

eBird Class Notes, November, 2020

<https://secure.birds.cornell.edu/casso/account/create>

This page also contains links to articles and tutorials on how to get started with eBird. All free.

What Is eBird? Your personal checklist, but also a global database

Course Outline

1. Overview of eBird and its impact on ornithology
2. Using eBird for researching birding spots and species locations
3. Posting your observations to eBird

Parts 1 and 2 will be covered in Zoom presentations, which will be recorded so you can access them for a week or so (depending on the amount of storage available on the GGAS Zoom account).

Part 3 (Posting your Observations) will be similarly discussed online, but the following expansion of the material offers greater detail worth reviewing as you begin posting your observations.

Relax. Birding is supposed to be fun. eBird is your tool, not your master. Posting your observations with the degree of rigor that the eBird managers would like can be time-consuming and a pain in the butt. Decide for yourself how rigorous you wish to be. Please don't let the suggested protocols discourage you from using eBird. As long as your postings are accurate, you'll be adding valuable data to the project even if you don't strictly adhere to the protocols.

Following are suggestions, requests, and comments from several eBird reviewers (i.e., county editors). Disclaimer: A lot of this stuff won't make sense until you gain more experience posting your observations. Also, you'll note some differences in opinions among the eBird/Cornell managers, county reviewers, and experienced individual birders about how to record observations and navigate the various features of the app.

- Visualize your audience: Your posts build your personal checklist. But you're also adding to a valuable scientific database. When you post, put yourself in the shoes of a researcher years in the future who is trying to make sense of your data. See Kimball Garrett's screed on this subject, starting on page 4.

- Post complete records (Traveling or Stationary, not Incidental or Historical) whenever possible. Only complete records build vital Trends in the database.
 - Please report ALL the birds you see, not just the highlights of your walk (pigeons and starlings are scientifically important, even if not interesting to you). See Best Practices about complete vs. incomplete lists at <https://support.ebird.org/en/support/solutions/articles/48000795623-ebird-rules-and-best-practices#Know-when-to-start-a-new-list>
- Use Hotspots—not personal locations—whenever possible. Hotspots aggregate many observations into a single easily accessed location. In contrast, learn when using a personal location would be preferable. In general, use the nearest hotspot if you are birding within 5 miles of it and the habitat is similar. See the Best Practices page at <https://support.ebird.org/en/support/solutions/articles/48000795623-ebird-rules-and-best-practices#Know-when-to-start-a-new-list>
- Keep records in the field—please don't post your sightings from memory, especially way after the fact. Otherwise, you might get an email from a reviewer asking if you really saw a Scrub-jay on Catalina Island (there are none).
- Report to the level of detail you're sure of.
 - If you're sure of the species, then report the species.
 - However, if you're not sure of the species (e.g., Cooper's vs. Sharp-shinned Hawk), please use the less-detailed description (e.g., "Accipiter sp." or "Cooper's/Sharp-shinned").
 - Be careful about the overuse of subspecies. Only report the subspecies if you're sure of the identification, not because that's the expected subspecies in a particular location.
- Numbers, not "X": Please enter your best count estimate for every species you record. If you simply mark "X" for the number of individuals, this has little scientific value. However, you don't need to count every individual. Entering an "order of magnitude" number provides valuable data (e.g., 500 Willets is much different than 50, and entering a good-guess number is much more valuable than entering "X").

Learn how: If you're not familiar with counting large groups of birds, the eBird tutorials show different techniques. When reporting large numbers of birds, it's helpful to enter a note telling the reviewer how you counted (e.g., "I counted by tens," or "I counted by hundreds," or "I attempted to count every individual") so the reviewer knows you weren't just guessing. This is especially helpful if your count triggers a "high count" filter.

- 0 is data, too. If you miss a bird that you expect or hope to see, post "0" with a comment as to why you're including it in your list. It's a handy reference for yourself and adds data to the global database.

- Record your mileage and hours correctly (by the way, both eBird and the Audubon Christmas Bird Counts use this same protocol):
 - One-way Mileage: On an out-and-back route, record your one-way mileage only. If you're using the tracking feature on the eBird phone app, you'll need to adjust the reported mileage since it will record all your mileage.
 - All Hours: Record all your hours spent birding, regardless of your route. So to be clear, record only your one-way mileage but all your hours (this always seemed counterintuitive to me).
 - On an out-and-back, try not to double-count birds.
 - Traveling lists should be no more than 5 miles. All lists should be no more than 4 hours. Lists of fewer miles and hours provide more granular data, so are preferred.

- The eBird phone app is handy but can be problematic. Let your personal preferences dictate how you use the app.
 - Pen? Paper? One reviewer bemoans the number of errors committed using the app. He suggests using written notes in the field and transferring them to eBird at home, or at least reviewing your eBird list at home after birding.
 - Look, don't type! Another reviewer sees people being distracted by the app when they would be better off paying attention to the birds around them. Like the reviewer above, she suggests using paper notes in the field. Or, if using the app, restrict its use to every 10 minutes or so.
 - Tracking: Yes or No? The eBird managers suggest using the tracking feature on the app so that your exact birding location gets recorded as part of your posting. Your call.

- Filters and queries from the reviewer are your friends, not your enemies.
 - The automated filters exist to prevent inadvertent posting errors (e.g., you input "Mountain Quail" when you meant "Calif. Quail" in Tilden Park, or you put in "400" when you meant "4"). So don't panic or take offense when you trigger a filter.
 - Likewise, don't panic or take offense if you get an email from a reviewer questioning one of your posts. Here's what a local reviewer says about this: "I want all eBirders to know that they need not get defensive or feel offended or worst of all discouraged from eBirding when they get a review letter. I look at every review as a teaching/learning opportunity for both parties."

Personal Best or Research Contribution?

