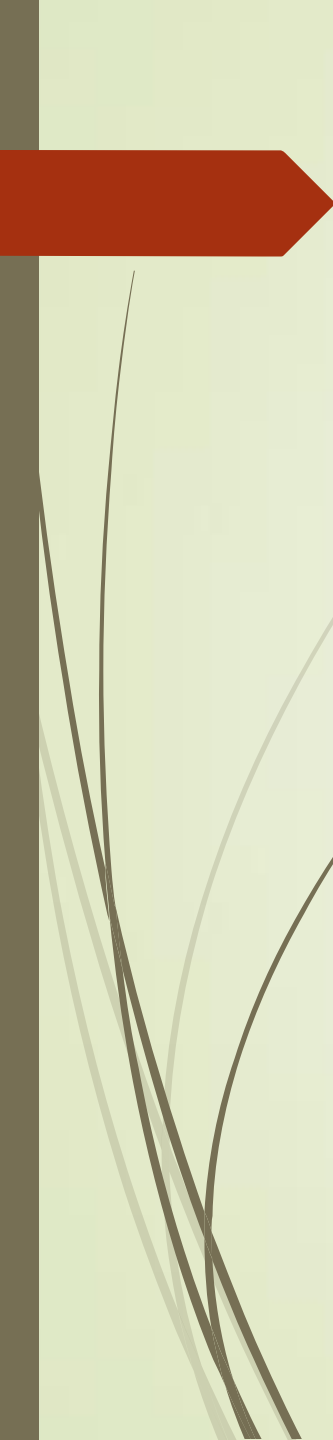
**A great reference –  
use it help learn about  
nests;**

**Find it at:**

**<http://nestwatch.org/>**

# However, as Ryan mentioned yesterday:

- 1. Seeking out nests is NOT critical to this project**
- 2. We do NOT need nest monitoring data and in fact discourage active pursuit of such (no nest record cards this time)**
- 3. Most of your nest finds will be incidental. This is fine but act accordingly:**
  - Don't touch nest, eggs, or vegetation (predator cues)**
  - Don't leave a dead-end trail**
  - Get out of there quickly**
- 4. Other methods of confirmation can be attained through careful observation, esp. if nest suspected in area**



**An important note:** Let's decide to act ethically when in the field. This includes ethical behavior in terms of birds and their nests, but also ethical behavior in terms of our relationship with local landowners and others.

A decorative graphic on the left side of the slide. It features a dark red arrow pointing to the right, positioned above several thin, light green lines that resemble blades of grass or reeds, extending downwards from the arrow's tail.

**We all “represent” the  
Atlas project, and our  
respective organizations.**

**Get permission when  
planning to atlas on  
private lands!**




**1) What constitutes bird harassment, especially during the breeding season?**

**WSO Code of Ethics: “Avoid chasing or repeatedly flushing birds. Observe birds from a safe distance by using binoculars. If the bird shows signs of stress, then you are too close and should back away. “**



**I've found a nest. Should I approach it and examine it to determine if it contains eggs or nestlings? If yes, how do you do this without attracting predators to the nest? Watch for nest predators!**

**Cornell NestWatch advice: “Avoid leaving tracks that can direct predators to nests. Nest predators are everywhere. Be careful that predators such as cats, crows, and jays are not following you. Minimize damaging or trampling vegetation that could expose nests.”**

A decorative red arrow points to the right from the left edge of the slide. Below it, several thin, dark lines represent grass or reeds, extending from the bottom left towards the center of the slide.

3) Can I use song playback during my block survey? It is **NOT** needed for **most purposes** -- very careful use of playback is **OK**, in **exceptional circumstances** (rails, other secretive marsh birds, nocturnal species.) Do not use in heavily-birded areas, or for endangered species. Playback should not be used once a species has been detected. (See Handbook.)



**Thanks to Ryan Brady,  
Carl Schwartz, and  
Amber Roth for great  
suggestions!**

