

# Urban Atlassing in Detroit

BY JULIE CRAVES

The William Livingstone mansion was arguably one of the most photographed old buildings in the city of Detroit. One of the dozens of Victorian mansions built in Detroit's Brush Park, this 1893 Albert Kahn-designed home had been saved by preservationists in the 1990s. Unfortunately, it was not placed on a proper foundation, and very slowly started to collapse into itself, earning it the name "Slumpy."

In summer 2007, my husband and I visited Slumpy. Yes, we took photos, but we're sure we were the first people in its 114-year existence to seek out this incredible structure to see if Chimney Swifts were nesting in its chimney. It didn't take long for us to exchange high-fives: we had confirmed Chimney Swift nesting in another block for the *Michigan Breeding Bird Atlas II (MBBII, 2002-2007)*.

This was just one of many urban adventures in the city of Detroit during the research for the *MBBII*. As part of my work for the Rouge River Bird Observatory at the University of Michigan-Dearborn, I was the Wayne County field coordinator. I did work in all of Wayne County's 76 blocks, and Darrin and I did much of the work in the highly urban areas of the city of Detroit.

Many of our days were memorable: Barn Swallows nesting in the sally port of pre-Civil War era Fort Wayne; Eastern Meadowlarks, Savannah Sparrows, Indigo Buntings, and Eastern Kingbirds re-populating the acres of "urban prairie" near the Detroit airport; American Kestrels at the iconic ruins of the (also Kahn-designed) Packard plant, viewed from the adjacent cemetery with signs indicating it wasn't safe to leave your vehicle.



Eastern Meadowlarks are among grassland species re-populating the acres of urban prairie near Detroit City Airport. © 2009 Kevin Karlson.



Chimney Swifts flying over a home in Detroit, MI © 2009 Bill Rapai.

The many hours in these blocks revealed interesting patterns of urban bird distribution. Ring-necked Pheasant is a classic example of a species that we found to be more common on vacant city land than in the suburbs. American Kestrels found declining industrial areas in the city—with cavities in disintegrating structures and prey in overgrown lots—more appealing than habitats in other parts of the county.

I suspect that if we had been able to spend even more time in the inner city, we could have confirmed a lot more Chimney Swifts, Common Nighthawks, and Turkey Vultures using abandoned or burned-out buildings. Usually, though, we restricted our work—driving slowly through derelict areas peering through binoculars—to weekend mornings.

Overall, our efforts in the inner city, combined with that of 40 additional volunteers who submitted nearly 10,000 records from across the county, made the Wayne County portion of *MBBII* a great success. During the research for the first *Michigan Breeding Bird Atlas* (1983-1988), five blocks in the county had no coverage at all, and only 22% of the blocks recorded a minimum of 25 species. For *MBBII*, all blocks had coverage, with 92% recording at least 25 species, over 80% recording at least 40 species, and a third with at least 60 species. The *MBBII* total of 135 species with breeding evidence in Wayne County was a 5% increase from the first *Atlas*, and included a nearly 30% increase in the number of species confirmed nesting (114 in *MBBII*).

Fourteen species were found in over 95% of the blocks: Rock Pigeon, Mourning Dove, Chimney Swift, Eastern Kingbird, American Robin (100%), European Starling (100%), Chipping Sparrow, Song Sparrow, Northern Cardinal, Red-winged Blackbird, Common Grackle (100%), House Finch, American Goldfinch, and House Sparrow. The only species that was confirmed nesting in the first *Atlas* that was not found in *MBBII* was Northern Harrier. Species not found in the first *Atlas* but confirmed in *MBBII* were Wild Turkey, Osprey, Bald Eagle, and Clay-colored Sparrow.

The diversity and abundance of birds in Wayne County may seem surprising, but the apparent increase since the first *Atlas* was due to the dedicated effort of volunteers, not necessarily because Wayne County avifauna is experiencing growth and good health. Habitat substantially declined in Wayne County in the years since the completion of the first *Atlas*, especially in the suburbs, during the economic boom of the early 2000s.



Catbird at a scrap metal facility in Detroit. © 2010 Al Brown.

One place that is experiencing a slow increase in bird habitat is, as you might have guessed, the city of Detroit, with an estimated 40 square miles of vacant land. I took no joy in seeing firsthand the heart-breaking decay of abandoned property. It is likely that Detroit will never again be a city of 1.8 million people. As its population contracts and consolidates, many acres will be returned to nature. It may be planned green space or urban farms, or just empty and neglected tracts left to surrender to grass, then weeds, then scrub. Some of the most imperiled bird species in North America are those that occupy grasslands and early successional habitats. I take some comfort that neighborhoods which have been forsaken by humans may provide refuge for birds and other wildlife during Detroit's next transformation.

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#### More information on places mentioned in this piece:

- William Livingstone mansion (<http://bit.ly/bCDp2J>). Slumpy no longer houses Chimney Swifts. Deemed a hazard, it was finally demolished in fall 2007.
- Rouge River Bird Observatory (<http://www.rrbo.org>) and RRBO's Wayne County Breeding Bird Atlas site (<http://bit.ly/caLPt2>)
- Historic Fort Wayne (<http://bit.ly/bREz1z>)
- Packard Motor Plant (<http://bit.ly/aEfley>)



## Special Thanks

The 5<sup>th</sup> Annual Tawas Point Birding Festival was a success due in part to the cooperative efforts of many hands. Michigan Audubon would like to thank and recognize the many businesses, organizations, chapters and individuals that helped to create another successful birding event in Iosco County.

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