

Notes on Breeding Information for Bird Species Groups

Ducks, Geese, and Swans

Non-breeders are frequently seen south of their known breeding range during summer, particularly on sewage treatment ponds. Lesser Scaup are the most frequent diving duck to summer over without evidence of breeding but almost all species can occur. Breeding by injured northern waterfowl such as Snow Geese has also rarely occurred in the Midwest. Ruddy Ducks are notoriously late breeders with eggs in July and August; early summer records may not be indicative of breeding. Re-nests occur with many species and flightless young can occur even into August and September. Note: Feral Mute Swans have been known to breed in the wild.

Loons

Occasional non-breeders are observed south of the known breeding range in summer. Birds often give flight calls from high overhead. Such flight calls are sufficient only as "Observed". Loons may begin to form loose concentrations (social and/or pre-migratory behaviors), typically on larger lakes, as early as mid- to late July.

Grebes

Horned Grebes rarely occur now in Minnesota as breeders with recent records only from the far northwestern counties. Carefully document any reports of this species. Young of both Red-necked Grebe and Western Grebe may climb on the back of a parent for easy confirmation. There have been reports of Clark's Grebe hybrids in the state.

Pelicans

Pelicans are a colonial-nesting species. Non-breeders (or birds feeding/loafing away from nesting colonies) are common on lakes and marshes throughout much of western Minnesota. Observation of multiple individuals, or individual(s) present on multiple days is not sufficient to elevate breeding status above "Observed".

Cormorants

Double-crested Cormorants are colonial breeders that appear in both single-species colonies and with other species of herons. Nesting occurs over a long period and some young can be in the nest throughout August. Be sure to document location for any confirmed colony.

Herons and Bitterns

American Bitterns are non-colonial nesters; use normal guidelines for breeding codes. In areas of highly favorable habitat Least Bitterns may breed in small loose colonies. Birds disperse to feed far away from nesting colonies; also potential non-breeders. Single or multiple individuals are commonly observed on wetlands throughout Minnesota. Yellow-crowned Night Heron may nest singly, loosely associated with mixed-species heronries. Observation of multiple individuals, or individual(s) present on multiple days not sufficient to elevate breeding status above "Observed" for Great Blue Heron, Great Egret, Snowy Egret, Little Blue Heron, Cattle Egret, Black-crowned Night Heron, and Yellow-crowned Night Heron. Most Green Herons nest in small, loose colonies, Some do nest singly however. Observation of bird(s) perched or foraging within safe dates is sufficient for "Possible".

Vultures

Turkey Vultures are difficult to confirm, breeding on cliffs, in caves, abandoned houses, and in large hollow trees or logs. Daily wandering may bring vultures virtually anywhere in the state but this does not necessarily equate to a local breeding presence.

Hawks and Eagles

Bald Eagles begin nesting in the south in March and in the north in April but there is also migration still going on in the northeast through mid May; actual nests are not difficult to find. Other hawks (except Broad-wings) begin nesting in April and May but they also are still migrating throughout May. Broad-wings are a late migrant and occur as migrants through early June.

Partridge, Grouse and Turkey

Gray Partridge and Ring-necked Pheasant are non-native species that were introduced early in the 20th century to Minnesota; they are now year-round residents in open areas, principally in the southern and western part of the state. Ruffed Grouse and Spruce Grouse are native permanent residents in the forested part of the state, with the latter species confined to coniferous landscapes. Sharp-tailed Grouse and Greater Prairie-chickens are also native year-round residents, although some birds may wander during the winter. Breeding for these two species begins with communal displaying at mating areas, called leks, sometime in April. The Wild Turkey, a native North American bird, was not known to nest in Minnesota until it was widely introduced by the Department of Natural Resources and now occurs as far north as outside Duluth and Crookston; breeding has not yet been established in many northern areas. The Northern Bobwhite once nested in Minnesota, but now all birds that are seen are considered escapees from game farms or introduced by people.

Falcons

Both Merlins and Peregrines may over-winter in suburbs and cities where they previously nested; actual nesting behavior should be observed rather than using multiple observations as Probable breeding evidence.

Rails

Use normal guidelines for breeding codes. Yellow Rail presence/activity closely tied to narrow range of water depth in sedge wetlands. Heavy rains may induce calling/breeding activity later in summer (late June or July) at locations where birds were not detected earlier in breeding season. A few Yellow Rail are known to migrate as late as early June in the North.

