

# Active Field Birders, the Process of Exploring, and the Importance of Status and Distribution

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The title of this commentary at first might seem to involve a hodgepodge of several mostly unrelated topics, but they are actually related—so please bear with me.

Active field birders are those who regularly go birding as best their schedules permit, be it in their local region or farther afield, or both. They are the ones who find most of the rare birds that lots of other birders chase, and they are the ones who investigate poorly known and under-birded locations and regions. Active field birders are the ones who tend to *explore*. But sometimes they get lost in the shuffle and hype compared to those who set listing records or who post the most and scream the loudest on the local birding listservs.

Don't get me wrong. Setting listing records shows dedication, effort, and probably some craziness—and a good dose of fun. Chasing and seeing lots of rarities is great. I am a huge fan of these pursuits. A serious career lister, I happily chase rarities (out to some “reasonable” distance) found by others. But as the years go by, I find myself get-

ting more and more satisfaction from doing my own birding and exploring, rather than just spending much of my time chasing other people's birds and being the 30th person that day to go to the same eBird hotspot or other site posted on the local listserv.

All that said, nothing gets my hackles up more than hearing someone complain about how other people should or shouldn't bird, especially when it comes across in some holier-than-thou way. Let people bird the way they like. If they are having fun, or gain any level of self-satisfaction, then that's what matters most. If they are also somehow contributing to our knowledge of bird status and distribution, changing bird populations and conservation, bird behavior, and the like—then so much the better. Sure, let's encourage contributing to the greater good. But such “birding with a purpose” is not a requirement.

Our personal favorite types of birding vary greatly. For some folks, nothing is better than studying bird migration and trying to correlate it with weather phenomena. For

Not surprisingly, **Common Nighthawks** exhibit some geographic variation in plumage across their extensive breeding range. Less appreciated—except by birders who are up on S&D (“status and distribution”)—is the remarkable geographic variation in the timing of migration. West of the Rockies, Common Nighthawks migrate much later in spring than they do farther east. The species may also be showing a long-term shift in the timing of fall migration, especially in the East. Further work is needed, and efforts by active field birders will teach us more about this bird and how to protect its populations. *Pawnee National Grassland, Colorado; August 2009. Photo by © Bill Schmoker.*





Fall **Orange-crowned Warblers** are understandably hard to identify, but knowing when and where to look can ease the ID process. In eastern North America in fall, a great “field mark” for this bird is the date of the sighting. After late September, the species is uncommon but regular away from the breeding grounds. Before that date, Orange-crowns are remarkably rare—and over-reported! A drab yellow warbler seen in mid-September, let alone mid-August, in the East is almost certainly a Yellow Warbler, a species that is uncommon to rare after early October. Know “S&D”—status and distribution—and you’re less likely to confuse Orange-crowned and Yellow warblers. *Cape May, New Jersey; October 2011. Photo by © Tom Johnson.*

some it might be seawatching, hawkwatching, bird banding, or night birding. Perhaps it is submitting to eBird at the end of a day in the field. For others it might be picking through a mixed-species flock in a tropical forest. Others, myself included, get their biggest thrill searching for rarities at a variety of desert oases, checking some semi-seedy but productive urban site that all the other local birders ignore, or spending oodles of time combing isolated patches of struggling greenery on some god-forsaken windswept, rain-blasted offshore island. For yet others, it’s all about year, county, state/province, or ABA Area lists, and doing so chiefly by chasing stakeouts, perhaps to the point of heading straight home each time without ever doing any additional birding. And then there are the “patch workers” and “green birders,” folks who elect to bird locally and/or without the assistance of internal combustion

engines. It may well be a combination of these styles. We all have our favorites—or not.

But I’d like to make a plug for birding the less trodden sites—to explore, and by doing so helping to contribute to our knowledge of avian status and distribution (S&D).

**B**irders, like all human beings, tend to follow the crowd. In the past, many observers went only to the latest rarity hotspot as divulged by the local phone RBA, or only to the places written up in the local bird-finding guides. For many of today’s birders, it is the “eBird hotspot.”

A friend of mine who is one of the most active birders in one of the most rarity-rich regions in the ABA Area—and who also has the thankless task of keeping the mass of local bird records—recently observed: “I think eBird has the potential effect of actually encouraging many birders to

bird at fewer and fewer locations, e.g. hotspots, now accessible via Hotspot Explorer. This makes it harder to avoid the hordes at hotspots but easier to avoid them elsewhere.” I should note that, in March 2014, eBird addressed this concern by also encouraging its users to use the Hotspot Explorer to find places that *weren't* being adequately canvased.

