

Colorado Bird Atlas Quarterly

News from the Colorado Breeding Bird Atlas II Project

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Female American Kestrel exhibiting distraction display (DD). Photo by Tony Leukering.

COBBAII Progress: Season 5

Dear Colorado Breeding Bird Atlas II (COBBAII) volunteers and friends:

Well, the migrants took their merry time arriving in Colorado this spring, and breeding activities seemed a bit sluggish; however, it's finally beginning to feel a lot like the atlas season! This spring brought some much welcomed moisture in the mountains, which may well provide for high productivity for montane and alpine species this season. That is, if the snows actually melts! I've been told by U.S. Forest Service biologists and atlasers alike, that the unusually high snowpack in the northern mountains has resulted in a delay in opening

many forest roads. With that much snow still on the ground, it will be interesting to see what happens to those high-country birds. Will they simply delay the onset of breeding, or will they move on to alternate breeding territories where snowpack isn't covering the vegetation needed for nesting. On the opposite end of the spectrum, southeastern Colorado has experienced one of the worst droughts in recent memory, resulting in several fires, fewer grassland birds, and consequently less than spectacular atlas data. Right now, the best atlas action seems to be in the shrublands and woodlands of the mid-elevations, for which confirmations abound!

COBBAIL Progress, cont.

With the 5th and last “official” atlas upon us, and a large number of blocks still untouched, the Atlas Technical Committee has reached a few decisions about the strategy to successfully complete the project.

Elimination of Kansas Border Blocks

The Colorado-Kansas border spans the length of 32 priority blocks; however, less than one-third of each block actually occurs in Colorado. It is unlikely that data from these blocks will add significantly to the Atlas dataset; thus, the Technical Committee agreed to eliminate these border blocks from COBBAIL. The resulting target number of priority blocks has therefore been reduced from 1,824 to 1,792, a difference of less than 2%. While examining the importance of the Kansas border blocks, the Technical Committee also discussed whether or not to remove other border blocks. Priority blocks along the northern (Wyoming/Nebraska) and southern (New Mexico) borders of Colorado are entirely within the state, and will not be omitted from the dataset. The Colorado-Utah border blocks, however, are also partially located outside of Colorado. Greater than two-thirds, and often greater than three-fourths of these blocks occur in Colorado; thus, these will also be retained for the Atlas.

Extension of the Atlas to 2012

Like most atlases, COBBAIL was designed as a 5-year field effort. However, those of you that were involved in the first Atlas remember, the effort required several additional years to complete. While 5 years may seem like a long time, these past 5 years seem to have flown by with lightening speed. As much as I (and many of you) would like closure on Atlas fieldwork this year, it has become more and more apparent

that additional effort will be required. After numerous discussions with the Atlas Technical Committee, I anticipate there will be one final season in 2012 to complete the Atlas. The 2012 season will focus on collecting as much data as possible in untouched blocks, as well as allowing volunteers to put the finishing touches on any blocks that may still be incomplete. I strongly urge each and every one of you to work diligently to complete your blocks this season, so we may begin preliminary analyses and move forward with production of the publication and website database.

Progress of COBBAIL – Year 5

Although there is still much to be accomplished, progress on the Atlas this season is very encouraging. Across the state, volunteers are working diligently to complete their blocks. During the past month, I have received an overwhelming number of alerts for rare species observations, while data for the more common species has poured into the database. At this time, the number of assigned blocks has increased by almost 40% since this time last year, and the number of completed blocks has doubled (Table 1, next page). With a slightly lower target number of blocks, that equates to approximately 83% blocks assigned and 41% blocks completed. These impressive increases are partially attributed to the paid atlas effort this season in the Plains regions (see “Plains Blockbusting”, page 15). While paid atlasers made tremendous progress in the Plains regions, there are still many unassigned blocks in extreme eastern Colorado, and the northwest and south-central portions of the state (Figure 1, next page). While much of these blocks occur on private lands, I hope we are able to cover as much of these areas as possible in 2011 and 2012.