Cranes and shorebirds

Sandhill Cranes should be on their territories by mid-April in the south and central and early May in the north. Non-breeders are common in some locales so find a pair to achieve at least a probable status. Adult birds forage near the chicks after hatching so watch carefully for small brown balls of feathers nearby to confirm. Killdeer are early breeders and young may be present as early as April some years. Solitary Sandpiper might breed in remote river swamps and marshes anywhere from Aitkin County northward but are very rare as breeders. They may migrate as late as late May and return southward beginning about June 20th so confirmation would require a nest or young and "probable" is not a likely category to use and feel safe about it. Marbled Godwit are noisy and territorial early in the nesting cycle but very quiet and difficult to find during the early nesting period but are easy to get a "probable" once the young are out and the adults are loudly defending them. No breeding Willet has been confirmed in the state since the 1800's but the species breeds close to the border in South Dakota. Some Spotted Sandpipers are polyandrous with one female and two males. Three adults in close proximity would likely indicate a high probability of a current or potential nest. Wilson's Phalarope often occur on sewage treatment ponds in summer without evidence of breeding but the species does breed on some such ponds so multiple visits might confirm breeding.

Gulls

Birds disperse to feed far away from nesting colonies. Also, non-breeders (or birds feeding/loafing away from nesting colonies) are common on lakes and marshes throughout much of Minnesota. Observation of multiple individuals, or individual(s) present on multiple days not sufficient to elevate breeding status above "Observed". Single pairs of Herring Gulls may be found on nests on cliffs along Lake Superior or on rocky islets on inland lakes.

Terns

Common Terns and Caspian Terns (very rare) are colonial breeders usually occurring on islands and are not to be expected away from large lakes and the North Country. Forsters' Tern breed in loose colonies in open marshlands, habitat sometimes shared with Black Terns.

Pigeons and Doves

Rock Doves are a year-round resident and start breeding as early as April. Mourning Doves migrate, although some individuals over-winter, usually at feeders. Eurasian Collared-Dove, which is an introduced species, recently began to colonize Minnesota from the south. Some birds may over-winter, perhaps depending on the weather. Individuals have been seen as far north as Itasca County; they appear to be dispersing birds that have yet to establish a breeding presence. Breeding for Eurasian Collared-Dove has only been confirmed in Minnesota in the Twin Cities and Houston County; however, the species has been observed in many counties in the southwestern quarter of the state and may nest there.

Cuckoos

Use normal guidelines for breeding codes. Care should be taken in differentiating between species based on calls alone. Eastern Chipmunks have a call that is similar to Black-billed Cuckoo, especially heard at a distance. Black-billed Cuckoo often calls at night.

Owls

Resident, non-migratory, owls (Screech, Great Horned, Barred) begin nesting early – Great Horned in January and the other two at least by March. Migrant owls (Long-eared, Short-eared, Saw-whet) may be still migrating into May in the north; therefore, single observations (calling or sight) should be treated with care until later in the season. Saw-whet Owls may begin dispersal in July. Both Great Gray and Boreal Owls are probably year-round residents as well as migratory invaders; therefore, presence is not enough to indicate breeding until later in the season.

Nightjars

Use normal guidelines for breeding codes. Both species vocalize primarily at night. Nighthawks do nest in native (rock outcrops), as well as urban habitats. Common Nighthawks begin congregating and migrating in latter half of July.

Swifts

Chimney Swifts breed in both home and industrial/school chimneys in both small towns and cities; a few pairs still breed in hollow trees, usually in mature forests and perhaps along rivers.

Kingfishers

Kingfishers use burrows for roosting so carrying food into a burrow would be the best way to confirm. Chicks are usually loud when supper arrives.

Woodpeckers

Species that are year-round residents (Red-bellied, Downy, Hairy, Pileated) begin nesting in March in the south and April in the north. Pairing, calling and cavity building provide evidence early in the season, but they are fairly quiet later when on eggs; feeding young in cavities provides good evidence of nesting later in the season. The migrant species (Red-headed, Sapsucker, Flicker) are both migrating and establishing breeding in May. The three-toed woodpeckers (American, Black-backed) are both residents and winter invaders; very little is known about their breeding behavior chronology.

Flycatchers

Use normal guidelines for breeding codes. Several species (particularly Olive-sided and Alder flycatchers) are very late migrants, as late as 10 June in the south. Extreme care should be taken in differentiating between *Empidonax* flycatchers based on sight alone. There have been reports of Western Wood-Pewee hybrids in the state.

Larks

The Horned Lark is widespread in open areas of the state and is one of the first passerines to breed with nesting suspected as early as March. An early visit to your block in March or April is recommended although the birds sing through June and into early July with second broods a possibility. Finding the camouflaged nest on bare ground is a challenge; better to confirm by finding the recently fledged young that remain with their parents a few days after leaving the nest.

Vireos

Use normal guidelines for breeding codes. Warbling Vireo nests are often high in trees in dense

vegetation and difficult to spot. Philadelphia Vireos are likely only in the far north and there are few confirmed nests for the state. Bell's Vireos are rare and breed in shrubbery, thickets, and short trees in the southern third of the state.

