



Bob Biersack spent two years exploring the Goshen Wildlife Management Area for the second Virginia Breeding Bird Atlas. The experience was both unexpected and profound.

Bob Biersack has been waiting for comfortable nocturnal birding temperatures since the New Year. By mid-January, conditions ripen. With a quarter moon, clear sky and temps just above freezing, the 64-year-old sets out from his Lexington home for the Goshen Wildlife Management Area (GWMA).

Pursuing backroads for nearly 30 miles into the mountains, Biersack arrives at Guys Run Road. Unlocking then closing its gate behind him, he follows the gravel access along a forested ridgeline

deep into the 33,000-acre tract. A mile in, he parks. Killing the engine, Biersack steps into the cold and listens for about 10 minutes. Silence. Retrieving an audio device from the car, he plays a series of owl calls. Echoing through the moonlit trees, the sounds are haunting. Isolation amplifies the effect—Biersack has locked himself in one of the state's biggest and most rarely visited wilderness areas. Why would he do such a thing?

"This is the time of year when owls look for their mates," he explains with a laugh. Males vocalize to communicate

territorial boundaries and attract females. Females respond to the calls of males. "If there's an owl in the area, it's likely to respond."

As a volunteer for the second Virginia Breeding Bird Atlas (VABBA2), Biersack hopes to confirm breeding. A project of the Virginia Department of Game and Inland Fisheries and various other conservation organizations—including the Virginia Society of Ornithology and Virginia Tech's Conservation Management Institute—the Atlas relies on citizen volunteers to collect information about avian

populations, distribution, and breeding activity throughout the Commonwealth. Upon the Atlas's conclusion in the winter of 2020, the data will be used to adapt better—and more targeted—avian conservation strategies.

Biersack begins with great-horned owl calls and proceeds to smaller species, like the Northern saw-whet owl. A minute of playback is followed by five spent listening. Detections are recorded in a notebook, with 15 minutes of silence observed between species. “You don’t want to lure in a little fella and have him become dinner for a bigger bird,” says Biersack. The process is repeated at 12 locations, each .5 miles apart, and takes about three hours.

“It’s tough on an old guy like me, but worth the price of admission,” Biersack jokes. “On one hand, I’m contributing to an important conservation effort. On the other, I’m out in the woods in the middle of nowhere with the moon and stars overhead, listening to these primordial animal sounds.” When asked to describe the experience, “words like ‘eerie’ and ‘magical’ come to mind.”

Though Biersack may sound like a veteran, he’s been birding just 7 years. Following a 30-year career in Washington D.C. as spokesperson for the Federal Elections Commission, he and his wife retired to the outskirts of Lexington in 2012.

Hoping to “make friends” and “learn more about the area’s natural landscape,” Biersack attended a Rockbridge Bird Club (RBC) meeting. As one of the oldest ornithological groups in the state, the RBC’s roster was studded with fascinating members. There was Rhodes scholar, Bob Baxton. Virginia Military Institute biology professor, Dick Rowe. Former Virginia Wilderness Committee president, Laura Neale. And the list went on.

“Everyone was just so welcoming,” says Biersack. “Their knowledge about birding was immense—yet, they went

out of their way to make me, a complete novice, feel comfortable.”

Biersack was hooked. Within months, he was contributing to newsletters and had been elected secretary. With the help of veterans like Neale and Rowe, his birding improved at breakneck pace.

Approaching the VABBA2’s launch in 2016, the club was rife with excitement. “This is the largest and most comprehensive avian survey undertaken in state history,” says atlas coordinator, Ashley Peele. “Its importance cannot be underestimated.”

Accordingly, the RBC urged members to volunteer. Though interested, Biersack worried his skills were inadequate. Neale, then the group’s vice president, disagreed. “If you enjoy watching birds, you’re qualified to participate,” she asserts. With her encouragement, Biersack attended a training session. The event proved revelatory.

“Atlasing offers a profoundly intimate wildlife experience,” Biersack explains. Furthermore, it was fun. “You’re observing how birds interact with habitat. It’s like you’re eavesdropping on an ecosystem and they’re your guide.”

In early 2017, Biersack signed up to bird in the GWMA—one of the project’s hardest to reach survey areas. The

protected lands would offer a glimpse of birds interacting in undisturbed natural habitats. Contrasting Biersack’s findings with surrounding areas, the data would provide valuable feedback for the effects of land-use and development on avian distribution and breeding.