Table 1. Comparison of COBBAII summary statistics between June of 2010 and 2011.

Summary Statistic	June 2010	June 2011	% Change
No. Blocks Assigned	1,063	1,481	+39%
No. Blocks with Data ^a	1,746	2,525	+45%
No. Blocks Complete	362	727	+101%
No. Block Effort Hours ^a	18,549	30,060	+62%
Total Auto Miles ^a	269,825	387,199	+44%
No. Data Submissions ^a	102,100	139,712	+37%
No. Species Reported ^a	285	288	+<1%
No. Species Confirmed ^a	245	250	+2%

^a Includes non-priority blocks.

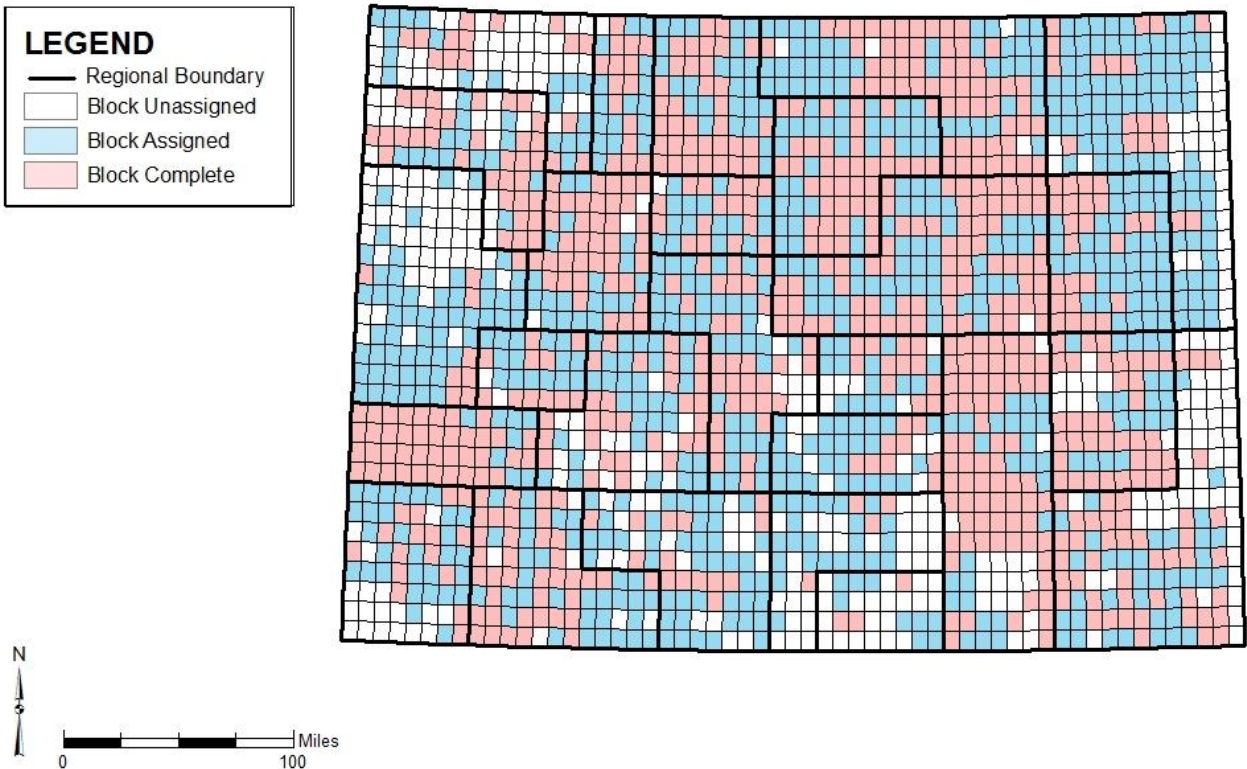


Figure 1. Map of block assignments and completion for the Colorado Breeding Bird Atlas II Project, 2007–2011.