Kimball Garrett's Posting Suggestions

Kimball is a pillar of the California birding community; he's the ornithology collections manager at the LA County History Museum and also the LA County eBird editor. He has strong opinions about how eBird is used and misused. He posted this article on the LA County Birds site on August 24, 2017 <https://groups.io/g/LACoBirds/topics>.

Birders,

Fall migration is in full swing. The rate of use of eBird by Los Angeles County birders continues to skyrocket, with the obvious benefit of much denser information about our avifauna, but also with the drawbacks of continuing and even accelerating issues with data quality. So here's another in a series of occasional messages intended to improve the eBird database for our area. If you know eBird users who are not on this list serve, always feel free to share these messages with them. This mini-rant will cover three issues: (1) Adding descriptions; (2) dealing with subspecies options; and (3) improving metadata in the "Comments" section.

DESCRIPTIONS

This could be subtitled "There is a happy medium between Curtis Marantz and the average eBird user." We all know it is now easy (and desirable) to upload photos and audio files to one's eBird checklist. But when you are asked to document a flagged record, PLEASE keep in mind that such evidence is only part of the documentation that should support unusual records. I am constantly amazed at how many eBirders will attach a photo (or 2 or 3...) to their checklist to document a rarity and will not write a single word about the sighting. In many cases the photos are less than ideal, and might not even help support the identification; so we rely on the added value of a written description. This is where Curtis comes in..... you don't have to write a Marantzian tome of 4000 words to document a rarity (though such detail is helpful). But please add information about the circumstances of the sighting and any characters (e.g. size and structure, movements, other behaviors, plumage, voice, etc.) that are not evident from the photos as well as amplification of what is shown in the photos. And indicate how similar species were considered and eliminated. I fear that the simple art of writing a good description of a bird to document a sighting and confirm its identification is disappearing from our birding culture. I largely blame the apparent need for instant gratification through smartphones and apps – why not jot notes down in the field (they have these things called pens, pencils and notebooks) and then add a thoughtful and detailed description based on these notes when you're home sitting at your computer? Yes, it takes time. But the alternative is having what might be a perfectly good record questioned or even invalidated by a reviewer. And as I have mentioned before (let's call this section "Sandwiches I have Eaten While Birding"), concentrate on relevant points in your description and leave the irrelevant things out.

SUBSPECIES

I strongly urge eBirders to enter data ONLY at the level of species, except in the few cases where well-marked subspecies are (usually) readily identifiable in the field; species with field-identifiable subspecies or subspecies groups in L. A. County include but are not limited to: Yellow-rumped Warbler, White-crowned Sparrow, Green-winged Teal, Red-tailed Hawk, Merlin, Northern Flicker (and intergrades), Bell's Vireo, Hermit Thrush, White Wagtail, Red Crossbill (call types), Bell's Sparrow, Savannah Sparrow, Fox Sparrow, and Dark-eyed Junco. In some of these cases only one subspecies (or none) occurs regularly. In some other cases, observers with extensive experience and good studies of the bird in question can also reasonably determine subspecies (e.g. Orange-crowned Warbler, Marsh Wren, Song Sparrow, Canada Goose, Cackling Goose, Leach's Storm-Petrel, Red-breasted Sapsucker). There is nothing to be gained by indicating a subspecies based ONLY on your locality – so it's preferable to enter "Osprey" rather than "Osprey (carolinensis)" even if you can be 99.9% certain that a local Osprey is of the North American carolinensis subspecies. An exception would be if you were able to study the bird well enough to rule out the other Osprey subspecies based on actual characters rather than locality. A lot of the subspecies entry issues seem to arise from the use of smartphone apps, so when entering data via such an app be sure to select the full species rather than a particular subspecies (unless you can document the subspecies). To the novice birder, some of the subspecies names might seem completely appropriate, even though they're not. A recent example is a birder who entered "Willow Flycatcher (Southwestern)" on the assumption that a Willow Flycatcher in the "southwest" should be that subspecies. In fact, of course, the "Southwestern" Willow Flycatcher (*Empidonax traillii extimus*) is known from Los Angeles County in recent years only by a very few possible breeding pairs, with essentially no documented records of migrants. So 99.9% of Willow Flycatchers in L. A. County will be what eBird calls "Willow Flycatcher (Northwestern) (*Empidonax traillii brewsteri/adastus*)", even though Los Angeles County is hardly "northwestern." Why not just enter as "Willow Flycatcher"?

METADATA AND INTRODUCTORY COMMENTS

When you enter an eBird checklist you can make comments about that birding event in the Comments section on the second screen ("Date and Effort"). It is unfortunate that eBird does not require users to enter information about conditions, but until they institute that capability, you can use the "Comments" section to add information on, for example, sky conditions, wind conditions, precipitation, temperature, tide, and other physical environmental conditions that can greatly impact your bird list. Indicate how you covered the area (route, areas of concentration, etc.). Also a description of the habitat, any disturbances or other conditions that might impact your bird list, names of birding companions (these show up automatically only if the list is "shared" with them), condition of vegetation and food crop, and anything else that seems relevant. Sure, you could even mention what kind of sandwich you had for lunch.

All of the above must seem like “work,” but I suspect a large number of you use eBird for the common good as a thorough avifaunal record rather than simply for an accounting of your sport-listing accomplishments. Joseph Grinnell and other “early” naturalists in California might have spent hours writing in their journals about each of their field outings, and that information is invaluable to researchers today. Can’t we, at least in some small part, try to do the same?

Kimball

Kimball L. Garrett
Ornithology Collections Manager
Natural History Museum of Los Angeles County
900 Exposition Blvd.
Los Angeles, CA 90007 USA
(213) 763-3368
kgarrett@...
<http://www.nhm.org/site/research-collections/ornithology>