Jays and Crows

Use normal guidelines for breeding codes. Most species are early nesters. Black-billed Magpies often form flocks in fall/winter (particularly in far northwestern Minnesota), with some movements outside of breeding areas. Nest-building typically begins in mid- to late April. Common Ravens occasionally move well south of normal breeding range in winter. Observations of birds south of primary breeding range during April-May should be approached with caution (follow-up later in breeding season); may nest in cliffs or trees. Common Ravens may utilize nests from previous years of other species including crows and raptors.

Chickadees and Titmice

The Black-capped Chickadee is an easily confirmed hole-nesting species that also occasionally utilizes bird houses. Nesting may commence in April, more likely in May and second broods are known to occur at this latitude in June and July. The Boreal Chickadee is a very locally occurring species, difficult to confirm with breeding initiated in mid-to late spring when observers may not be in their North Country environment. Search for this species in coniferous bogs and adjacent mixed forest habitat from Aitkin County northward. The Tufted Titmouse favors mature forests in southeastern Minnesota uncommonly as far west as Rochester and rarely, nowadays, as far north as the Twin Cities. The titmouse breeds in cavities and occasionally in nest boxes in mid-to late spring and is normally single-brooded. Fledged young remain with their parents for several weeks in a localized situation which should indicate a "confirmed" breeding unless you are near the boundary of a block when it might indicate only a "probable."

Swallows

Tree Swallows are easy to confirm when they utilize bird houses. If you can, try to obtain specific addresses for Purple Martin colonies for the Minnesota Purple Martin Working Group (<http://mnmartin.org/>). Migrant martins in late July and early August will utilize martin houses in migration so try to confirm before 20th of July or find flightless young/eggs. Northern Rough-winged Swallows breed under bridges but occasionally a few will breed in large Bank Swallow colonies where it would be difficult to confirm. Cliff Swallow nests under bridges usually last about a year so the species could be confirmed post-breeding if the nests are distinguished from bridge-nesting Northern Rough-winged Swallows and Barn Swallows.

Creepers

Brown Creepers place their nests under loose bark and are difficult to confirm when incubating. Easier to confirm when young are being fed or when fledged.

Nuthatches

Both species are considered year-round residents, but wintering birds may have dispersed from other areas. Because the chronology of these movements is not known, observations alone in early spring may not indicate breeding. Red-breasted Nuthatches do have population cycles and are found wintering in southern locations and may not leave until late May.

Wrens

Use normal guidelines for breeding codes. Winter Wrens appear to breed in very limited numbers in southern Minnesota, particularly in the southeastern bluffs and Minnesota River Valley. Individuals of this species seen/heard in this region in mid- to late May warrant follow-up visits to determine breeding status. Sedge and Marsh Wrens typically build "dummy" nests. Nests found without further breeding evidence (e.g., birds carrying food into nest) for these two species results in "Probable", not "Confirmed" breeding status.

Bluebirds

Mountain Bluebirds paired with Eastern Bluebirds have been documented a few times, with the two most recent records from far northwestern Minnesota. Bluebirds typically nest in human-built nest boxes. Nesting in natural cavities should be reported in the Notes field.

Kinglets

Both species nest only in northern Minnesota. All observations in the south in late May or early June are undoubtedly migrants. In the north, use normal guidelines for breeding codes.

Gnatcatchers

Nest-building for the Blue-gray Gnatcatcher commences by early May in southeastern Minnesota. Try to confirm this species before the trees fully leaf out and look for a small knob on an outer (usually) branch.

Mockingbirds and Thrashers

The widespread Gray Catbird prefers edge habitats, scrublands, shelterbelts, and woodlots in both rural and urban situations. Catbirds may raise two broods so confirmation is possible from May through August. The Northern Mockingbird is a sparse breeding species potentially occurring in almost any part of the state outside the most heavily-forested regions. Their breeding season is long, extending from April to August. The nest is usually placed in a small spruce tree, hawthorn, crab, or other ornamental in urban/suburban and agricultural landscapes. The Brown Thrasher is possible throughout the entire state but more localized in the heavily forested north and northeast. The species breeds from April to August with second broods providing a chance to confirm throughout late summer. Favored habitats include shrub/scrub, pastures with scattered shrubs, hedgerows, woodlots, and forest edges.

Thrushes

Use normal guidelines for breeding codes. Hermit Thrushes primarily nest in lowland coniferous forests, but sometimes are found in mature, moist deciduous forest. Wood Thrushes sing most actively at dawn and dusk. Song activity is often greatly reduced relatively early in the morning, with activity increasing again at dusk.

Pipits

Use normal guidelines for breeding codes. Sprague's Pipit is now only a casual breeder in Minnesota. Males deliver song while in flight very high overhead, such that a singing bird is often not visible. Singing males could be unpaired individuals.