COBBAII Progress, cont.

As a reminder to all volunteers, please attempt to enter your field data in a timely manner, and submit your daily field cards to the Atlas Office at the end of the season. Timely data entry is essential to tracking the progress of the Atlas and is greatly appreciated. The address for mailing your field cards is:

Lynn Wickersham
San Juan Institute of Natural
and Cultural Resources
Fort Lewis College
Durango, CO 81301

With July upon us, I encourage you to utilize your time wisely to boost confirmations in your blocks, and bring as many blocks to completion as possible. July is a wonderful time to find nests with young or observed adults carrying food, new fledglings, and family groups. This is my favorite time to atlas, as I never know what I'm going to experience. As I head back into the field to work my blocks, I'd like to once again express my sincere thanks to COBBAII volunteers, helpers, paid atlasers, Regional Coordinators, and members of the Technical Committee for all of your hard work and dedication to COBBAII. Because of you the Atlas is successful!

Good birding,



Lynn Wickersham
COBBA II Project Manager



Yellow-billed Cuckoo on nest (ON).
Photo by Marilyn Rhodes.



Adult Chukar with fledgling (FL).
Photo by Bill Kaempfer.



Green Heron on nest (ON).
Photo by Pearle Sandstrom-Smith.

COBBAI Data Per Region

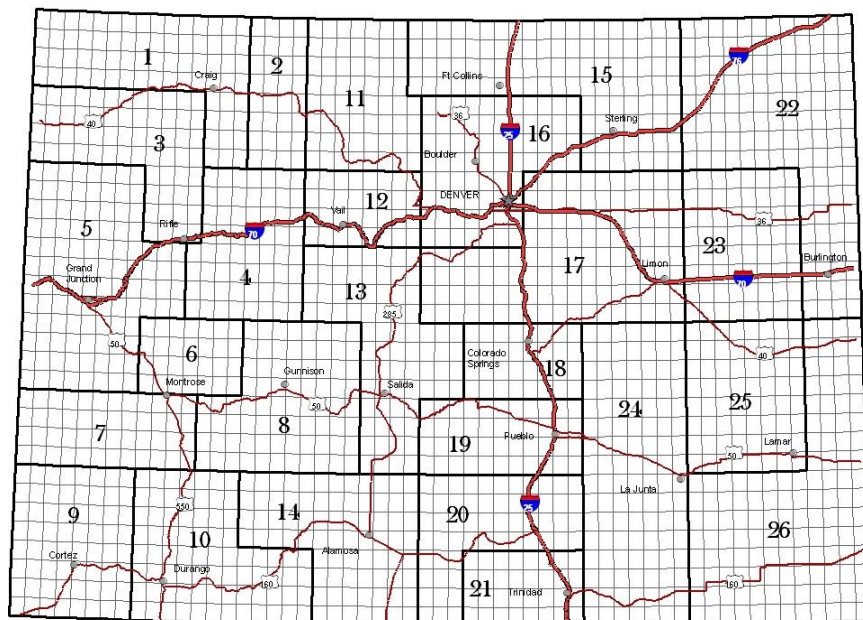
Atlas data per region are shown in Table 1 (next page). To date, thanks to the efforts of Regional Coordinators Coen Dexter, Jim Liewer, and Hugh Kingery, 100% of priority blocks are assigned in the following regions:

- Region 7 (Montrose, Naturita)
- Region 11 (Granby, Walden)
- Region 23 (Seibert, Stratton)

Region 7 leads the pack with the highest percentage of completed priority blocks (83%), again thanks to the excellent leadership of Regional Coordinator Coen Dexter (Fig. 1, page 7). Region 16 (Denver, Boulder), led by Regional Coordinator Steve Jones, is holding strong as the leader for the highest number of species reported (213) and confirmed (174). Region 2 (Steamboat Springs) continues to dominate the highest percentage of species confirmed (84%) largely as a result of the hard work by Regional Coordinator Allison Hilf. Keep up the good work everyone!