Far from urban centers, the GWMA is bordered by steep cliffs and dense forests; access is limited to footpaths and service roads. Beyond hunting season, the latter are closed to the public. Reaching the interior from the barriers requires 6-8 miles of hiking, roundtrip.

To conduct a comprehensive avian breeding survey, Biersack needed a key. Knowing he was a dedicated volunteer, Peele worked with DGIF to make it happen.

“It was an atypical situation,” says DGIF bird conservation biologist, Sergio Harding. “But the VABBA2 is one of our primary initiatives. And we wanted to ensure Bob had the tools he needed to succeed.”

Biersack started out birding alone and was astonished by what he found.

“You have to drive 4 miles up a mountain along a windy dirt road just to reach the access gates,” he says. “It’s another 2 miles to the walking trails that carry you



A black-throated green warbler enjoys the high altitude of Goshen WMA for nesting.

Previous page: Goshen WMA in Rockbridge County was the site for Bob Biersack’s birding adventures. Photo by Sergio Harding / DGIF. Inset: A male hooded warbler proclaims its territory. Photo by Cammeron Kline / Shutterstock.com, Illustration by VitaminCo / Shutterstock.com



The veery is a shy, migratory woodland warbler that nests in Virginia and is known for its beautiful spiraling song.

into the deep interior. For Virginia, the isolation is incredible. The landscape is so wild and pristine—it’s like you’re in a place where different rules apply.”

Throughout the spring, summer and fall, Biersack visited about once a week. Time in the woods ranged from 2-4 hours. Revisiting most areas, he became intimately familiar with the property and its unique habitats. His favorites included a string of small, high-altitude meadows atop Ragged and Bratton Mountain.

“As the southern funnel of the Shenandoah Valley, the region is a kind of overlap between the Blue Ridge and Alleghany Mountains,” says Peele. “Accordingly, such meadows often serve as breeding grounds for high-altitude species like rose-breasted grosbeak, veery, black-throated green warbler, and more.”

Biersack would hike into the woods, find a grassy spot near the edge of the forest, and sit down. At first, nothing happened. But 10-20 minutes later, like flipping a switch, on came the nature.

“It was like the birds and animals had accepted me,” he laughs. “They’d start peeping out, and, whenever I’d think,

‘Okay, it’s time to move on,’ something new and interesting would happen.”

One particular experience stands out. Hoping to survey the Meadow Ground—the largest of the WMA’s grassy areas—Biersack set out around dawn on a spring morning. Midway into the 2-mile hike, he stopped in a clearing.

“Suddenly, a tiny little bird landed on a tree branch not 20 feet away,” says Biersack. Initially, he thought it was a wood thrush. Then came the beautiful downward-spiraling song of a veery. “It’s such a neat, distinctive sound,” he continues. “I’d seen them high in the Blue Ridge, but they’re typically pretty quick to disappear. And this guy was *right there*, just hanging out.”

Then a second veery showed up. When the pair began to play, Biersack was overjoyed. But the show wasn’t over yet.

“I was getting ready to leave, when all these warblers started appearing,” he says. First came a tiny black-and-white. Minutes later, a black-throated blue and black-throated green emerged. Finally, a pair of bright-yellow hooded warblers—which also began playing. Biersack was overwhelmed. “I couldn’t believe my

eyes,” he says. “I sat there for an hour, just observing and listening to their calls. It was an incredible treat.”

On the way out, a gray catbird swooped onto the path ahead of him. In a distraction display, it pretended to be hurt. When Biersack got close, it flittered ahead, leading him away from the meadow and, likely, its nesting site.

Heading into the fourth of the Atlas’s five seasons, Biersack has nearly completed his survey of the GWMA. All that remains are a few nocturnal birding sessions. Though the Atlas has more than 1,000 volunteers statewide—and a collective log of about 50,000 field-hours—most of the effort has been focused on northern and eastern Virginia. Much of the state’s southern and western territory remains un-surveyed. Biersack hopes his story will help that change.

“I am profoundly grateful that I overcame my reservations and signed up to help with the VABBA2,” he says. “Not only is it a necessary conservation effort, the project introduced me to a fantastic wildlife area that I probably wouldn’t have visited otherwise. Today, I tell every birder, hiker, hunter, angler, whatever: ‘If you love wildlife and the outdoors, help out with the Atlas. You won’t regret it!’”

Also, he says, visit the Meadow Ground. ✨

Eric J. Wallace is a writer and avid lover of the outdoors. His work has appeared in more than 50 national publications.



RESOURCE:

To learn more about the VABBA2 project, check out:
<http://amjv.org/vabba/the-atlas>

