

# Colorado Bird Atlas Quarterly

News from the Colorado Breeding Bird Atlas II Project

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San Juan Institute of Natural and Cultural Resources - Fort Lewis College - Durango CO 81301 - 970-247-7245

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Male Hooded Mergansers displaying for female (C).  
Photo by Nancy Stocker.

## *Update from the Project Manager*

Well, this is it—the 5<sup>th</sup> and **final** year for Colorado Breeding Bird Atlas II (COBBAII)! We are entering the home stretch of the project, and I’m finally beginning to see the light at the end of the tunnel. As the days become warmer and longer, gaps in block coverage are slowly disappearing, and eager volunteers are selecting new blocks for the coming season. My plate already “runneth” over with blocks; and, although I’m a little concerned about how much I have committed to this year, I am excited for the atlas to begin. Bring on the birds!

With January, February and March in our rearview mirrors, now is the time for Atlas volunteers to check in with themselves and their commitment to their blocks. For the past 4 years it may have been easy to put off

atlas, because we knew we had plenty of time to finish our blocks. At this stage of the project, we don’t have that luxury anymore, and it is imperative that we fulfill our commitment and complete our blocks. With a project lasting 5 years, some of us may grow tired or lose interest, but with the end in sight, and the final products (i.e., new book, website database) to look forward to, it is my hope that all Atlas volunteers remember why they agreed to participate, and how important the information they collect is to Colorado’s bird populations. Thus, as we as a team enter our last breeding season together, take a moment to reflect on what it is you love so much about birding, and renew your dedication to the Atlas. Your time is well spent, and the importance of your contributions cannot be overstated.

Although I have reported on COBBAI progress in 2010 in prior newsletters, the Atlas Office continues to receive data that has not yet been entered in our database. To date, atlasers have completed 634 priority blocks, which leaves almost 1,200 blocks to finish in 2011 (Table 1, next page). Additionally, there are still over 500 unassigned blocks; although, this number has been shrinking weekly as the next breeding season draws near. Through the effort of volunteers and a few paid atlasers, it is clear we made tremendous progress in 2010 (Table 1). Notwithstanding, we still have a long way to go to complete the Atlas.



Juvenile Grasshopper Sparrow.  
Photo by Gregg Goodrich.

At this time, the largest gaps in block coverage remain in southeastern and northwestern Colorado (Fig.1, next page). Although these areas are relatively remote, they host some of the best birding opportunities that Colorado has to offer. Block coverage in the south-central mountains and the San Luis Valley is also relatively low, but with the help of paid atlasers, we hope to make great strides in these portions of the state in 2011. If you

plan to spend time in 2011 birding any of these “low coverage” areas (county listers, I am talking to you!), I strongly encourage you to adopt a block or two while you out there birding, and help move the Atlas closer to its completion.

### Technical Committee Update

Recently, COBBAI Technical Committee member Charlie Sharp moved from his position with the BLM, Uncompahgre Field Office, to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. Due to his heavy workload in his new position, Charlie has stepped down from his role on the COBBAI Logistics Sub-committee. Charlie was instrumental in procuring BLM funding for the Atlas, and contributed data to the Atlas from the Western Slope. His contributions to the Atlas are greatly appreciated, and we wish him well in his new position.



Eastern Screech-owl in cavity (ON).  
Photo by Cynthia Madsen.

As we gear up for our final field season, I wish you all a productive and enjoyable time atlasing, and I thank you all for your tremendous effort and enthusiasm!

