

This is for those of you out there who don't use eBird because you are afraid of the time it takes to use it or avoiding it because you don't feel it benefits your birding. If you shy away from it, at least read the first three paragraphs (below one and the two next underlined ones with the numbered items) and if any of that info applies to you, then I would absolutely encourage you to spend the time with eBird and reading the rest of my write-up.

I wanted to follow up on all the talk this year about eBird with my recent experiences as I think it might help a lot of people. It is a rather long write-up on exactly how I have started using eBird, including getting my life/county lists uploaded.

My resistance to eBird:

I have been very resistant to doing eBird as it was rather time consuming. Although I know it was benefiting research, it was a lot of time spent without any real benefits to me and I was already strapped on time for enough other causes. I am all about donating time to causes with no benefit to me as many of you know, but in this case it would've been nice for eBird to help me in addition to providing data. It's a bit selfish I know, but it is the truth that I, like many many others, am more inclined to use something regularly if I am reaping some kind of benefit.

What spending time with eBird has done for me:

I have been able to successfully upload my life and county list. Total time was about 6 hours for around 450+ entries (an additional 2 hours for optional updating) and that was spread over 3-4 days (not a whole lot really). I have reaped huge rewards from it after investing the time.

1) I now have an accurate picture of my lists. I have always counted my Monterey list at 353, yet eBird verified my list was 361. My life list according to my rough calculations was 438, yet eBird confirmed my life list to be 456. So eBird's first help was in verifying my true counts.

2) I receive the notifications that pertain directly to me. If I haven't seen a Blackpoll Warbler in Monterey County, it notifies me when one is seen. I don't get all the other notifications of Turkey Vultures, Rock Pigeons, etc. I have the settings set to hourly so as soon as someone enters in their sighting, I get it no more than 60 minutes after they've entered it. Now it still relies upon people using eBird in a timely manner, but the main point is when someone doesn't use the Birdbox or MBB has a lag, it is one more notification level that is customized just to what I want to see.

3) If I am traveling somewhere that might have a particular species that I have always wanted to see, I can look up where it might be located and spend less time trying to randomly search for it. If I see that there are no swamp hens ever seen at a particular area, I just saved myself hours of unsuccessful searching and can go directly to where they historically have been seen.

4) I am finding the birds faster. The comments or actual GPS location of a sighting allows me to go directly to where it was last seen and have a good idea of where to look. If a bird was seen in the NW corner of a place down low in the shrubs every sighting, I can avoid the aimless high/low wandering I would have normally done.

5) It has inspired me to go birding more. When I get that notification of something I want, I instantly feel that urge to go find it. I have found that I have actually made more time to go out birding than I did prior to eBirding. Likewise, related to #4 above, if I know where to go find something and only have 30

minutes to spare, I am more likely to take a shot and go bird that 30 minutes where prior I would have said, "That area is going to take me at least a couple hours to comb well enough to find that bird." Just recently, I was stuck in traffic and when I saw the eBird report of a rare bird along my route, I decided to spend 20 minutes looking for it rather than 20 minutes in traffic. I found it minutes after arrival and then drove back out where traffic was gone. If it wasn't for the info in eBird I would have never spent the time going and looking.

6) I am recognizing the birds faster. Using the comments in eBird (i.e. juvenal plumaged, look for bill length), I know exactly what to look for and it helps me not only find the birds faster, but also helps me feel more comfortable on my ID of a difficult bird. So using eBird has improved my identification skills.

7) eBird is not a chore, but an investment that WILL pay off. The whole process has showed me that I should not have viewed eBird as a chore, but rather an investment into better birding. Considering the benefits I've received in just the first couple months I've been eBirding, 8 hours is absolutely nothing compared to the lifetime I will spend rewarded.

8) Spending the time uploading my list was like taking a trip back in time. Trying to recall birds had me remembering many fun trips and good memories. I remembered the crazy requirements of clothing, walking style, etc. our guide required us to do in order to find Smith's Longspur in Alaska. I remembered people past like Margaret Moody and my grandmother taking me birding for the first time. I remembered this fantastic meal we had while it was snowing outside birding in Klamath. Spending the time getting set with eBird really reminded me that it wasn't just about birds, but the memories created while birding.

8) I am having more fun birding! I am running into other birders more who in turn inspire me to find out what else they've seen. I find I am more inspired to go search for a bird knowing there are probably 4 or 5 others who will be there as well. It is definitely more fun racing around with everyone rarity chasing.

So in summary, eBird has improved my birding skills, my birding success, my inspiration to get out, streamlined my time, and made it overall more fun.

If any of the above has inspired you to get into eBird, then by all means read on...

Key point to the process:

eBird was quite overwhelming at first, like being overwhelmed with the job of painting a large house. But I found when I just took it one task at a time, like focusing on painting just one corner of a house at a time, the job was done rather smoothly and overall quickly. When divided up into tasks, the overall outcome did not feel like 8 hours at all.

My education about eBird:

Late last year there was discussion about a contest and it prompted a lot of talk about eBird. I attended Rita Carratello's field workshop last year where I learned about the phone app and it definitely shortened the time for me to make entries and increased my interest in making those entries. But it was still a bit confusing and thus timely and as a result remained quite low on my list of priorities with time constraints. Subsequently I decided to do a newsletter dedicated to the topic and then recently released the Q&A in the latest edition. Finally, after doing the latest edition with the Q&A, which included a lot of

questions submitted from birders receiving the eBird edition of the newsletter, I looked more into trying to get eBird to benefit me in addition to research. This was a complaint that I now had heard almost a dozen times from others. The nice thing was that I now had enough information from the field workshop and the two newsletters to streamline my use of eBird and it was a tremendous help.