Yellow Warbler nest.
Photo by Dave Leatherman.



COBBAI
Region Map

COBBAII Data Per Region, cont.

Region	No. Priority Blocks	No. Blocks Assigned	No. Blocks Completed	No. Species Recorded*	No. Species Confirmed*	% Species Confirmed
1	72	34	15	163	115	71%
2	32	31	15	152	127	84%
3	64	47	33	172	138	80%
4	60	56	38	167	132	79%
5	108	67	11	185	136	74%
6	28	26	11	179	114	64%
7	48	48	40	176	136	77%
8	76	59	29	153	109	71%
9	64	46	16	163	126	77%
10	76	70	40	176	141	80%
11	60	60	35	174	142	82%
12	32	31	16	132	109	83%
13	76	72	31	182	138	76%
14	76	58	14	176	123	70%
15	104	99	57	201	138	69%
16	72	71	39	213	174	82%
17	116	114	68	197	161	82%
18	32	26	12	178	131	74%
19	44	35	9	195	142	73%
20	56	27	4	172	100	58%
21	32	12	3	142	66	46%
22	112	97	18	143	81	57%
23	64	64	24	89	52	58%
24	112	95	69	179	106	59%
25	64	55	36	135	75	56%
26	112	81	44	149	88	59%
ALL	1,792	1,481	727	288	250	87%

Table 1. Summary of COBBAII data per region.

Summary of COBBAIL Data Per Region, cont.

