

PATCH BIRDING A CASE FOR PATCH BIRDING

Gary Kohlenberg
Ithaca, NY

My embrace of patch birding came late in my birding run. eBird advocated for this type of birding years ago, but I never learned to love it. As a newer birder it was enough to try and learn all the different species, their habits, and songs. The life checklist didn't seem large enough. Of course, many birds were elusive and their habitats a mystery. Consequently, I would chase the more unusual species wherever they were reported adding to the growing life list and gaining valuable experience with locally rare birds.

Soon, with a growing list of birds and birder friends under my belt, casual competition was the order of the day. The greater birding community encouraged this competition with the eBird Top 100, greatest number of checklists, our own local "David Cup", (largest number of species in the Cayuga Lake Basin per year). What birder/film fan can forget 2011's *The Big Year* immortalizing the yearlong chase for fame and glory?

At some point the change in my birding started, subtly. The rarer species became more of a quest for habitats that might lead to my own finds of good birds instead of burning fuel to chase others' discoveries. One migrant Cape May Warbler singing from a spruce tree, or a Red Crossbill, was greater satisfaction than several birds reported by others. Soon dozens of weekly eBird locations started to dwindle to a few selective migrant traps and local breeding locations. The drive to make my hundreds of eBird lists richer for science overtook the listing drive.

When the great pandemic hit, driving all over God's creation to see birds with its environmental cost seemed out of order. My local patch with its mix of water, woods, and shrubs provided a relaxing refuge from masks, crowds, and stress. Daily trips over the months and in any weather gave a glimpse into a world slowly in tune. Migrant birds appeared and were gone. Local birds sang, bred, raised families, and moved on. Raptors soared and kettled. Mammals grew used to seeing me. My fuel bill plummeted along with my driving time.

The most unexpected change was that the year list did not dwindle. One migrant Lincoln's Sparrow or Swainson's Thrush returned more happiness than I formally received from a greater number of previous examples. Arrival and departure dates started to make sense. How birds use their habitats and their preferences started to become clearer. I gained a greater sense of the carrying capacity of the habitat for numbers of individual birds. The birding became more intuitive with a sense of the natural order in this slice of the world. I could almost fill out a bird list before starting with abundance. A new bird or lingering bird was suddenly like a beacon in the habitat, the "look at me" sign hard to miss. I gained a feel for the breadth of migration. On those days when migrants are reported in

several areas, I can usually be sure that my patch will hold some copies of the new visitors.

I think as time goes on and climate change continues to impact every place, the value of these specific repeated bird lists will grow. eBird's ability to chart abundance, range, frequency, along with migration trends will become more refined. We can be a part of this effort by making regular visits to our patch. Yard list aficionados can adopt a patch to supplement their backyard.

Now that the pandemic is entering a new phase, with trips and groups returning, my desire to go back to usual, pre-pandemic, listing is gone. I find myself missing my patch with its shrubs, trees, and flowing water, wondering if there is something new today. The Mallards have young swimming in a line, the Veeries and Baltimore Orioles are now silent—but are they just invisible or have they moved on like the Red-winged Blackbirds?

I still chase the true rarities, lately Roseate Spoonbill and Wood Stork, but patch birding with 200+ checklists a year is here to stay. Listing will always be fun, and I can now add a more focused approach to my year birding. I encourage all birders to adopt a location to make your own. The benefits are real.