

PATCH BIRDING DISCOVERING NEW PATCHES WHILE ATLASING

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You might be a patch birder if... you know that the first American Woodcock begins his flight display in the hawthorn grove on or about the 15th of March. If you have located the resident fox den and know how many kits they will be feeding this spring and when the wild columbine is expected to be in full bloom. You will be certain you have established your own patch when you have subdivided it and given portions of the property names like Red Bird Lane, Indigo Corners, and the Bobolink Field. I became a “patch birder” before I had ever heard that expression. As a budding new birder, I began birding the same locations in and around Crown Point State Historic Site on a very regular basis back in 2012. Initially, I was attracted to the variety of habitats the property offered and its proximity to my home. Before I knew it, I was adding to the eBird database for this hotspot and secretly celebrating each new species found.

Were there any other benefits to my returning over and over to the same location? I became familiar with each species’ chosen habitat, desired food sources, and nesting locations. I learned where to find certain birds in a given area of the property and began to make the all-important connections between habitat, vocalizations, and field marks for each resident bird. I grew as a birder by simply birding my patch with regularity. I began to formulate expected dates for migrants passing through and the returning nesters. I enjoyed seeing the impressive consistencies in arrival dates and grieved the egress of birds as they moved southward each fall. Although I will never claim to keep records of each species’ departure dates, their absences were quickly realized because I had formed a connection to my patch and its nesting birds.

Additionally, if I missed out on a Philadelphia Vireo sighting in spring migration I knew where to hunt for one after Labor Day. In the second week of October, I should position myself out in front of the main parking lot and scan for flocks of Brant flying down Lake Champlain. In mid-May checking the apple trees on the property will be rewarded with sweet blossoms humming with bees and Tennessee Warblers alike. An evening walk in late August might offer a Common Nighthawk flyover. From August thru November the standing waters under the Champlain Bridge become a stopover for shorebirds and as the fall migration progresses Coffin Point will become a gathering spot for diving ducks. Even before I had read about last season’s Red-breasted Nuthatch irruption, I was already taking note of their marked increase throughout the grounds. During last winter’s super flight, the cone bearing spruces on the property successfully attracted both Red and White-winged Crossbills, and small groups of Pine Grosbeaks. Additionally, cheery Redpolls flitted over the open areas with flocks of Snow Buntings. Yes, even winter birding in one’s patch can be rewarding.

With the third NYS Breeding Bird Atlas in full swing the opportunity to find a patch of your own has been simplified. Last spring, I signed up for a priority block twenty minutes from my home. Atlasing this block has been a truly wonderful experience and a new patch within the block has emerged. I find myself returning to my newfound patch hoping to glean a new species and to observe breeding successes. This isn't an isolated experience. Living in the northeast corner of the state where birders are few and unclaimed priority blocks numerous, I have spread myself around a fair bit, exploring and observing breeding behaviors in unassigned atlas blocks in both Essex and Clinton Counties. In every block I've visited inevitably there is an appealing patch deserving of a dedicated patch birder.

So, here's a suggestion: if you haven't yet submitted a checklist for the Breeding Bird Atlas we have three full years left to do so. It's easy, fun, and rewarding! During the upcoming quieter winter months take the opportunity to check out the BBA website <https://ebird.org/atlasny/home>. You may already be enjoying a patch of your own or are thinking of laying claim to a patch. So, consider this—why not add your sightings to the data being collected for this citizen science project? The birds give us so much, this is a great way for us to give back!

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