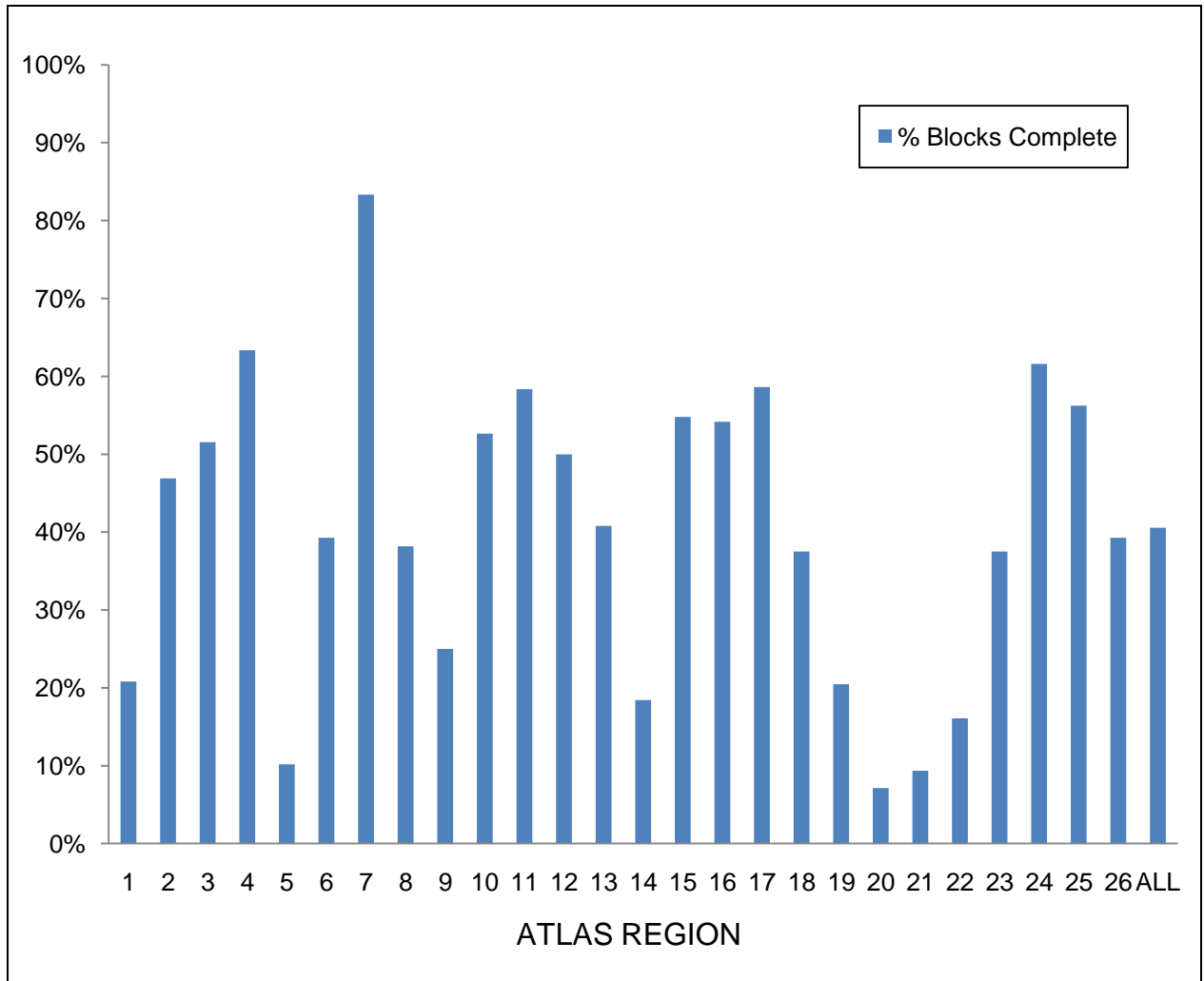


Figure 1. Percentage of block completion per region, Colorado Breeding Bird Atlas II, June 2011.

Volunteer All Stars Update

by Lynn Wickersham

With the last official Atlas season underway, many volunteers are stepping it up a notch to insure the successful completion of the project. While many of the Atlas's most productive volunteers are also taking on some paid blocks in the Plains regions or in the high country, each is still competitive in the volunteer all star race. At the mid-point of COBBAII Season 5, the top spot for the number of *volunteer* atlas blocks assigned once again goes to...

Doug Kibbe

Doug has increased his load of volunteer blocks from 59, at this time last year, to an astounding 87. In addition to these volunteer blocks, Doug will also be working a few high elevation blocks as a paid atlaser in 2011, helping to complete the effort in Atlas Region 15 (Fort Collins).



Northern Rough-winged Swallow fledglings (FL). Photo by Sherman Wing.

Here's how the rest of the Volunteer All Stars measure up so far in Season 4:

Volunteers with >50 blocks

- Hugh and Urling Kingery
- Coen Dexter and Brenda Wright*

Volunteers with 31-40 blocks

- John Drummond*
- Kim Potter

Volunteers with 21-30 blocks

- Chuck Hundertmark
- Mackenzie Goldthwait
- Randy Siebert*
- George Steele and Kathey Graaff*

Volunteers with 11-20 blocks

- Susan Allerton*
- Alex Brown
- Barbara Byron
- Jeff Dawson
- Ken Ecton
- Gregg Goodrich
- Mike Henwood
- Allison Hilf
- Steve Jones
- Jim Liewer
- Tom and Kay McConnell
- Duane Nelson*
- Paul Opler and Evi Buckner-Opler
- Terry Rau*

* Paid atlaser; paid blocks removed from analysis.

Volunteer All Stars Update, cont.

Volunteers with 5–10 blocks

- Arden Anderson
- Audubon Society of Greater Denver
- Brad Andres
- Debbie Barnes*
- Jason Beason
- Jim Beatty
- Robert Bradley
- Dan Bridges
- Lori Brummer*
- Francis Commercon
- Joyce Commercon
- Jacob Cooper
- Bill* and Cheryl Day
- Peter Derven
- David Elwonger
- Donna Emmons
- Roger Grimshaw
- David Hallock
- Dona Hilkey*
- Ed Hollowed
- Brian Holmes
- Marjorie Joy
- Ron Lambeth
- Randy Lentz
- Diane Luck
- Gary Matthews
- Ellery McClintock
- Brock McCormick
- Jeannie Mitchell
- Naseem Munshi and Mike Tupper
- North Park ColonyWatch Team
- Colleen Nunn
- Thomas Parchman
- Roberta Peterson
- John Rawinski



Warbling Vireo pair building nest (NB).
Photo by Sherman Wing.