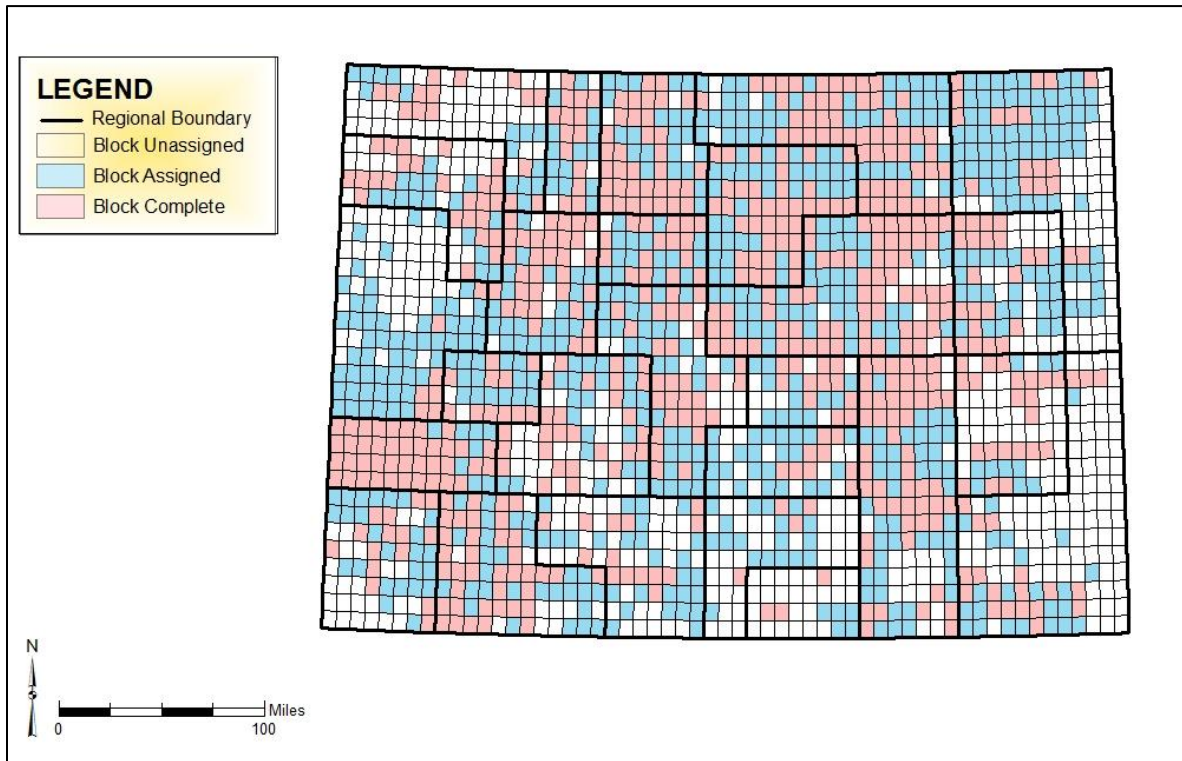
Good Birding!

Lynn Wickersham

**Table 1.** Comparison of COBBAII summary statistics, spring 2008–2011.

Summary Statistic	Spring 2008	Spring 2009	Spring 2010	Spring 2011
No. of Priority Blocks Assigned	638	818	943	1,298
No. of Blocks with Data <sup>a</sup>	485	1,003	1,482	2,175
No. of Priority Blocks Completed	8	108	305	634
No. of Block Effort Hours <sup>a</sup>	3,742	10,883	16,201	26,829
Total Auto Miles <sup>a</sup>	41,193	126,510	223,663	337,268
No. of Observations <sup>a</sup>	19,359	52,305	89,480	123,904
No. of Species Reported <sup>a</sup>	253	267	278	286
No. of Species Confirmed <sup>a</sup>	207	236	239	248

<sup>a</sup> Includes non-priority blocks.



**Figure 1.** COBBAII map of block assignments as of April 6, 2011.

## COBBAI Top Block

After the fourth year of the Atlas, the priority block reporting the highest number of species is:

### Nucla-SE

Block owners Coen Dexter and Brenda Wright eked into first place for species total for Nucla-SE, with a whopping 115 species, including 48 Possible, 30 Probable, and 37 Confirmed breeders. Among these data include such rare species as Snowy Egret, Sandhill Crane, White-winged Dove, Yellow-billed Cuckoo, Black Phoebe, and Rose-breasted Grosbeak. Fantastic job you two!

	Number of Species			
	PO	PR	CO	Total
<b>COBBAI</b>	26	5	24	55
<b>COBBAI</b>	48	30	37	115



Sandhill Cranes in the Nucla-SE block in 2009.  
Photo by Brenda Wright.

Taking the second place spot is...

### Castle Rock North-SE

Hugh and Urling Kingery continue to add data to this block, far exceeding the number of species from the first Atlas. To date, they have reported 110 species, including 21 Possible, 23 Probable, and 66 Confirmed. Fantastic effort, Kingerys!

	Number of Species			
	PO	PR	CO	Total
<b>COBBAI</b>	25	29	21	75
<b>COBBAI</b>	21	23	66	110

And, coming in third place is....

### Boulder- SE

Steve Jones and local birders are neck and neck with the first Atlas for the Boulder-SE block, reporting 101 species, including 37 Possible, 19 Probable, and 45 Confirmed species. Great work all!

