

Timing the Block Visit

Introduction. This section offers Block Leaders (BLs) guidance for working out a calendar of visits to the study blocks. Because it is not feasible to regiment the timing and frequency of block visits for all volunteers; and since there is considerable variation among the county's habitat types, we are not suggesting that a single schedule will work in all instances. The goal here is not to create a rigid model for all bird species or for all volunteers; rather, we offer broad guidelines that volunteers may use for planning their season and achieving optimal results. Armed with knowledge about the terrain and its vegetation, watercourses, human presence, and expected avifauna, volunteers can use the following guidelines to set an ideal pace for their field work. Furthermore, with an eye on the principles laid out here, Regional Coordinators (RCs) may work with BLs to refine recommendations on timing, see that adequate coverage is achieved, and improve the likelihood that key moments in the breeding cycle are well represented in the data.

The peak breeding season. In an average year, Marin County's peak breeding season roughly comprises the 92 days between 15 April and 15 July. This notional 'peak' misses some early breeders (like some of the flesh-eaters), as well as outliers – the opportunists and nomads. By peak season, some herons and egrets, hummingbirds, waterfowl, and marsh birds have already laid eggs, as have certain resident landbirds. Many of these 'early' records can be captured by special surveys conducted on behalf of parks agencies or conservation groups; others will turn up in special expeditions launched by the atlas project itself; still others can be gleaned from incidental reports on eBird or submitted directly to us by casual observers. Block Leaders should not be overly concerned about missing a few breeding records. The trick is to time our visits most efficiently. Still, a few observations on early, 'pre-season' records may be useful.

The 'pre-season'. One of the main reasons for timing block visits properly is to avoid cluttering data with indeterminate records of scant value. As a general principle, records of behaviors represented by lower breeding codes are not usually valuable, since the actual breeding status of a species or individual can be difficult to determine when wintering and breeding populations are in flux. For example, wintering birds sometimes sing – and can do so as a feature of 'migratory restlessness' (*Zugunruhe*). For this reason, the only consistently useful 'pre-season' records are of behaviors that rate high on the scale of breeding codes. A good rule of thumb is: "If it's a confirmation (i.e. a confirmed breeding code) – we'll take it." Here in Marin, many of these confirmations will relate to owls and hummingbirds, but any confirmation, recorded at any time of year, is valid and acceptable.

The number of visits in a single season. Before beginning your block survey, you should first settle on a rough number of visits that you think you can afford to make to your study block over the course of this 92-day peak season. It is very important to our study that you distribute these visits as best you can throughout the season, so that they are more or less equally spaced. The main reason for this is that your field work will directly contribute to our store of data on 'phenology', or the seasonal timing of landmarks in the avian life-cycle. It may help you to know, as you deliberate about your commitment, that some BLs will probably finish their blocks quickly and move on to others – before the first season is out. (See below for what qualifies as 'finishing' a block.) The speed or efficiency with which a given block is finished will mainly depend on the variety of habitats found within it. Therefore, if you think your block is complex in this way, you should be prepared to make more visits than the recommended minimum.

Minimum seasonal effort. Each volunteer should strive to make the minimum seasonal effort that we recommend, 16 hours per block, per season. This figure assumes four visits at four hours apiece over the course of a season. We strongly recommend (and hope) that BLs plan for five or even more visits. If, on the other hand, you feel able to commit to fewer than four, please make contact with your RC as early in the season as possible. We're grateful for any help you can offer, but in some cases teaming up with another volunteer may be best.

Distributing your efforts by habitat. The grid system of study blocks is an arbitrary construct meant to organize our field work into spatially similar units of area. BLs should understand that the boundaries of their blocks are not meant to enclose or delineate self-contained landscape features or habitats. On the contrary, the boundaries often dissect important features, including bodies of water, public lands, private holdings, and so on. Hence, early in the project the BL should make her/himself very familiar with the features and habitats within her/his block. In principle, you should make an effort to inspect every area within your block that supplies suitable habitat for breeding. No two block visits should necessarily be identical: strive instead to sample all the good habitat in your block. With good planning, you can study a portion of more than one habitat type on each visit. As you study the map of your block, note the resources that birds will need: forage, water, vegetative cover, etc.

Get in touch with your RC should you identify promising habitat to which there is no safe or legal access. You should not attempt to explore terrain with unstable footing, dense poison oak, dangerous inclines or declivities, etc. Be safe and do not hesitate to ask for help covering these areas.

Calendar of distributed visits. The following table should give you a rough idea of how block visits might be paced through the season so as to yield best results. The dates represent estimates of more or less evenly spaced visits; as a rule of thumb, 'give or take a few days on either side' (whereby the margin narrows as the number of visits increases).

<u>Four Visits</u>		<u>Five Visits</u>		<u>Six Visits</u>		<u>Seven Visits</u>		<u>Eight Visits</u>	
1	May	25	April	22	April	18	April	15	April
23	May	13	May	9	May	2	May	28	April
15	June	31	May	26	May	16	May	11	May
7	July	19	June	13	June	30	May	24	May
		8	July	30	June	13	June	6	June
				10	July	27	June	19	June
						11	July	2	July
								15	July