- Chuck Reichert
- Joe Roller
- Linda Vidal
- Karen von Saltza
- Amy Seglund
- Lynn Wickersham*
- Marty Wolf*
- Mark Yaeger
- Yampa Valley Bird Club



Long-billed Curlew fledgling (FL).
Photo by Dave Leatherman.

* Paid atlaser; paid blocks removed from analysis.

Volunteer All Stars, cont.

Top 10 Volunteer Effort Hours

1. Coen Dexter & Brenda Wright*	2,598
2. Chuck Hundertmark	1,339
3. Hugh & Urling Kingery	1,297
4. Kim Potter	1,154
5. Terry Rau*	1,124
6. Doug Kibbe*	1,059
7. Jeff Dawson	873
8. Steve Jones	797
9. George Steele & Kathey Graaff*	738
10. Ken Ecton	663



Cassin's Sparrow display (C).
Photo by Tony Leukering.

Top 10 Volunteer Data Submissions

1. Hugh & Urling Kingery	6,904
2. Coen Dexter & Brenda Wright*	5,417
3. Chuck Hundertmark	4,407
4. Mike Henwood	3,940
5. Doug Kibbe*	3,787
6. Kim Potter	3,760
7. Paul Opler & Evi Buckner-Opler*	3,677
8. Tony Leukering*	3,510
9. John Drummond*	2,572
10. George Steele & Kathey Graaff*	2,412



Lazuli Bunting. Photo by Gregg Goodrich.

Top 10 Volunteer No. Species Reported

1. Tony Leukering*	224
2. Doug Kibbe*	216
3. Mackenzie Goldthwait	210
4. Hugh & Urling Kingery	206
5. Chuck Hundertmark	192
6. John Drummond*	191
7. Coen Dexter & Brenda Wright*	185
8. Steve Jones	182
9. Jeff Dawson	181
10. Kim Potter	172



Pine Siskins at bird bath. Photo by Brenda Wright.

*Paid atlaser; paid block effort hours removed from analysis.

Species Profile: Brown-headed Cowbird

By Lynn Wickersham

The Brown-headed Cowbird (*Molothrus ater*) is North America's most widely recognized brood parasite and elicits mixed feelings from birders and biologists alike. It is the quintessential "bad egg" (pun intended), imposing its chick rearing responsibilities on unsuspecting "host" birds, usually to their detriment. I have personally heard birders refer to this species in a negative light, with such phrases as "darn those cowbirds", "those lazy cowbirds", and "cowbirds...yuck". I have even been asked, on occasion, if it is acceptable to remove Brown-headed Cowbird eggs from a nest to protect the host species. I'll get back to this point later, but for now it is important to recognize, whatever your personal opinion is about cowbirds, they are a native species with an extraordinary evolutionary strategy.

Brown-headed Cowbirds breed throughout the continental U.S., northern Mexico, and southern Canada, and are year-round residents throughout most of the eastern and southern U.S., and the west coast (Fig. 1). Historically, however, this species occurred only in open grassland habitats in central North America, where they presumably followed buffalo herds (Lowther 1993); however, the species expanded their range following European settlement, which opened up forested and other wooded habitats to agriculture and urbanization (Mayfield 1965). Their expansion ultimately exposed a suite of new bird species to the perils of brood parasitism.



Photo 1. Brown-headed Cowbird (front) and Chipping Sparrow nestlings. Photo by Catherine Ortega.



Figure 1. Distribution of the Brown-headed Cowbird. From Lowther (1993).

Species Profile, cont.

Brown-headed Cowbirds prefer open habitats, such as grasslands, pastures, and agricultural areas, but also occur in relatively open woodlands, orchards, and residential areas. Cowbirds may frequent edge habitats, where they may take advantage of a wider array of host species (Lowther 1993). Atlas distribution maps for Brown-headed Cowbird leave little doubt as to the extensiveness of their population in Colorado (Fig. 2). Further, Atlas II data suggest cowbirds appear to occupy almost every habitat available in the state.