Getting setup:

It was extremely painless loading the BirdLog app onto my phone. I then went on to the actual eBird website on my home computer and spent about 30 minutes going over the preferences/settings of my eBird account and learned about the different notifications I could use, including notifications for a particular county list, species, or life list bird. My next step was to take on the task of uploading my life list so that eBird could start fully working for me. Over the years I had kept records of location but only the year. I essentially had two lists I was working on, North American and Monterey, which was around 600 possible entries.

Uploading my life list:

I started out painstakingly entering each sighting in and found it was extremely timely at almost 3-5 minutes per bird. A quick email to Brian Sullivan led to discovering a faster way by uploading an excel spreadsheet into eBird. Using the helpful links in eBird I looked at the two ways to upload a list and chose the sample that I thought would be the easiest to create.

Setting up the basics of the list:

I downloaded the sample sheet and then cleared out the boxes to enter in my info. I then went to the ABA website and was able to download a full list of NA bird names which now made it less timely than re-typing every bird name. I copied and pasted the list into the excel spreadsheet. I was taught when I was a kid to write in my bird book above the name of the bird the location and year I saw it. This now made the order of my list based on the order they are in my book page by page. As such, I moved the bird names around so that the excel list order matched my bird book order. This took about 30 minutes. Since I cared about essentially two lists, my NA and Monterey, I made sure that if a bird was seen as a life list in another county as well as spotted in MTY, it received two columns. Example: if I saw my first House Finch in Nevada, then across the top where my location would go I reserved two separate columns, one to enter in the NV location and one to enter the MTY location. If I had wanted to keep track of a different county, I would have needed a 3rd column, etc.

eBird only accepts so much data in one upload based up to column AX and row 52. So once I got to AX, all the bird names from line 53 down were cut and pasted to a new excel page and the process repeated. This took about 45 minutes and the length of time was mostly because I had to flip through the book page by page figuring out how many columns each bird needed, just 1 for NA only or 2 for NA and MTY (3 for a third county, etc.). Once I had figured this out, it actually went pretty quick. I ended up with 11 pages.

Now that my pages were setup, it was time to enter data.

Entering the generic data:

To streamline my time, I picked generic info to start: time 9am, 1 observer, U.S., "stationary", 60 minutes of birding, "N" for complete checklist, and then comments "List building." I then copied and pasted this info across every single box. I was now complete with all the generic info that needed to be added and it only took me minutes.

I was now up to spending about 1.5 hours building my list and was halfway done with the boxes filled.

Entering the location and count data:

This was the most timely of the entire process. I now had to go page by page and at the top enter the locations and then scroll down and put the count in the associated box. I used "X" for each bird, but in hindsight from the guidance many gave me, I would use "1", especially when encountering a potentially rare bird. I got emails on "X" Rose-breasted Grosbeaks when 1 would probably have not gotten the same notice. I just went page to page and went right down the list. This took a total of about 2.5 hours, which honestly wasn't too bad for page by page through a bird book and over 450 entries. I type pretty fast so someone slower might take a little longer.

Uploading:

I followed the directions and "saved as..." each file as a .csv file. The upload went really smooth! Upon each uploaded page I received notifications of corrections needed. If the location couldn't be automatically matched, it asked me to verify. I would select the hotspot I wanted or pick a personal location and it would update all records with the same location. If it didn't understand a species name, then it asked for verification and I would correct it. The first uploads took the longest with locations, but each additional upload had fewer corrections needed as eBird learned what my written location translated to what hotspot. The first couple pages had 20-30 corrections, the middle batch had 10-20 and by the last handful of pages I had only 1-2 corrections per upload. Total time on the uploading was about 2 hours for all 11 pages with corrections.

Updating entries:

Once everything was uploaded, I spent the optional time of going back to some sightings that I had more details about and editing those sightings. Birds that were rare, at a special location, had an actual date, or I even had a picture of, all were updated. I made my whole list alphabetic and then went through and edited any observations I wanted to add more detail. Some sightings where it was a field trip with 10 people, I changed the number of observers. If was traveling or incidental it got changed from stationary. Change in counts. Rare birds got what details I could remember. A generic date of 1-1-1980 now got 12-27-1980 if I had an actual date. I added comments as needed describing the bird or the checklist. I added a pic if I had one. I didn't do that for every observation, just the ones I personally wanted to add or I felt was important. It is important to note at this time though, that if I had an actual date and details about the bird, I removed my general comments of "List building." This now allowed my sighting to become part of the true scientific database rather than just be my own personal list data.

Notifications from eBird verifiers:

Shortly after my list was uploaded, I received many emails from those that verify records in eBird. Most of them had to do with lacking exact date, lacking exact location, lacking details on a rare bird, etc. It was very helpful as it directed me to either go back and enter in as many details I could about the sighting or write them back saying I had none and that they could keep the sighting out of the database. Everyone who contacted me was very understanding and also very helpful. We had discussions about rarities which helped further in my birding knowledge. Total time to go back and address these notifications was 30 minutes.

And suddenly, before I knew it...I WAS DONE!!! The total time from start to finish, including the optional updating of my observations with details and pics and dealing with notifications, was about 8 hours.

Using eBird:

Now that I am fully up and running, I keep up on my eBirding to help my lists. The entries are showing me what I am really not paying attention to...like how many crows, inspiring me to pay attention to ALL birds. I am now thinking of building a yard list to further have fun with birding. When I am out and about and see something interesting, it takes seconds to submit the sighting, possibly helping someone else find what they need and adding to what I have seen.

And thus, my adventure continues with eBird!