

Volunteers needed to compile Minnesota's first bird atlas

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It's the most comprehensive study of bird species ever conducted in Minnesota, with researchers stopping three times in every township across the state to see what's flying around. Volunteers will contribute their findings as well.

The first-ever Minnesota Breeding Bird Atlas is long overdue, bird enthusiasts say, and will help document which species are where across the state.

About a dozen trained researchers will do the study's heavy lifting, stopping for 10 minutes at 2,352 different locations — generally the northwest quadrant of every township — from downtown Minneapolis, across southern Minnesota's farms, through the desolate Red Lake peatlands and even the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness.

Meanwhile, more than 1,000 volunteers, most of them avid birders, will fan out across assigned areas to help confirm what the scientists find, and maybe add findings of their own. Even the general public is being asked to report their findings, be it a back yard robin's nest or a hawk nesting on their office building.

"We're going to put it all together and get the most comprehensive dataset anyone has ever compiled [on Minnesota birds]," said Jerry Niemi, ornithologist at the University of Minnesota Duluth's Natural Resources Research Institute.

The study won't count actual numbers of birds but how many species are identified and where. Surveyors will pay attention to the birds' habitats at nesting season, generally late May to early July, when the count will take place.

The three locations in each township include a random point, a point

within the dominant habitat (farms, forest, swamps, etc.) and one in the second most common habitat.

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It's estimated the state has between 225 and 250 bird species that nest here each summer.

Researchers started work this year and finished about 600 townships, Niemi said. Organizers hope to finish by 2013, with the atlas published in 2014. Most researchers are graduate students who must pass a test identifying 75 bird songs, as well as a hearing test.

"I can't do it because I can't pass the hearing test," Niemi noted.

While avid birders have a good handle on which native birds are most often seen here, there will likely be some surprises, said Anna Peterson, an NRRI bird researcher. Much of the existing data on the range of Minnesota birds is dated.

"Most of the older birding books show turkey vultures range only in southern Minnesota. But we all know they have spread across the northern part of the state now," she said.

Another species, boreal chickadees, were once common across Minnesota and are listed as such in most books. But boreal chickadees now may have a much smaller range, Niemi said, while once common evening grosbeaks have nearly disappeared from the Northland.

Other birds thought to

be extinct or rare may show up more often than anyone expected. And birds thought to be common may end up being scarcer than thought.

NRRI is leading the scientific data-gathering and analysis portion of the project, which is being compiled by the Cornell Laboratory of Ornithology. The Audubon Society is coordinating volunteers. The project is funded by the state's lottery and cigarette tax profits through the Legislative Citizen's Commission on Minnesota Resources.

Minnesota is one of only a few states that doesn't have a comprehensive breeding bird atlas. Wisconsin published its atlas in 2006.

The NRRI is well-versed in tracking bird species using the system that will be employed for the atlas. Since 1991, Niemi has been using the 10-minute point count system, returning to the same spots year after year, to keep track of birds in the Chippewa, Superior and Chequamegon National Forests.

That study has not only documented trends — including a steep decline in ground-nesting species — but has also established a solid bird-counting methodology.

"The trouble with bird-watchers is that we tend to go to the same place every time, where we know there's going to be birds. ... But what about five miles



away? We don't know much at all about many areas in this state because we don't go there," Niemi said. "I suspect we're going to find a lot of surprises as people go to places they haven't gone to before."

More volunteers are needed to cover every survey section in the state, said Bonnie Sample, atlas coordinator for Minnesota Audubon.

"Wisconsin had 1,602 contributors, and we'll probably need just as many," Sample said. "We've been getting people new to birding and some experienced people looking to stretch their skills... and we're getting some really experienced birders getting

involved who have never been part of any group before."

HELP COUNT THE BIRDS

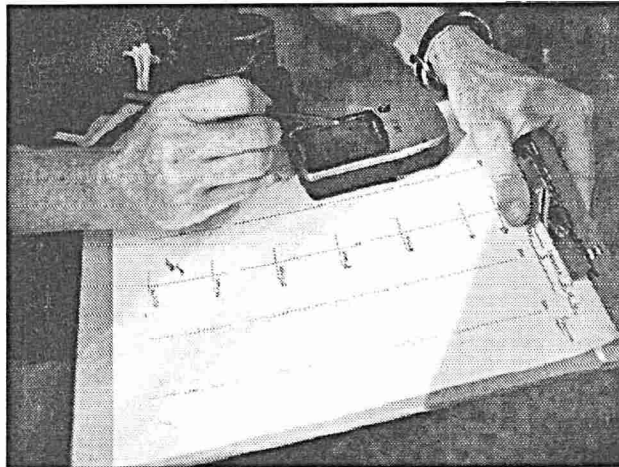
In addition to volunteer surveyors and professional researchers, the general public is being asked to submit their bird sightings next summer. To find out how to report birds, or to volunteer to go into the field in a specific region to survey them, go to mnbba.org, e-mail bsample@audubon.org or call (651) 739-9332.

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Researcher Anna Peterson listens for birds along the Superior Hiking Trail last week. Birders around the state will be conducting a survey next year. *Derek Montgomery / derekmontgomery.com*



Using a GPS unit, bird researcher Anna Peterson records data last week along the Superior Hiking Trail near Crow Creek and Castle Danger. *Derek Montgomery / derekmontgomery.com*