Some Brown-headed Cowbird populations exhibit monogamous pair bonds (Yokel 1986) while others are promiscuous (Elliott 1980). Thus, the use of the breeding code “P” (Pair) may not be appropriate and is discouraged for the Atlas. If male-female pairs are observed during atlasing, it is important to look for courtship behavior (C), such as bowing and copulation.

As a brood parasite, the Brown-headed Cowbird does not construct its own nest, but rather lays its eggs in the nests of other species. Female cowbirds locate host nests by watching birds from perches, walking on the ground, or making short, noisy flights to flush birds from their nests (Norman and Robertson 1975). Once a nest with eggs is located, the female cowbird usually removes one of the host eggs before laying an egg of her own. After eggs are laid, cowbirds provide no parental care, leaving the task to the host parents. Brown-headed Cowbird eggs may hatch in as few as 10 days (Ehrlich et al. 1988), generally faster than most host young. Subsequently, cowbird young usually have an advantage over host young because of their early hatch date and

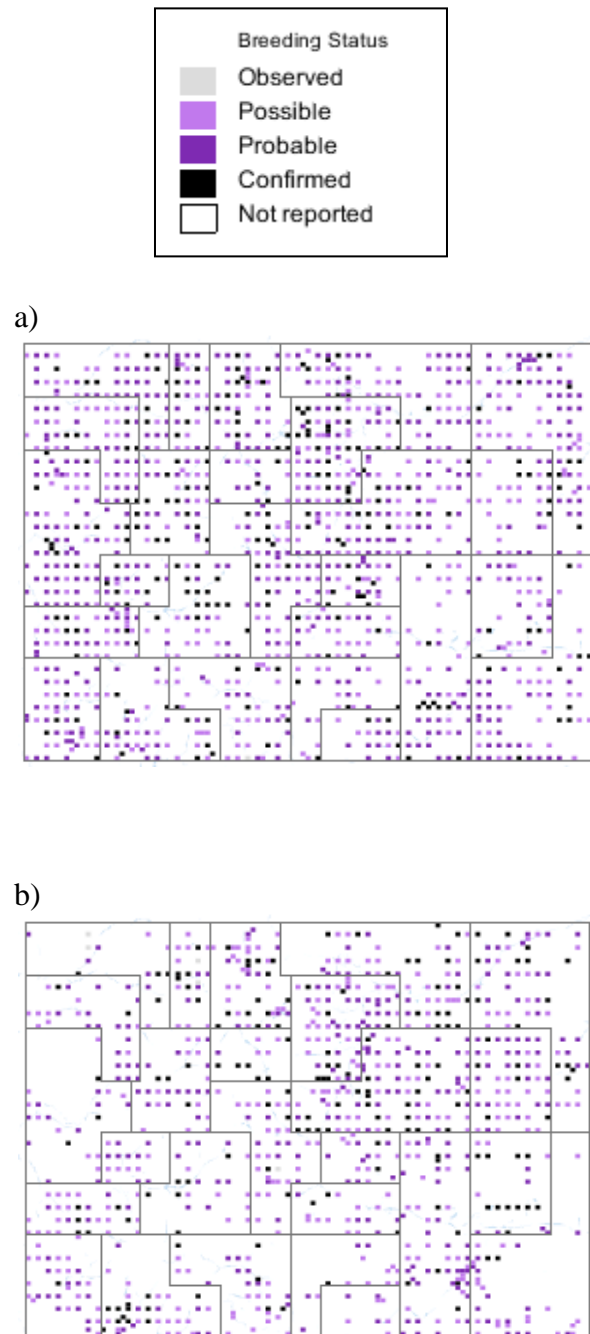


Figure 2. Breeding evidence and distribution for Brown-headed Cowbird during a) COBBAI and b) COBBAIL.

