

THE PATCHINESS OF PATCH BIRDERS

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“I would like to volunteer for the New York State Breeding Bird Atlas,” said the voice on the other end of the phone. Thus began my introduction into the phenomenon of patch birders as I took on my role as regional coordinator of the 2000 Breeding Bird Atlas (BBA).

When I assumed the duties of Regional Coordinator (Long Island and NYC) of the 2000 BBA the term “patch” would have had little meaning to most Long Island birders. Visiting local birding areas was well known at the time. Many, but not all of these locations were not advertised, and generally consisted of small properties near the birder’s home that could be covered in a relatively short period of time. These small areas were not birding hotspots, posing a real challenge to the birder to find the occasional uncommon species. Patches were sometimes simply referred to as a favorite birding area.

The nature of the BBA protocol focused on birding locations outside of popular birding sites. In certain instances, these properties may have been part of a birder’s “private” patch. This revealed a theme I encountered a number of times—patch territoriality, or as I sometimes referred to it “What is (insert name) doing in my block?” Soothing ruffled feathers (pun intended) became part of my regional coordinator duties.

At the time of my taking on the regional coordinator job I had been birding for over twenty-five years and thought I had a good sense of the makeup of the birding community. I was wrong—very wrong. Being the BBA coordinator exposed me to a whole segment of the birding community that was active and vibrant but not part of the field birding and reporting scene.

Perhaps I should have known that there was a significant part of the birding community that was hiding in plain sight. In 2013, well after the 2000 BBA, the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service released a report that estimated there were forty-seven million birders in the U.S. Many active birders (including me) thought that this number was a gross overestimate. However, upon reflecting on my Atlas experience and the percentage of that forty-seven million that were considered “backyard” birders—forty-one million (a very broad definition), I have since changed my opinion.

But what about the intrepid atlaser who called me? I quickly determined where this individual lived and assigned them the appropriate block. The atlasers also received maps and information packets. A data baseline for each block had been established in New York’s first BBA in 1980-1985. Unless there had been significant development in a breeding block it seemed reasonable that an atlaser could approach or exceed the number of breeding species recorded in the first atlas.

As the first breeding season of the BBA was coming to a close, the data sheets started to roll in. Our atlaser had dutifully recorded eighteen species in a block that had observed fifty-five breeding species in the previous BBA. Well, it was not overly impressive but a solid start. After all, there were four more years to improve the totals.

The years quickly passed, but something was clearly amiss in the breeding bird totals I was receiving. The total number of breeding birds was not increasing but the breeding confirmation rate was increasing. What was going on?, I had to ask diplomatically. After all, you do not annoy your volunteers. It became apparent that for some atlasers twenty-three species was the extent of their bird identification skills. The other, more telling aspect was that some atlasers had never birded outside their patch, despite breeding blocks being five kilometers by five kilometers and many containing good breeding bird habitat.

I urged the atlasers (the above referenced atlaser is an amalgamation of individuals I dealt with) to visit other productive locations in their block but the numbers did not significantly change. My patch atlasers were going to stay loyal to their patch. In the last two years of the BBA I finally threw in the towel and covered these blocks myself, defeated by the patchiness of patch birders!