

Review of February program

By Tim Johnson

On Feb. 19, about 70 people braved the snow to hear a discussion of eBird by Chris Wood, Assistant Director of Information Science at the Cornell Lab of Ornithology and lead eBird scientist. His presentation, “eBird and the Elephant’s Child,” took its name from a Rudyard Kipling story about an elephant that was punished for being intensely curious but got revenge in the end! His talk was a fascinating exploration of how everyday curiosity, if appropriately documented and treated with the right statistical tools, can lead to important science and public policy.

Wood began by giving eBird a larger context. He sees its methodology as a tool for understanding natural systems. He believes eBird’s base of citizen observers, with its potential for generating large amounts of data, may be the best available resource for environmental research and conservation. eBird statistics support this view. Wood noted that birders have submitted lists from about 6 million locations and from every country, representing 35 million person-hours in the field.

Wood emphasized that birds are uniquely qualified to be subjects for citizen science: they are ubiquitous and easily detectable; they are indicators of broader ecosystem composition, wherever one might be; and they are also indicators of environmental health. Best of all, people like to engage with them. It might be unproductive, for example, to invest effort in an eFly citizen science initiative.

The great challenge of Wood’s citizen science vision is data quality. Mere humans often don’t document observations rigorously. Wood cited eBird data for Yellow-Headed Blackbirds as an example, showing that the areas where they are most common are also areas with the least photographic evidence. The goal of eBird is to come up with a fine-grained distribution of bird species in space and time, so that one could predict what a seasoned birder would likely find at a given location, season, time of specific day, duration of effort, weather condition and so forth. Wood grouped the obstacles and paths to obtaining such high-quality data from checklists into three categories:

1. Misidentification – eBird has more than 1,800 checklist reviewers. All submitted lists are reviewed and potential flaws are identified by reference to seasonal abundance charts.
2. Individual observer variability – many of us have looked at eBird checklists and asked, “How did I miss all that stuff?” From one birder’s multiple checklists at one location, eBird can generate a “species accumulation curve,” a graph of the number of species seen versus hours of observation. This allows eBird to tell experienced observers from amateur ones. An experienced observer will identify more species in a given time than an amateur under the same conditions, especially if times are short.

Continued on page 6

Field Trips

Continued from page 4

and listen for Boreal Owls. Expect 5 miles of hiking and up to 500 feet of elevation gain after dark. Snowshoes are required. A thermos of warm drink, hand warmers, and a headlight are highly recommended.

Cherry Creek SP Wetlands Loop (Arapahoe County)

Sunday, April 15

8:00 AM - 12:00 PM

Karen von Saltza

and Bill Wuerthele

Email: kvonsaltza@yahoo.com

Phone: 303-941-4881

Trail Difficulty: Moderate

Directions: Meet at the Prairie Loop lot in Cherry Creek SP. State Parks pass or day pass required.

This is a half day of walking that passes through most of the important habitats found in the park over a distance of about 3.5 miles. Trails could be slippery or muddy. Beginning birders are welcome.

Genesee Park (Denver Mountain Parks)

Sunday, April 15

8:00 AM - 12:00 PM

Wendy Wibbens

Email: wibbwj@aol.com

Phone: 303-330-1175)

Trail Difficulty: Strenuous

Maximum Participants: 10

Directions: Driving west, take exit 254 off of I-70 and cross to the south side of I-70. Turn right on Genesee Mountain Road. Drive 1.6 miles to the large, 100-car, gravel group-picnic parking lot. NOTE: Go right at the Road Closed sign at Mile 1.5.

Continued on page 6

Field Trips

Continued from page 5

Expect to see bluebirds, vireos, flycatchers, Western Wood-Pewee, Western Tanager, and Williamson's Sapsucker. We will walk at a leisurely pace on unpaved trails with some steep hills. We may go off trail. Elevation gain is from 7,500 feet of elevation to about 8,200 feet.

Southeastern Colorado Tues, April 17 - Wed, April 18 7:30 AM - 4:00 PM

David Suddjian
Email: dsuddjian@gmail.com
Phone: 831-713-8659
Trail Difficulty: Strenuous
Maximum Participants: 8
Directions: Meet at the RTD
Lincoln Station Park and Ride,
4681 Station Way,
Lone Tree CO 80124.

This is a 2-day trip focusing on shorebirds and waterbirds, with some spots that attract migrant landbirds. We will visit locations in Otero, Bent, Kiowa, Prowers, and Baca counties. Overnight at Lamar on 4/17. Participants are responsible for carpool arrangements in advance and all lodging.

McCabe Meadows Trailhead Saturday, April 21 7:30 AM - 12:00 PM

Wendy Wibbens & Sue Summers
Email: wibbwj@aol.com
Phone: 303-330-1175
Trail Difficulty: Moderate
Maximum Participants: 10
Directions: From Parker Road and Main St, go south on Parker Road 1.3 miles to Indian Pipe Lane. Turn right and make an immediate right into the parking lot for McCabe Meadows.
We will hike along the Cherry

Continued on page 7

REVIEW, continued from page 5

3. Sparse and clumpy data – There is no substitute for large numbers of checklists evenly and densely distributed in space and time across a region, but that does not happen in many places. Wood showed that it is possible to build approximate population density distributions from sparse checklist data by using statistical procedures called STEM (spatio-temporal exploratory modeling). This information can be combined with remote sensing satellite imagery from NASA to identify what habitats bird populations need as they travel through their yearly cycle.

What good is all this? Your checklists can help determine what percentage of your birds live on public lands, whether they are concentrated in local areas at some times of year, where major and minor migration corridors are, and so forth. eBird cooperates with the U.S. Forest Service and Bureau of Land Management to identify public land areas of special conservation importance. For example, in California, in a collaboration with The Nature Conservancy, eBird STEM models identified specific agricultural fields that could be important food sources for migrating shorebirds at certain times. Farmers were paid to flood the fields, which birds indeed used heavily. [An article summarizing this can be found on the eBird website.](#)

To conclude, Wood offered guidelines for eBirders:

1. Report everything the checklist asks for.
2. Stationary counts are best.
3. Use Tracks on eBird mobile if you can.
4. Share checklists with companions.
5. Document rare species and high counts.
6. Be nice to the reviewers, even if your Ruddy Turnstone at Barr Lake didn't make the cut!

The Third Annual DFO Picnic is Right Around the Corner!

By Tom Behnfield

Plans are currently under way for the 3rd Annual DFO "Members Only" Picnic, which will be held in June. The exact date and the location have not been determined yet, but it will be on a Saturday. We hope that you will join 100 or more of your best birding buddies at this signature DFO event.

One of the most fun parts of the Picnic is the planning, so if you would like to help with the planning, please email your returning Picnic Coordinator Tom Behnfield at behnfield@q.com. The DFO Picnic – Bringing Birders and Bratwurst Together Since 2016.