

Good News for Massachusetts Birds: Introducing Massachusetts eBird

www.massaudubon.org/ebird

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Listing with a Purpose. Birders typically have the most detailed and accurate information about the birdlife of their favorite birding spots, and many of us keep extensive lists and notes documenting our observations. Yet these valuable records have usually been lost to scientists and conservationists either because they were not recorded according to a prescribed (often cumbersome) census methodology or because there was no convenient way to bring such records together in a single database. Now, thanks to the development of a powerful new Web-based data-gathering tool developed by the Cornell Laboratory of Ornithology and adapted for use in the Commonwealth by Massachusetts Audubon Society, you can make important contributions to our knowledge of the state's avifauna, help protect those natural areas in your community that are most important for bird conservation — and have instant access and analysis capability not only for your own records but to those of other eBirders recording observations from the same localities.

What is eBird? eBird is an easy-to-use, interactive computerized database, which in its basic form lets you keep track of the birds you see anywhere, anytime. You can retrieve information on your bird observations — from your backyard, your neighborhood, your favorite bird-watching locations — any time you want. And you can also access the entire database to find out what other eBirders are reporting from across Massachusetts. The computerized format allows you to view your records cumulatively and to perform simple analyses revealing trends in factors such as arrival and departure dates and breeding distribution. Perhaps the most exciting thing about eBird is that your records, combined with those of other observers, become a powerful tool for bird conservation by supplying scientifically useful data on species distribution and movement patterns in Massachusetts and across the continent.

Why should I eBird? It's fun! If you've never kept systematic birding records before, this is a painless way to experience a whole new level of satisfaction from your birding adventures. It's a great way to save and recall exciting days in the field, and as your records accumulate you can begin to track trends relating to the birds in your life. How do the bird populations at my feeder vary from month to month and year to year? When do the Baltimore Orioles return to nest in my yard each May? Which week do I have the best chance of seeing a Buff-breasted Sandpiper on Plum Island? What's the total number of species that I have seen (or anyone has seen) at my favorite birding hot spot? You can discover the answers using eBird. If you are already a veteran list keeper, eBird makes it easy to record, access, and manipulate your records.

You can make a valuable contribution to science. A recent scientific paper published in the United Kingdom documents alarming population declines in many species over recent decades. The data for this authoritative study came from hundreds of volunteers, “citizen scientists” who contributed their records to a centralized database like eBird. The system allows scientists to uncover patterns in bird movements and ranges across Massachusetts and beyond, including migratory pathways, wintering and breeding ranges, arrival and departure dates, range expansions and contractions, and a host of other important environmental relationships.

It's an important tool for bird conservation throughout the state, the region, and in your own community. Mass Audubon's eBird system includes special files for tracking the status of birdlife on the seventy-nine Important Bird Areas in Massachusetts recently identified by the state's birding community. Another set of files encourages the recording of observations from our 30,000 acres of wildlife sanctuaries. You can also help identify and document the most important bird habitats in your town using eBird—a potentially invaluable tool for community planners trying to establish which open spaces should have priority for protection.

In the near future, we will also be adding specialized eBird functions that will allow you to participate in more complex censuses of selected “birds-to-watch” — species that are not yet endangered but seem to be declining. Are Whip-poor-wills and Eastern Meadowlarks getting rarer in Massachusetts? How rapidly? Where are they surviving best? Can eBird serve as an early warning system for common species, e.g., the decline of Skylarks and other widespread farmland birds in the United Kingdom? The answers to such questions will allow us to devise management strategies for many species before they reach the brink of extinction.

It's a great way to get kids interested in science and nature. Are you a teacher in search of a project that will show students how science works while actually contributing useful data to a national database and getting kids out into the field? Are you a parent looking for a fun and meaningful project to share with your family? eBird's the answer: It's fun. It uses computers (so your kids can teach you!). It's of genuine value to society. It's cool!

How do I eBird? It's easy. Simply keep track of your bird sightings wherever and whenever you can, then log on to the Mass Audubon eBird site, <<http://www.massaudubon.org/ebird>>. You'll find detailed instructions and helpful tutorials on the site, but here are the basic steps:

1. From the “Submit Your Observations” tab, we'll ask you to tell us where you went birding by choosing a location. If you were at a publicly accessible location, you may be able to find your location in our Sanctuary or Important Bird Area list. Otherwise, you can enter the latitude and longitude directly, find the location on the eBird interactive map, or simply enter your observations at the county or city level. You can store the location you select in your “My Locations” list for easy access during future submissions.
2. Next, we'll ask you how and when you were birding. You'll be able to select an


“Observation Type” such as casual observation, stationary count, etc. that most closely matches the type of birding you did. Then fill in the time, distance, or area fields when prompted. We’d also like to know the number of other observers in your party, and if weather affected your ability to record birds.

3. Finally, tell us the species you saw and heard. To report a species, simply enter the number of individuals of each species that you observed. Once you submit your checklist, it will be available for immediate retrieval.

That’s all it takes to eBird! Of course, you’ll find many different ways to view and analyze your data and compare it with other birders’ observations. There is a wealth of fascinating questions to explore!

We Need Your Help! The value of this kind of data increases with the number of records we can accumulate. The more data you can send us from as many localities as possible, the more we will get to know about Massachusetts birds and their conservation status. One way of stating our goal is that we’d like to have “citizen birders” sending us their lists from every city and town in Massachusetts as often as possible — thus securing the Commonwealth’s reputation as The Birders State.

What about Quality Control? The eBird system has a built-in filter that flags unusual records, based on ornithological norms for Massachusetts. If you report seventeen Ivory Gulls from your feeder (or even one), the record is not automatically rejected but is highlighted and reviewed by the Massachusetts eBird editor, Simon Perkins.

You probably have other questions... For the answers please contact the authors at Mass Audubon. The program is up and running now; we hope you’ll be participating soon! 

All three authors can be reached at the Mass Audubon offices in Lincoln, MA. **Taber Allison** is Vice President, Conservation Science; **Christopher Leahy** holds the Gerard Bertrand Chair of Field Ornithology; **Simon Perkins** is a Field Ornithologist. They eagerly await your input to Massachusetts eBird.

