

Announcing the Oklahoma Winter Bird Atlas Project

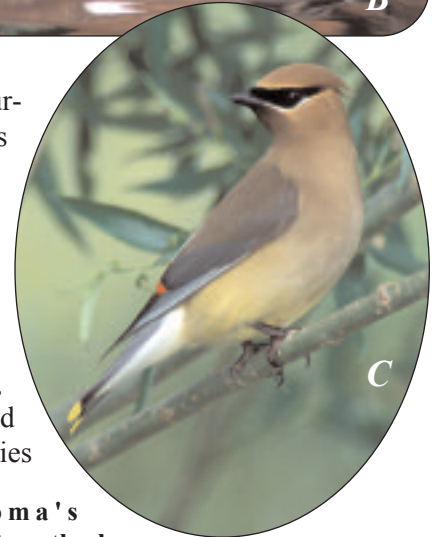
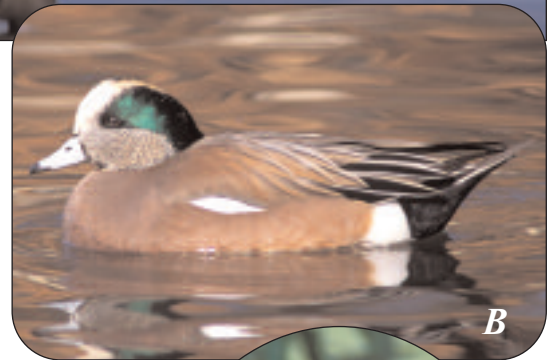
by Dan L. Reinking
Photography by Bill Horn

Whereas studies of breeding birds are commonplace in North America, populations in winter are generally less well studied---consider that nearly every state has completed a breeding bird atlas, while wintering bird atlas projects are underway in only two states. Existing information on the winter distribution of most bird species in Oklahoma is limited to general statements of occurrence within broad regional areas, on the basis of many decades of sightings, both opportunistic and anecdotal. Christmas Bird Count data are often used to indicate winter bird distribution, but there are only about 20 such count areas in Oklahoma, and these counts take place in the early winter. The use of a standardized methodology to survey systematically nearly 600 locations across the entire state, during both early and late winter, within the relative confines of a five-year period, will provide an accurate snapshot of current bird distribution within Oklahoma during the winter. This survey is called the Oklahoma Winter Bird Atlas project and will take place over five winters from late 2003 through early 2008.

Oklahoma's mid-south latitude means fall migration in many species continues well into November and spring migration for some species begins in late February. Therefore the winter season is defined as 1 December to 14 February, a period believed to capture wintering species with minimal overlap from migrants. A major difference between the Oklahoma Breeding Bird Atlas (see sidebar) and the Oklahoma Winter Bird Atlas (OWBA) is that in the breeding season most individual birds remain on local territories, whereas in winter, birds may be more mobile in response to regional or local weather and foraging conditions. As a result, there may be distributional differences in some species

between early and late winter periods, or from one year to the next. To assess seasonal distributional patterns within a single winter, the OWBA season and survey effort are divided equally into early winter (1 December to 7 January) and late winter (8 January to 14 February) periods. To assess year-to-year variation in bird distributions, a number of blocks will be surveyed in each region of Oklahoma in each year.

In addition to surveying the randomly selected blocks throughout the state, birders are being asked to report observations of special interest species which are rare or local in distribution, and to report observations of water birds on Oklahoma lakes during the winter survey period. Persons with good bird identification skills and a desire to get involved should call or e-mail the Sutton Center for more information, instructions, and data forms.



Oklahoma's somewhat southerly

latitude means that its many reservoirs are usually ice free in the winter months, providing habitat for a variety of waterfowl including the stately Northern Pintail (A) and the American Wigeon (B).

The nomadic Cedar Waxwing (C) is commonly seen in Oklahoma during the winter, where it travels in flocks to find its favored food of berries, sometimes becoming inebriated from consuming those that have been fermenting on the trees. Many species of sparrows breed farther north but find brushy cover in Oklahoma to their liking during the winter months, including the Fox Sparrow (D) and White-crowned Sparrow (E) shown here.