	Number of Species			
	PO	PR	CO	Total
<b>COBBAI</b>	23	21	57	101
<b>COBBAI</b>	37	19	45	101

## *Finding Magic in the Mountains*

*By Mary Harris*

*Roaring Fork Audubon Society*

A great yogi once said that if you stand still and wait, a bird will land on your head. Well, that's not exactly how it happens, but last summer I discovered it does come close.

It began when Tom McConnell "volunteered" me to work on the Colorado Breeding Bird Atlas,

I was given two blocks, each 3 miles square. I was nervous to start because I had never done anything like this. I am an amateur birder, and although I have hiked many miles in Colorado, I have encountered relatively few nests. The trepidation worsened in mid-May, a few nights before I was to begin. I read the last surveyor's report, done 20 years ago. It was filled with breeding confirmations of Cooper's and Sharp-shinned Hawk, American Kestrel, Common Nighthawk, Swainson's Thrush, Yellow-rumped Warbler, Black-throated Gray Warbler, Band-tailed Pigeon, Great Horned Owl, Black-chinned and Broad-tailed Hummingbird, Dusky Grouse, and at least 55 more species! My data would be the first record since the early 1990's, and the results would reflect the "health" of a large population of birds. I thought about how much the Roaring Fork Valley had changed over the past 20 years and how significant this survey could be. What if my results showed a large decline in nesting birds just because I couldn't find them? I felt doomed to failure, but I was already committed so decided to at least try my best.

Part of the commitment was to rise at 5:00 a.m. and head out ASAP to catch the morning activity. While I can't recommend



hiking alone to others, I found that the birds weren't intimidated by a lone observer. They were often so overwhelmed by the morning feeding frenzy that they paid no attention to the quiet lady with large binoculars pressed firmly against her face. And that's when the magic began!

I became part of a secret world that I have only seen on Planet Earth DVD's. Birds that had recently flown from as far away as Argentina were right in front of me working on nests, frantically feeding babies, with males putting on great sexual displays for the females and rival males. A handsome Dusky Grouse put on a very sexy display inflating his bright red air sacs, raising his electric yellow eyebrows while shaking and moaning. (*I was sure it was just for me*).

The thrill of discovering nests quickly became addicting. Over the course of 6 weeks I found over 25 nests, another 23 species of parents frantically feeding their newly fledged, and multiple males singing and defending territories.

Of course when you're quiet, watching for birds you reap other rewards as well. I enjoyed watching a Black Bear eating Twin Berries, marveled at eagles and hawks in aerial fights, found a gorgeous Bushtit nest

## *Finding Magic, cont.*

carefully decorated with lichen, and with goshawk research student Grant Frank, Chalese Carson and I tracked down an incredible Northern Goshawk nest with juvenile, and saw the male deliver food to the female in a dramatic mid-air collision. With Phil Nyland from the Forest Service we found an entire intact mountain lion skull, and endemic penstemon.



Bushtit on nest (ON). Photo by Justin Crom.



Northern Goshawk nest with young (NY).  
Photo by Linda Vidal.

May's fear of failure melted away and was replaced by a realization of how lucky I was to have witnessed the summer's breeding activity at such close range; all just by being persistent and present. I missed my blocks when I needed to tend to real life, and would wonder what *my* birds were doing.

Breeding season will be here before long with new magic and marvels. Grab a friend and get out to witness what we have right in our own back yards.

It is very rewarding to know that you are helping with an important and needed conservation tool that can eventually aid with the protection of Colorado's breeding birds. I know there are some blocks still available if you are the kind of person that has knowledge of birds and wildlife, enjoys the outdoor life, and have time to donate to this project.

## Species Profile: Canada Goose

By Catherine Ortega

Many people appear to have mixed feelings about Canada Geese (*Branta canadensis*), from enjoying them on their tables (286,000 Google results for Recipes + Canada Goose), to the heart warming, joyful experience of watching and listening to flocks flying in their characteristic V shapes (often thought of as a harbinger of changing seasons), to disdain for the nuisance they cause on golf courses as well as in parks and other urban/suburban settings. In addition to all the recipes on the internet, I found over 3 million hits for Canada Geese and management of golf courses, which points out the enormity of the more negative emotions that people feel about geese.