Species Profile, cont.

larger size. Female cowbirds may lay as many as 40 eggs per season (Lowther 1993).

Brown-headed Cowbirds take advantage of a variety of host species, from flycatchers, vireos, and warblers, to sparrow, towhees, and blackbirds. Cowbird eggs are similar in size, shape, color, and markings to some host species (Photo 3), but noticeably different than others (Photos 4–7). Relatively few host species are known to eject cowbird eggs from their nests; and, most host parents appear to happily raise cowbird young as their own. Which brings us back to the question... is acceptable to remove a cowbird egg from a nest?

As a native species, the Brown-headed Cowbird is protected under the Migratory Bird Treaty Act (MBTA), which prohibits the “take” of migratory birds, their eggs, feathers or nests. Under MBTA, “take” includes killing, possessing or transporting any migratory bird, nest, or egg. Therefore, it is illegal to remove Brown-headed Cowbird eggs from any nest, unless issued a special permit by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. While such permits have been issued to biologists to protect threatened and endangered species from reaching critically low numbers, they are not appropriate for the average birder. As an Atlas volunteer, finding a nest with cowbird eggs provides two species confirmations at the same time and should be recorded as “Nest with Eggs” (NE) for both the host species and the cowbird. If confronted with this situation, consider yourself fortunate to have witnessed first-hand the amazingly successful breeding strategy of one of North America’s native birds.



Photo 3. Spotted Towhee nest with two host and two cowbird eggs (back). Photo by Catherine Ortega.



Photo 4. Chipping Sparrow nest with one cowbird egg (back) and three host eggs. Photo by Catherine Ortega.



Photo 5. Yellow Warbler nest with one cowbird (right) and two host eggs. Photo by Catherine Ortega.

Species Profile, cont.



Photo 4. Brewer's Blackbird nest with four host and one cowbird egg (back right). Photo by Lynn Wickersham.



Photo 7. Plumbeous Vireo nest with two cowbird eggs (far left) and four host eggs. Photo by Catherine Ortega.

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Plains Blockbusting

By Lynn Wickersham

In 2011, the Atlas Office received supplemental funding from a variety of sources, to conduct atlas surveys in the Plains regions. The majority of funding came from the Colorado Division of Wildlife, with the sole purpose of collecting atlas data in the Plains regions, including Regions 17, 22, 23, 24, 25, and 26 (refer to map on page 5). Funding to complete atlas blocks on the Comanche National Grasslands was also provided by the USDA Forest Service. In addition, the Atlas was a recipient of this year's Audubon Society of Greater Denver's Lois Webster Fund, with the intention of funding Plains atlasing. Finally, the Atlas Office also received donations this spring from the Bill Barrett Corporation, Exxon Mobil (Star Grant Program), and several individual donors. These funding sources were utilized in May and June of this year, in "blockbusting" fashion, to collect data in as many Plains region priority blocks as possible. I am happy to report that paid atlasers worked **172 Plains blocks** in 2011, putting a very noticeable dent in the previous data gaps in that portion of the state. The number of blocks worked per region was as follows:

Region 17 = 4
Region 22 = 41
Region 23 = 14
Region 24 = 34
Region 25 = 32
Region 26 = 47

Special thanks to all paid Plains atlasers for a difficult job well done!



Piping Plover incubating eggs (NE).
Photo by Duane Nelson.

2011 Paid Plains Atlasers

Debbie Barnes – 6 blocks

Coen Dexter and Brenda Wright – 34 blocks

John Drummond – 11 blocks

Tony Leukering – 19 blocks

Duane Nelson – 11 blocks

Peter Nelson – 10 blocks

Paul Opler and Evi Buckner-Opler – 20 blocks

Stan Oswald – 5 blocks

Brandon Percival – 12 blocks

Randy Siebert – 17 blocks

Marcel and Joel Such – 17 blocks

Joyce Takamine – 7 blocks

Lynn Wickersham – 3 blocks