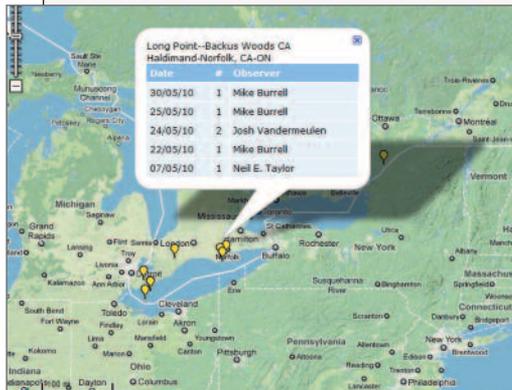


eBIRD

birding: the next generation By Mike Burrell



eBird automatically keeps all of your lists for you.
It breaks them down by province, country, and county and by life, month and year.



eBird can display powerful maps for a given species.
Shown here is the map for Cerulean Warbler observations in Ontario in 2010 (note Kingston area sightings are blocked by the bubble). Clicking on any pushpins displays details on the exact dates and observers.

The types of birders are as varied as the species they watch, and each of them has their own reasons, motivation, and methods for doing what we all love to do: watch birds. But in 2002, the Cornell Lab of Ornithology and the National Audubon Society launched **eBird**, a new, online tool that is designed for every birder, no matter what type you may consider yourself. Shortly after, in 2006, Bird Studies Canada launched the Canadian portal, **eBird Canada**. Since then, more than 2700 users have entered over 230,000 checklists, reporting detailed occurrence data for at least 550 species in Canada alone. Take notice everyone, as this is the future of citizen science and birding's jump into

the 21st century. eBird now covers the entire western hemisphere plus New Zealand and is slated to go worldwide.

Why do I think eBird is the future of birding? It can serve many different functions such that it should appeal to every birder, whether you are a government scientist looking for distribution of a species-at-risk, a lister wanting to keep detailed country, province, or county lists, a backyard birder who wants to look up when exactly it was that you had your first Cape May Warbler in your yard, a travelling birder who wants to know where Snail Kites have been seen in the last month before they head to Florida, or even the high school student who wants to find out what type of birds they could see in a local park. eBird can do all of that and more.

How does eBird work?

eBird is essentially an online database that anyone can contribute bird sightings to. Sightings are uploaded in the form of checklists. Each checklist has detailed information on the date, location, and effort. To submit a checklist, users create an account on the eBird webpage. Based on the location and date a user specifies for their checklist, filters are applied to flag rare species or high counts for that location and date – a feature especially useful for beginning birders. Flagged records are examined by volunteer reviewers who may contact the user for more information before the record is accepted (i.e. allowed into the public database). Even if your record is not immediately accepted into the public database, it will always appear in your personal account. From the records that are accepted into the public database, a variety of statistics can be performed; the most commonly used is frequency. Frequency is calculated for each quarter of a month and is the percentage of checklists submitted that contains a given species for a given area.

What's in it for me?

You might be thinking that eBird just sounds like extra work, with the benefits seeming to go mostly to others. At first, you might have to keep regularly reminding yourself to enter your checklists. But if you make it part of your birding routine, it is no different than keeping a birding journal. The great thing is you can take it as seriously as you want to; some people submit checklists every day while

others submit only one or two a month. When away from internet access, I keep my sightings in a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet which can be directly uploaded to eBird at a later date. Once you begin using eBird, you will quickly come to realize the benefits of it.

Detailed list keeping

Because all submitted checklists have the date and location, eBird automatically does what most (very costly) commercial bird listing software already does – keeps every kind of list you can think of. eBird can generate year and life lists for any specific location(s), county/district/regional municipality, province/state, or country. You can then explore these lists in detail; for instance, I can display my Ontario life list, and then see that I saw my first Kentucky Warbler at Point Pelee National Park on May 7, 1996. I could then click on Kentucky Warbler and get a list of all of the dates/locations where I have seen it in Ontario, or I could click on Point Pelee National Park and see my life list for that location, or I could click on the date and see the complete list of birds I saw that day.

Bird-finding in the 21st century

Another great use of eBird is to find birds of interest. This is of use to both travelling and local birders. Most readers will be familiar with *OntBirds*, the rare bird email alert system run by OFO. While *OntBirds* is reserved for provincial rarities, there are often times when birders are interested in knowing about the presence of less rare species that might not meet the criteria to have been posted on *OntBirds*. Also, there may be many birders who are not OFO members or aren't aware of *OntBirds*, but do use eBird to keep track of their sightings, including the species you're interested in. eBird offers a couple tools for just this sort of function. First, eBird has an email alert system, which is still being developed. Currently, you can subscribe for a specific province or state and an automatic email will be sent to you whenever someone reports a species to eBird that you have not seen in the province you specified. The email is complete with a link to a map showing the location of the sighting. Some people may be concerned about reporting sensitive species; eBird suggests you wait a couple of weeks before entering sensitive species records or to be less specific with the location.

eBird also is a great tool for travelling birders. Many readers will be familiar with seasonal checklists (such as those from Long Point and Algonquin, which have bar graphs for each species depicting the relative abundance throughout the year). eBird can instantly generate seasonal bar graphs for any location, county, province, or country. That means if you are going to Florida in February, you can create a checklist of species for the specific counties in Florida where you will be and see the frequency of checklists each species has been reported on for that time and location. You can even take it one step further and click on a particular species to view a map showing recent and older sightings for whatever time period and location you specified.