The conflict on golf courses and parks occurs for the simple reason that humans and geese like the same habitat, but for different purposes. Humans like grass to play, romp, and walk on, whereas Canada Geese depend heavily on grasses for forage, especially during the same times when we use this habitat most frequently – during spring and summer. Canada Geese do eat other foods, such as sedges, aquatic plants, seeds, agricultural grains, berries, and other plant materials that vary geographically, but many of these other foods are also associated with human activities. Golf courses and parks have additional characteristics mutually appreciated by both humans and geese: open areas and water features. So when we “build it,” they come.

These wide-scale landscape alterations have resulted in changes in the distribution and abundance of Canada Goose populations as well as changes in migration patterns. The



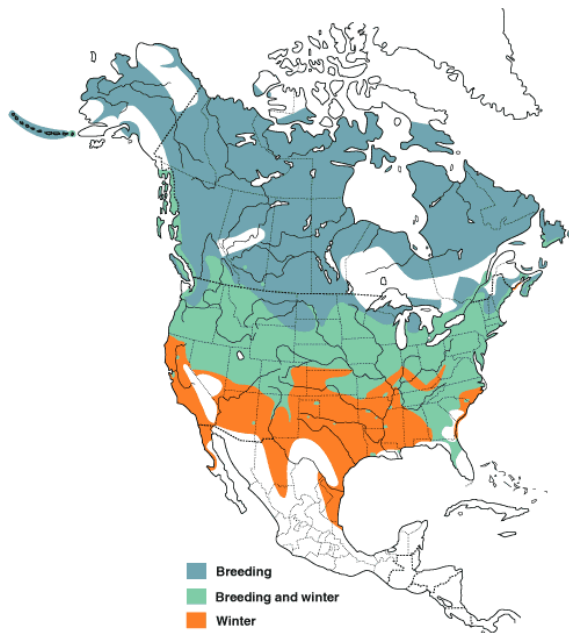
Urban/suburban and park-like settings, especially open areas with water features, attract large numbers of Canada Geese. Photo by Catherine Ortega.

species occurs throughout much of North America (Fig. 1), but the Breeding Bird Survey suggests a significant increase throughout the U.S. (Fig. 2, Table 1).

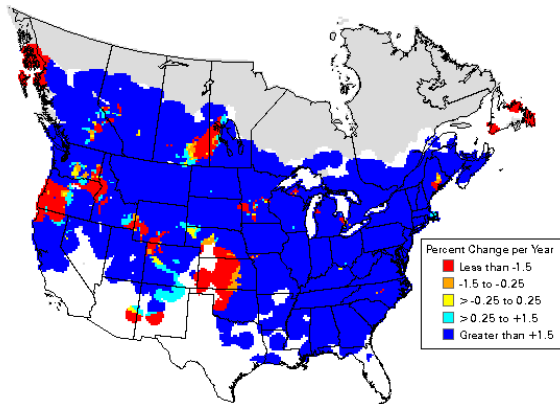
Colorado is the only state showing a negative population trend from 1966-2007 (total years of currently available data), but the data for Colorado also have important deficiencies (very low abundance, small sample size, or imprecise data). However, several states show a more recent (1980-2007) negative trend: Alaska, Colorado, Connecticut, Massachusetts, Mississippi, and Nebraska; the trend only for Mississippi is significant.

It may seem surprising that Colorado shows a declining trend because geese seem so common. However, the large concentrations of Canada Geese that we observe in Colorado come primarily from migrant populations that spend fall and winter here. In fact, during the same years of the Breeding Bird Survey (1966-2007), the Christmas Bird Count data suggest an overall positive trend during winter (Fig. 3).

*Species Profile, cont.*



**Figure 1.** Distribution of Canada Goose in North America (Mowbray et al. 2002).

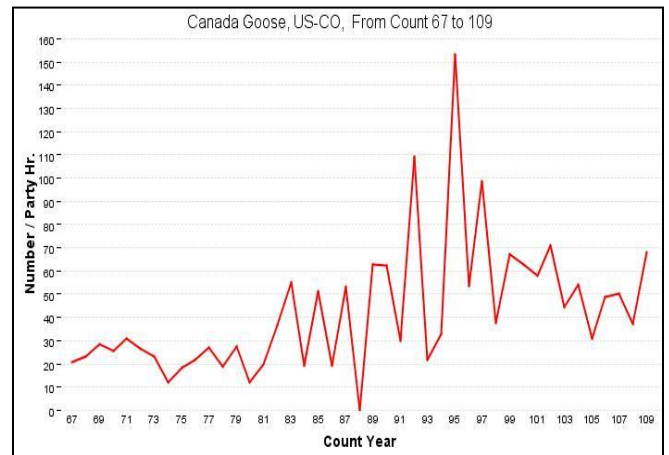


**Figure 2.** Breeding bird population trends of Canada Goose (Sauer et al. 2008).

**Table 1.** Trends of breeding Canada Goose populations nationwide and in Colorado (Sauer et al. 2008).

Location/Years	Trend	P-value
<u>United States</u>		
1966–2007	+ 6.9	0.00
1966–1979	+13.3	0.00
1980–2007	+5.5	0.00
1997–2007	+2.7	0.03
<u>Colorado</u>		
1966–2007	- 0.5	0.81
1966–1979	a	a
1980–2007	- 1.0	0.72
1997–2007	- 6.9	0.14