A different, sarcastic friend of mine wrote, “The people just check the local hotlines, go to the specific site, then blast birdsong from their smartphones until something comes out, perhaps they misidentify it, submit it, and then bristle if asked for details of any sort.” This is clearly cynical, but I bet most of us have seen something like this in the field. And while it is okay for birders to decline to document rarities, they shouldn't then expect that their reports will be included in the scientific record.

The importance of S&D goes beyond its simple value as data points of avian geography. For starters, it is crucial in bird conservation efforts. Various “bird conservation plans”—generated by organizations like Partners in Flight and implemented by agencies like the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service—depend critically on S&D data from dedicated field birders. Also, The Nature Conservancy's “eco-regional plans” have benefited importantly from the contributions of field birders with detailed knowledge of the S&D of threatened bird populations across broad landscapes. Knowledge of S&D makes us better birders. And it makes the whole experience of birding more rewarding and satisfying.

There are consequences of *not* knowing S&D. The lack of appreciation for S&D has tripped up many birders—as *much as not knowing field marks*. Yet far more birders spend their time studying field guides—or nowadays perhaps their phone apps—for the visual and aural clues, and ignore the maps and other distributional information. They don't read, or even own, most of the important regional,

state, or provincial S&D books; they don't read and subscribe to the ABA's journal *North American Birds*; and they don't study the cautionary and educational posts dealing with these topics on the eBird website.

A particular problem involves the report of a rarity by a birder who was unaware *at the time of the sighting* that such a species is unexpected in a given area, or at a certain time of year, or in such high numbers. Such reports, I have found, are far more prone to be in error, because the observer is unlikely to carefully, critically study the bird, does not double-check field marks, does not take field notes, or might not attempt to get a photo. This lack of appreciation of S&D can snowball further. After the fact, when the observer is queried by a regional editor, records committee, CBC compiler, or eBird reviewer, that person then learns that such-and-such is unusual. What happens then? Do the requested details subsequently submitted describe what that bird truly looked like? Not always. Instead, it is human nature to submit a description that is a hybrid of what we remember combined with what we “know” the species should look like. Inaccurate, after-the-fact recollections are well known and based on ample research in psychology and criminal justice. (See Charles T. Scialfa's article, “The Doubtful Birder: Decision Making and Field Identification,” *Birding*, March 2012, pp. 38–44, available online: [tinyurl.com/Scialfa-Birding](http://tinyurl.com/Scialfa-Birding).)

I am an eBird reviewer for part of Alaska's Bering Sea region, where very few birders actually live. Thus, I often see what has been termed the “Visiting Birder Syndrome,” basically, very poor knowledge of S&D in the region. I see many reports in which observers have bypassed eBird's request for supporting documentation (description, photo, etc.). Later, when an eBird reviewer personally follows up with the observer, the response may be something along the lines of: “I had no idea this species was rare there, but I see lots of them at home so know the species well.” I tend

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A generation ago, the **Cave Swallow** (shown here with a Northern Rough-winged Swallow) was considered a “mega”—an extreme rarity—in the northeastern U.S. and Atlantic Canada. Today it is routine in large numbers in late fall at such places as Cape May, New Jersey, and it is regular to New England, the maritime provinces, and the eastern Great Lakes. This remarkable shift in the occurrence of the species has been thoroughly, credibly, and commendably documented by active field birders who contribute their sightings to *North American Birds*, bird record committees, eBird, and various regional ornithological publications.

*Philadelphia, Pennsylvania; November 2008.*

*Photo by © Tom Johnson.*

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not to validate these reports. Of course this problem has existed since the dawn of birding time whenever written details have been requested.

A final plea: I know a good number of formerly active field birders who are less active now. Some have good reasons: job requirements, family, health issues. But others are spending more and more time “virtual birding” in front of a computer or tapping at their smartphone, and less and less time birding in the field. Yes, I, too, spend plenty of hours each day in the virtual birding world; see my commentary, “Birding and the Internet: The Dark Side,” *Birding*, January/February 2008, pp. 36–40, available online: [tinyurl.com/Lehman-dark-side](http://tinyurl.com/Lehman-dark-side). However, I have made it a personal goal to go birding every morning *before* I turn on my computer or all my latest phone apps. I try to bird at least as much in the field as I do in cyberspace. I realize that my lifestyle and, luckily, my work schedule allow me such a luxury. Still, I think I can say this to almost anyone: Pick up your binoculars and put down that mouse!

Have I failed to follow my own admonition to avoid being too judgmental of other people’s birding styles? I hope not. But do consider the encouragement—at least from time to time—to take the road less trodden. Search and you will find. If possible, make a lasting contribution. And study status and distribution!

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