This technology is becoming quite accessible, with apps for iPhones and hopefully other smart phones, meaning you can have access to all of this right in the field. On a recent trip to the southwest, a friend of mine logged on to one of the apps for eBird on his iPhone. He was able to ask for a map showing any rarities that had been reported nearby – it led him to his lifer – Lawrence's Goldfinch.

Getting started with eBird

Obviously, the first thing you'll need is a computer with internet access. The Canadian portal is available at www.ebird.ca. You'll have to register as a new user and create a login name and password. Once you have an account, you can start exploring the data or submitting your own observations. eBird is equipped with import tools, so if you have been using another program to keep your sightings, you should be able to import them into eBird, or, at the very least, export your older records from your software to a spreadsheet and import that. Each time you enter a checklist for a new (to your account) location, you will have to tell eBird where the new location is. The best way to do this is to use the Google maps interface within eBird to select a public birding location (known in eBird as a 'HotSpot') or a new location that you can name. Another great tool to be aware of in eBird is checklist sharing. This can significantly reduce the amount of checklists you enter if you often go out birding with other people. If a group goes out together, one person can enter the data and then share that checklist

with everyone else – after you accept the checklist into your account, it will show up the same as if you had each entered it on your own.

I hope you will consider becoming a regular contributor to eBird. If you start asking around, you will be surprised at the number of birders who have already begun using it. As birders we are all out there collecting valuable data, no matter our level of expertise. Think of the amount of data that we can contribute every time one of us records our observations. If eBird existed 50 years ago, we could have a complete record of all of the changes to bird's ranges and abundances; now that it does exist it provides an opportunity to track the next 50 years. If we as a group are keeping good records, it provides much more power to justify our hobby.

I would be happy to help get you started, or answer any questions you may have about eBird. You can reach me by email at michofski@hotmail.com.

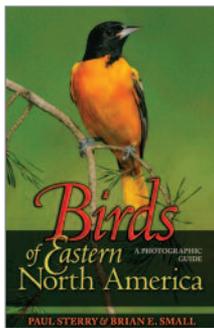
Book Reviews

Birds of Western North America: A Photographic Guide

2009. Paul Sterry & Brian E. Small. Princeton University Press, Princeton, New Jersey.

Birds of Eastern North America: A Photographic Guide

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This two-volume set continues with the trend to produce more photo-based guides, incorporating high quality digital images, created by some of North America's top wildlife photographers. Both Sterry and Small are well respected worldwide for their mastery with the camera. The scope of the two-volume set is ambitious — covering the entire western and eastern halves, respectively, of mainland North America (excluding Mexico) and the Arctic and Subarctic territorial islands of the U.S. and Canada (excluding Hawaii).

Each book is similarly laid out with introductory pages that include information on how to use the book, bird topography with an accompanying abbreviated glossary, information on plumage, habitats, migration and movements. Following this are the primary identification plates — 186 in western guide and 149 in the eastern one. Each volume adds five and four plates, respectively, for “Out of the Ordinary” species. The accounts themselves provide standard information on each species, such as common and scientific name, identification characteristics, voice, status and

habitat and observation tips. Each account is accompanied by a range map produced by the Cornell Laboratory of Ornithology and of course, photographs — lots of them. Each species has at least two photos depicting, adult vs. immature, male vs. female or forms and morphs.

For novice to intermediate birders, this book will become a very useful resource and will be both informative and entertaining, but, for advanced birders, it falls short. There are too many gaps in the information provided and the species covered are not inclusive enough to sate the appetite of the more serious birders. Here are some of my concerns and observations:

There is a huge overlap between the eastern and western species covered in each volume and this results in much duplication. All of the introductory information is duplicated in both volumes, including the use of most of the photographs of species in common. In fairness, the western guide does show western forms and morphs, while the eastern does the opposite, so some effort was made to reflect regional variations of widespread species.

The range maps are well done and depict both summering and wintering grounds. I found that more detail showing migration routes between the breeding and wintering grounds would have been helpful. While the ranges shown are generally very good and have incorporated recent data from the many atlases that have been undertaken across North America, two species jump out at me: the maps for the Trumpeter Swan and Bald Eagle are outdated and do not reflect the recent expansion, across Ontario in particular.

The photographs are very good in most cases and care was taken to choose ones that actually show as many key identification features as possible. The authors and photographers are to be commended. Some plates however, such as the swifts, depict species where the identifying characteristics are not easily recognized.