



# OFO News

NEWSLETTER OF THE ONTARIO FIELD ORNITHOLOGISTS



With some American Woodcock singing on territory in late February, and then settling into an early nesting season in southern Ontario, it is possible to find nests with eggs in the snow.

*Photo by Mark Peck*

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### ONTARIO FIELD ORNITHOLOGISTS

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## Breeding Bird Atlas Alert

With Atlas-3 squares currently being assigned, volunteers should step forward now — and here is what you need to know. *By Mike Cadman*

**THE ONTARIO BREEDING BIRD ATLAS** needs Ontario birders to step forward and get involved now for the launch of Atlas-3, which starts on January 1, 2021.

Preparations are well under way for the five-year project. Volunteers are needed, both to fill vacancies as Regional Coordinators in central and northern Ontario, and to take on squares and contribute to the data collection process across the province.

Here are some highlights. They include all of the FAQs and contact information you will need to become an active member of our team for this enjoyable and critically important survey.

Your first destination is the website ([www.birdsontario.org](http://www.birdsontario.org)). Here you can find out how to register, how to locate the regions and squares in which you would like to volunteer, how to contact your Regional Coordinators and what is involved in atlasing. Anyone interested in birds is welcome to participate, although higher levels of birding skill, especially in the identification of birds by their calls and songs, will improve your efficiency. Our social media presence is also now operational on Facebook ([www.facebook.com/ONBreedingBirdAtlas](http://www.facebook.com/ONBreedingBirdAtlas)), Instagram and Twitter (handles: @ONBirdAtlas).





Horned Larks are among the earliest migrants, with some singing on territory in late February, and some — like this one — nesting as soon as late March. But atlassers must be careful to avoid recording breeding evidence for other early larks just passing through.

*Photo by Mark Peck*

### REGIONAL COORDINATORS

Regional Coordinators (RCs) are listed on the website under Get Involved. They are already busy assigning squares and helping volunteer atlassers get prepared for the start of data collection.

We still have two regions in need of a Regional Coordinator: Nipissing West and Algoma. If you are interested in fulfilling this important role, please contact the office ([atlas@birdsonario.org](mailto:atlas@birdsonario.org)).

### COVID COMPLICATIONS

Due to COVID-19 concerns in remote communities, we will not be sending volunteers to the far north in 2021. Instead, efforts will double in the near-north, if COVID regulations allow it. In Ontario, this is the boreal forest region from the Temagami area to the Manitoba border, with squares surveyed by road, river or lake. You can reach some areas by car, and others by canoe or floatplane.

The boreal forest is one of the world's last great wilderness areas, with amazing places such as Lake Nipigon, Wabakimi Provincial Park, Missinaibi River and the northern shore and islands of Lake Superior. It has breeding birds such as Sharp-tailed Grouse, Connecticut Warbler and Great Gray Owl.

We will be working with Ontario Parks, Parks Canada and northern tourist outfitters, including fishing camp operators, to help atlassers reach high priority squares throughout that area. River-and-lake-based canoe trips, car camping and lodges are among the options. For more information, contact the RC for the region in which you are interested, or go through the office ([atlas@birdsonario.org](mailto:atlas@birdsonario.org)).

### EARLY-BIRD DATA COLLECTION

Atlassing — the process of collecting data — can begin on January 1. It should be straightforward at that time because very few birds are nesting. Yet there are a few species for which you can legitimately report breeding evidence during January and February. We provide details of breeding codes and categories on the website, and will soon add "safe dates" for recording breeding evidence.

### POSSIBLE EARLY BREEDERS

Rock Pigeons are a unique case because atlassers can report breeding evidence at any time of year. For Atlas-2, Glenn Coady famously went out at 12:01 a.m. on January 1, 2001, to confirm the first breeding Rock Dove (it's name then). With the bird sitting on a nest under a bridge in Toronto, Glenn did this with a mirror on the top of an extendable window washer's pole. While we are not recommending that everyone does this, Glenn's enthusiasm demonstrates the excitement that atlassing can generate.

Bald Eagles can lay eggs as early as March 1 in southwestern Ontario. South of the Canadian Shield, breeding evidence is acceptable as early as February 15. Just be careful to avoid recording migrants.