Waxwings

The bulk of the breeding for Cedar Waxwing likely doesn't occur until well after mid-June when fruits become available. Neighboring states and provinces have found some birds breeding as late as September. Foraging birds may occur a considerable distance from the nest site so use caution in indicating "possible" and "probable" for the breeding codes.

Shrikes

Although the Northern Shrike breeds no closer than northern Ontario, individual birds are known to sing in Minnesota from late winter into early May. Such activity should not be misconstrued as a sign of breeding. A high degree of caution in identifying shrikes seen before mid-May is thus needed. Loggerhead Shrikes are scarce, very local residents in some of the lightly-forested or non-forested regions of the state. They are early migrants and prefer native grasslands, early successional shrub-scrub habitat, and unimproved pasture, often placing their nests in small, densely-vegetated trees such as wild plum, various crabs and hawthorns, locusts, serviceberry, and red cedar. Two broods may be produced in a year with the first nest built in late April or early May.

Wood-Warblers

A few species can be found in forested regions throughout most of the state: Yellow, American Redstart, Ovenbird, and Common Yellowthroat. Several nest only in the southern half of the state: Blue-winged, Cerulean, Prothonotary, Louisiana Waterthrush, and Hooded. Others nest almost entirely in the north so observations further south need to be well documented to separate migrants from possible breeding birds with the safe dates used as guides. Late migrants, like Tennessee, Connecticut, Mourning, Wilson's, and Canada, may linger into mid-June with some singing individuals observed that are not on breeding territory. Fall migration can begin in July for species that have failed to successfully breed; sporadic singing may occur then as well. In the southeastern quarter of Minnesota there are a number of breeding records for species that almost

entirely nest in the north – Golden-winged, Nashville, Chestnut-sided, Black and White, Mourning and Canada. These species require good documentation to make sure they are not migrants or vagrants. With one exception (Louisiana Waterthrush) no warbler species has been studied in Minnesota for its breeding chronology.

The Louisiana Waterthrush is an early breeding species and birds may begin incubating eggs by mid-May; male singing activity begins in late April, peaks in early to mid-May, and is much reduced by early June.

Blackbirds/Orioles

In general, use normal guidelines for breeding codes. Observers should be careful in identifying non-vocalizing meadowlarks, particularly since there is extensive overlap in the breeding ranges of both species in Minnesota. Nesting Rusty Blackbirds were documented in extreme northeastern Minnesota in the early 1980's, but none have been found breeding since then. This species may still breed regularly in remote areas, particularly along rivers and streams in the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness. Any breeding records of Rusty Blackbird should be well-documented. Great-tailed Grackles are uncommon to rare breeders southwest of the Minnesota River, with the bulk of the breeding population in Jackson and adjoining counties. In Minnesota, this species nests in cattail marshes, and can be quite secretive during the breeding season.

Tanagers

Use normal guidelines for breeding codes. Summer Tanager is very rare in summer in southern Minnesota. Male Summer Tanagers paired with female Scarlet Tanagers have been documented nesting in the southern Twin Cities metropolitan area in recent years. Also, there have been recent June sightings of singing male Summer Tanagers in Lincoln and Jackson counties in the Southwest. Observers should give high priority to documenting elevated breeding status (Probable or Confirmed) for this species, if encountered. There have been reports of Summer Tanager hybrids in the state.

Finches

Purple Finch would not be expected to breed further south than St. Cloud and Princeton. Nests south of there should be well-documented. House Finch often place their nests in hanging baskets, an easy confirmation. The Pine Grosbeak is a rare but potential breeder in the far northern part of the state but would be very difficult to confirm. Crossbills are erratic breeders and although they breed primarily in the coniferous northlands, some, mainly Red Crossbills, may breed well to the south in coniferous plantings. At similar latitudes in Ontario, Red Crossbills breed mainly in late summer and fall and in late winter in response to maturing cone crops. The presence of streaky juveniles does not imply local breeding as the young retain this plumage for a prolonged period. Pine Siskins may breed from February through July; listen for the rising buzzy trills in open coniferous or mixed forest or coniferous plantations. Evening Grosbeak are also difficult to confirm, breeding in dense foliage in the upper reaches of trees, and are to be expected only in the northern third of the state.

Sparrows and Longspurs

Lark Bunting and Baird's Sparrow formerly nested in Minnesota but now occur only as accidental breeders. Both species should be watched for in far western Minnesota, and any occurrences should be well-documented. Henslow's Sparrow may nest in small, loose colonies. Chestnut-collared Longspur is known to nest primarily in the Felton area, Clay County. However, small colonies of this species have been found recently in Polk and Pipestone counties, so observers should watch for breeding longspurs throughout far western Minnesota.