

Fun and Science in One Project by Philip Krajewski

The phrase “document all the breeding birds in a specific area,” can create a feeling of intimidation, followed by a desire to develop easier outdoor pursuits. I met Elwood Moore in 1976, when he was 90 years old. When he said those words to me, he struck fear into the avian psyche of this novice birder. His stories of systematically gridding parts of southeastern Pennsylvania to compile lists of nesting birds seemed like a daunting, almost impossible, task. To Elwood in the early 1930’s, before the first Peterson field guide and efficient binoculars, it was merely having fun in the woods. Local birding groups would periodically try to increase the list of known breeders by finding and adding ones that previously had gone unnoticed or extended their range.

Elwood’s own love of birds started with a dream and a journey. In 1902 he began a decade of logging his way across the country and ended up in the Pacific Northwest in 1912. While felling the ancient fir and spruce, he used to help the cook by snaring spruce grouse to supplement the dinner menu. One night a very vivid dream of this accommodating bird conversing with him about the value of its life and the loss of its forest home awoke him suddenly. This nighttime encounter produced a lifelong separation with reality, and he could never shake the feeling that he was a bird dreaming he was a human being. He stopped logging shortly thereafter and spent the next two years mostly walking back to the east coast, birding as he went.

Elwood returned to Pennsylvania and began working on the family farm, but logging had left an indelible mark. He was the only person I have ever known who could identify all of the native northeastern trees by smell. “When you turn the innards inside out of as many trees as I have, the smell stays with you forever.”

Elwood had a few easy years birding with compact guides and ‘long eyes’ before his sight and hearing waned and left him watching the big shapes in the sky. Before he died in early April 1980, the Canada goose had become his favorite bird while warblers now only danced in his memory. Winter did not claim this notable outdoorsman, but, as he had predicted to me, that shot of vernal enthusiasm finally did him in.

In 1983, the first official Pennsylvania Breeding Bird Atlas (PBBA) project was launched and I sprang outside, eager to “document all the breeding birds in a specific area.” I personally dedicated my participation to the friendship I had with Elwood and looked at my involvement as having fun while being accurate and honest.

My initial anxieties were lessened when I realized that I didn’t have to climb high into a sugar maple, shimmy out onto a branch, and count the number of eggs in the nest of a Baltimore oriole. And, I did not have to scrutinize the rest of the tree for more nesting activity, then go on to the next tree and perform the same cumbersome analysis *ad infinitum*. I could stay on the ground and maybe see the Baltimore oriole gather nesting material in its beak and fly off. I could then write down NB for nest building, and add this colorful bird to my list of breeders. If I only saw it moving high in a tree after its safe post-migratory date of June 1, I could write down P as a possible breeder.

Some breeding birds are discovered by accident. One morning, I walked through a patch of interrupted and bracken ferns and caused an ovenbird a heightened amount of distress. Obviously I was too close to its nest, and this small ground bird started acting like a killdeer flopping around as if it had a broken wing. This distraction display was entered DD as a confirmed breeding observation. Similarly my run-in with a ruffed grouse left no doubt that something was up. As my vehicle passed this bird on our long driveway, it erupted with anger and continually flew into my rear window. This territorial aggressiveness became a T and indicated that I had witnessed a probable breeder. Did the difference in temperament between ruffed and spruce grouse indicate that my dream wouldn't be as inspiring as Elwood's, but was more likely to end in a nightmare?

The veil of mystery and difficulty had been lifted off participation in a breeding bird project. This type of birding was easier than my anxieties had led me to believe. It differed little from the regular enjoyment of bird watching. Instead of just listing the species seen or heard, the documentation of what the bird was doing was noted and classified into four major categories. Each entry could become more defined after simple observation. For instance, a fleeting three second glance at an American robin gathering a worm and flying away with it was CF, carrying food, and represented a valid acknowledgement of a bird performing a breeding task. Watching a bird for a longer period of time for behavioral insights was an aspect of the PBBA that augmented birding merely for identification or pleasure.

The first PBBA ended in 1987 with many unobserved places and regions. Luckily in 2004 various groups with an interest in determining the overall health of our natural environment decided it was time for another PBBA. Since 1987 technology had taken a mega-leap and it was felt that more data would be collected easier by a greater number of people.

The Pennsylvania Breeding Bird Atlas project provides a critical insight into "the occurrence and distribution of the state's breeding birds with their abundance and habitat associations and how they are impacted by a changing environment, with the goal of conserving birds and the places they depend on.

This year represents the fourth year of the new project and Tioga County has the typical rural equation: a large geographical area with relatively few birders. June 1 through August 15 is the time period in which the majority of birds are safe to report as breeders. This is the optimal time for birders of all levels, especially beginners, to get involved with the PBBA in our area.

The benefits of birding are many, from physical exercise to developing an appreciation for the many diverse forms of life, both plant and animal. And there may be a nighttime dream when you can ride on the back of a black-capped chickadee and touch the top of a tree, wake up and walk transformed, wondering if you will ever be the same.

Please volunteer for the PBBA. Call me at 324-2492 or access the website at www.pabirdatlas.org. Access www.tiaudubon.org for local birding information.