Great Horned Owls call throughout the winter in southern Ontario, establishing and maintaining their territories and trying to attract mates. Singing birds can be reported as "S" — which is a category of "Possible Breeding." Birds singing from the same location over a week apart can be recorded as "T" — which is "Probable Breeding." Deeper-voiced males and higher-voiced females heard duetting can be recorded as "P" for pair — which is another category of "Probable Breeding."



Great Horned Owl nests have been found in southern Ontario as early as late January, so “Confirmed Breeding” is also feasible this early. Scanning hedgerows and woodlots for incubating adults sitting on stick nests in the canopies of deciduous trees is the easiest way to confirm breeding until the leaves come out in spring. In northern Ontario, start recording breeding evidence on March 1.

Eastern Screech-Owls start their courtship behaviour in late January. You can record breeding evidence any time in January or February.

Canada Jays start nest-building in February, so it is acceptable to report this species from mid-February onward.

With their breeding cycle tied to the abundance and maturation of cone crops, both Red and White-winged Crossbills occasionally nest in January in Ontario — although they tend to nest more frequently in late summer and early fall. If you have birds around in January, especially on the Canadian Shield, watch and listen closely. Singing birds can be recorded as “S” and “T” is quite feasible. Nests are hard to find, but it can be done, and stubby-tailed young incapable of sustained flight can be safely “Confirmed Breeding” using “FY” for “Fledged Young.”

There are other possibilities. Some migrants do come back early and commence

breeding activity, while a few resident species start their breeding behaviours before the end of February. Horned Larks are among the migrants. Some very early individuals sing on territory in late February. You have to be careful to avoid recording breeding evidence for migrants just passing through. But, if you have indications of “Probable Breeding (Pair or Territory)” — or if there is more substantial breeding evidence — it is acceptable to record it.

Some American Woodcock are back and singing in late February in the south. To be sure they are not migrants, it is best to wait until they have been singing for a week at the same location before recording “T” status.

Select pairs of Red-tailed Hawk also get together in late February, standing close together in trees at that time. You can safely record these birds as “P” for “Pair” — a category of “Probable Breeding.”

In the February issue of *OFO News*, we will describe more early-nesting birds and we will also provide details on the special owl surveys we are organizing for March and April.

*Mike Cadman is Coordinator, Ontario Breeding Bird Atlas. He co-edited the 1987 and 2007 publications, Atlas of the Breeding Birds of Ontario, which resulted from the Atlas-1 and Atlas-2 projects.*

**Great Horned Owls are among the early breeding species, with atlasers able to record “Possible Breeding” from January 1 and “Confirmed Breeding” as early as late January in southern Ontario. This bird is sitting on its nest. Photo by Jim Richards**



## President's Message

**SEPTEMBER AND OCTOBER** are busy months for the OFO Board of Directors. We have the excitement of fall migration; we prepare for the Annual General Meeting in September; then we choose our roles for the upcoming year and re-prioritize OFO's activities.

This year, we held the AGM via Zoom on September 28. More than 80 OFO members participated. Voting was by done by Zoom polls while discussions and questions were managed by chat and in-person comments. All in all, the AGM was quite successful, and I am grateful that OFO members were patient with my Zoom fumbling. This issue of *OFO News* includes a summary of the meeting for those of you who could not attend.

### FACING UNCERTAINTY

Obviously, given the continued impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, we all face a great deal of uncertainty about what we will be able to do next year. We have decided to plan field trips and in-person events, but expect to follow COVID-19 protocols for the foreseeable future. In addition, we intend to focus more on online events and are working on an exciting lineup of webinars so we can all learn more about our favourite subject: birds.

Other priorities for the Board include a commitment to diversity and inclusion, a continued emphasis on raising awareness about conservation issues in Ontario, and a focus on supporting birding and the birding community in northern Ontario.

Last but not least, OFO is one of five partner organizations sponsoring the third Ontario Breeding Bird Atlas. Many OFO members are involved in planning for the start of field work in 2021. Atlas-3 is a wonderful project, and the results will support conservation for years to come. We encourage every OFO member, no matter what your experience, to become an atlaser. Atlas coordinator Mike Cadman explains how you can volunteer in our cover story.

**Good birding,**  
*Lynne Freeman*