<sup>a</sup> No data.



**Figure 3.** Population trend for Canada Goose during Audubon Society Christmas Bird Counts, 1966–2007.

## Species Profile, cont.

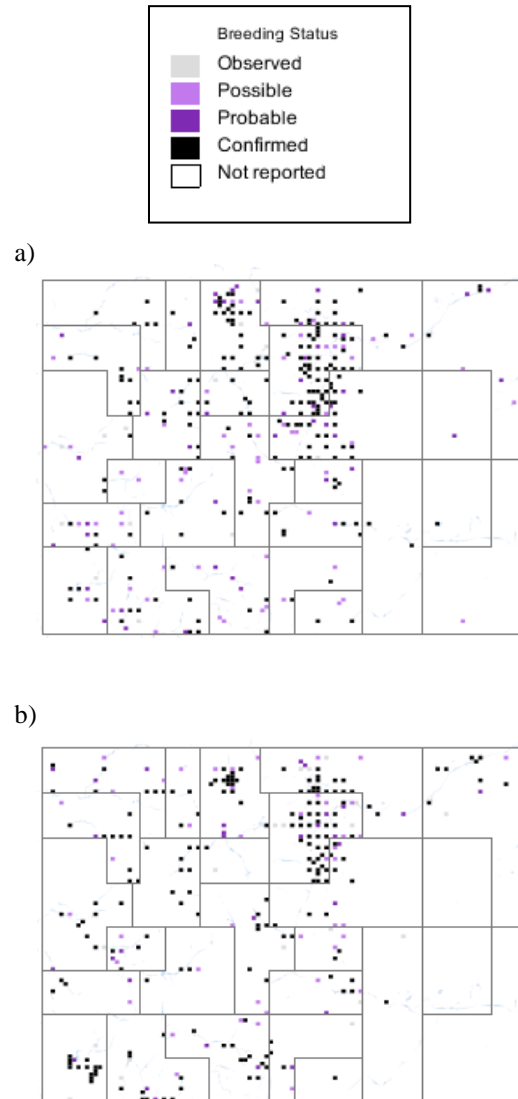
The 45th Supplement to the American Ornithologists' Union Checklist of North American Birds recognizes a split of the smaller Cackling Goose (*Branta hutchinsii* and its four subspecies) from Canada Goose (with seven subspecies, Mowbray et al. 2002), but the historical population trend data are lumped together. The Pacific Flyway Council has expressed concern that Cackling Goose populations have declined since the 1960s, which is reflected in the more recent negative trend in Alaska.

Canada Geese generally do not begin breeding until their second or third year, and peak production occurs in the fourth and fifth years. Therefore, pairs observed without goslings have not necessarily lost their young to predators or other causes; they could simply be younger birds. Clutch size typically varies from 2–8 eggs (mean = 5), and they do not raise more than one brood per year. Bellrose (1980) attributes more than 8 eggs or goslings to intraspecific brood parasitism (females laying eggs in another individual's nest).



More than 8 eggs or goslings per pair of Canada Geese might be attributed to intraspecific parasitism. Photo by Brenda Wright.

Data from both Atlas I and Atlas II show a concentration on the northern portion of the Front Range (Fig. 4), which may reflect not only more concentrated atlas effort but also abundance of urban/suburban habitat.



**Figure 4.** Breeding evidence for Canada Goose during (a) COBBAI (1987–1995) and (b) COBBAI (2007–2010).

## Species Profile, cont.



Canada Geese vary in their choice of nest sites but sometimes select woodpiles, such as this one next to the Mancos River in southwest Colorado. Photo by Catherine Ortega.

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Great Horned Owl nest with owlets (NY).  
Photo by David Moulton.

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Happy volunteers enjoying a break from their hard work in the Comanche National Grasslands. Photo by Linda Andes-Georges.