

## MCBBA2 Block Survey Guide

### Preparing for the Block Visit

**Field methods and protocols.** Before you set out on your first block visit, you should feel confident that you understand MCBBA2's field methods and protocols. Make an effort to read through all of this Block Survey Guide and have your questions about it answered, should you have any. Set time aside to watch our training videos, too. If you have worked on another atlas project, you will soon notice that our methods are similar to – but not exactly the same as – the methods of other atlases. As in other atlas-related business, you should first approach your Regional Coordinator with the questions you have. As a reference for you, this guide will reside on our project website, which is hosted on the Marin Audubon Society's site ([www.marinaudubon.org](http://www.marinaudubon.org)). You can also turn to our site for additional help, by way of useful links and book recommendations on a variety of relevant topics.

**Field ethics and personal safety.** Please review the chapter devoted to these topics before you make a site visit.

**Maps.** Thanks to our project cartographer, there are a number of different ways to view, study, and print our maps. Always accessible is the 'Data Explorer' on our website. With a bit of trial and error, this set of maps is easy to use. You will quickly learn how to look up historical species lists for each block, follow your own and others' progress, and see the same landscape features from the perspective of interchangeable base maps. Another option is the exhaustive library of printable maps that comprises all of our 221 study blocks. We recommend these for marking up – and notice that they are supplied with marginal graticules that will permit you to plot coordinates for hand-drawn points with a good straight-edge. Finally, there is a Map Plus / Mapinr option for your smart phone. This app will plot your current position within your study block and allow you to drop pins for marking coordinates. Our website will include a short demonstration video that offers instructions on how to install the app and use it for your survey. Further discussion will be found in the chapter, "Surveying the Block".

**Habitats in your block.** You should become familiar with the different kinds of habitat in your block. An especially useful tool for this is the map of vegetative cover, one of the base map options in the Data Explorer. As one of our duties in this project is to sample the array of habitats in each block, this map will be especially useful for planning and diversifying your coverage. In addition to the plant communities in your block, take note also of human-built structures and special habitats like rocky coastline, cliff faces, and outcrops. (The vegetative cover map does include agricultural fields, diked farmland, and other human-influenced landscape features.)

**Watercourses.** Where is the water? Learn where the water flows in your block, as well as what kind of water retention is possible in the various plant communities you find there. A little thought about water is an important key to finding breeding habitat.

**Points of Access.** With the help of these maps, you can also study points of access: roads, trails, boundaries of public land, and so on. In past atlas work, good data have been gained by observers in kayaks and other small craft and on bicycles. Sometimes the best, or only, vantage

point is the roadside, for example, in the case of private land. If you hope to carry a telescope with you, think ahead about how far you'll need to carry it beyond your car.

**Private land and residences.** In preparing your visit, you should try to determine whether there are private properties and residences in your block. It goes without saying that you should never trespass on private property in the course of your survey. But even if you are surveying from public rights-of-way, there are times when locals may feel curious or uneasy. If you do meet inquisitive owners or residents, you should mention the name of this project and its sponsor. Of course, know where you are with respect to property lines. If you are not comfortable approaching property owners verbally, please work with your RC to reach out to them. MCBBA2 is developing excellent relations with property owners, including owners and managers of farms and ranches; so, we are expecting to help you with this.

**Inaccessible terrain.** Unstable footing, thickly overgrown understory, marshy or muddy tracts – at one point or another, every atlasser comes across inaccessible areas. In preparing for your formal block visits, try to identify these areas and think of ways to derive breeding evidence from them within the limitations you face. A telescope might help in some cases; ear-birding or even taking recordings might help in others; if you're lucky, simply changing your vantage point might give you a better view of a towering cliff or lofty conifers. Patience and persistence can pay off. However, if you are thwarted by an inaccessible area, you should communicate that to your RC. S/he will probably be able to send out help, particularly if you have good reason to believe that extra effort will pay off. Under no circumstances, however, should you put yourself at risk in pursuit of a confirmation or 'good' bird.

**Historic species lists.** MCBBA2 has produced provisional lists of known and suspected breeders found in each of our 221 study blocks. These lists are based on historic resources (MCBBA1 and eBird). Further proofing is needed, so the data should be approached as 'usually reliable'. (If you yourselves discover flaws, please let us know!) Nevertheless, these lists will give you a pretty good general sense of what you may expect to find. Use them to review life histories with which you are unfamiliar and to remind yourself of bird vocalizations. One note of caution should be raised here. As discussed in the chapter, "Surveying the Block", you should not allow these historic lists to *dictate what you will see*. Because a bird is not known to breed in a certain area does not always mean that it cannot or will not. Possibly, it has been overlooked. In other words, though the lists are very useful, you should not let them close your mind to new possibilities, particularly since our objectives include the study of changes in distribution. With this in mind, it will also be useful to study species lists from adjacent blocks or blocks that have similar geographical features elsewhere in the county.

**Scouting the block.** Flowing and standing water, habitat types, species to expect, private property, inaccessible terrain, and access points: these are the things you're looking for on your early scouting trips. Take note, as you seek your first impressions, of what birds are up and singing. As mentioned before, what looks (or sounds) like territorial behavior in early spring is often unstable, even in the case of species that will in fact eventually breed in your block. Still, you will learn a lot by observing this early behavior. If you find what appears to be territorial behavior, you can use such clues when you return to conduct a formal survey. Should you happen upon an active nest – do take note! We'll accept all confirmations. Should you make a nocturnal

scouting visit and find owls or Common Poorwill active, remember that we accept ‘Probable’ and ‘Confirmed’ records for those species before 15 April – and all records during the peak season.