



## Create Your Own Bird Atlas

### Background

The Rhode Island Division of Fish and Wildlife, in partnership with the University of Rhode Island, has completed collecting data for the Rhode Island Bird Atlas 2.0. This project involved biologists, field technicians, and over 200 volunteers. The goal? Document all of the bird species in Rhode Island across all seasons and habitats, and figure out how our bird populations have changed, for better or for worse, since our first atlas efforts in the 1980s. By knowing which species are here, and the habitats they're using, we can make informed, thoughtful conservation decisions to help our birds in the years to come, particularly our Species of Greatest Conservation Need. To do this, we split the state up into 165 blocks. Volunteers visited each block and recorded all of the birds that they saw or heard there between 2015 and 2019. A total of 242 bird species were documented across Rhode Island! That means that no matter where you live in this beautiful little state of ours, you can bird watch.

To learn more about the RI Bird Atlas 2.0, visit [www.ribirdatlas.com](http://www.ribirdatlas.com).

A great way to connect students with birds is to conduct bird observations right at school. Creating a miniature bird atlas of the schoolyard, nearby park, or neighborhood allows students to collect and summarize their own data, and learn more about the wildlife right outside their window. Obviously, this project is not as complex as the Rhode Island Bird Atlas 2.0, but it will give students an idea of what it was like for biologists and volunteers to complete this huge dataset.

### Materials

You don't need to go out and buy 30 pairs of binoculars for your students in order to have a successful birding experience. If your school will support you in buying binoculars, that's wonderful! However, there are other materials that are more economical and just as useful. Investing in some bird field guides for your classroom is a good first step. There are many field guides on the market for different audiences. For example, The Sibley Guide to Birds is very advanced, and may not be the best option for a second grade class. Whatever guide you decide on, we suggest getting one that focuses on Eastern North America or New England.



## Guidelines for creating your own bird atlas

**Prepare before venturing out:** Give students some time to do a little preliminary research. Flip through field guides or play Rhode Island bird bingo (included in this kit). You can always contact your friendly RI Wildlife Outreach Coordinator for information about the atlas block in which your school is located! Having a preliminary list of the birds that were actually documented in your block can give you an idea of what you can expect to see. Try to learn some of the calls of the birds on your block list. Even having just a little bit of information before heading outside will give students a confidence boost as citizen scientists.

**Use a data sheet:** There is a template data sheet included in this kit. This is just a guideline to use. Depending on the age of your students, you can add or remove elements of the data sheet. One thing to remember is to use the same data sheet each time you conduct an atlas survey.

**Decide on your survey protocol:** For the RI Bird Atlas 2.0, observers conducted point counts and transect surveys. To do point count, sit or stand in one place, and record all of the birds that you hear or see over a set period of time at that spot. For a transect survey, walk along a selected pathway and stop at predetermined intervals (i.e. every 25 feet) to look and listen. Choose whichever method works best for the space that you have available. Select whatever method works for your particular group's needs.

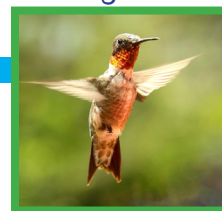
**Conduct multiple surveys:** Try to find a regular time to conduct surveys based on your schedule. Maybe you can go out once a week, or maybe just once a month or even once a season. Repeating your observations will give students a broader dataset.

**Summarize your data:** Depending on the age of your students, your data summary methods could vary. With older students, you could summarize data using graphs, or even GIS mapping. [K-12 schools can access GIS mapping software through esri for free.](#) For younger students, you could simply list all of the birds you saw over the course of your atlas efforts, create a wall mural with pictures of the birds observed, or use a hallway wall to create a timeline, showing when different birds were observed and for how long. For example, if you ran your surveys from September through June, you might have seen and heard tufted titmouse throughout that entire time period, but only saw yellow warblers in May and June. You can also document when species leave in the fall and when they return in the spring, like the ruby-throated hummingbird, represented by the green bars on the timeline. Here is a sample of what your timeline might look like:

Tufted titmouse



Ruby-throated hummingbird



Sept

Oct

Nov

Dec

Jan

Feb

March

April

May

June

Yellow warbler

