

PATCH BIRDING THE EXPANDED PATCH

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Driving westward from Queens into Brooklyn, the Belt Parkway bends to the south. On early mornings at certain times of year, this is where I find rosy-fingered Dawn, along with hopeful thoughts and the prospect of some birding before work. When traffic is moving well, the miles to Gravesend Bay pass quickly, and, as the road bends back to the right, the early twilight can seem eerily prolonged, as though I were somehow outpacing the sunrise behind me. Then in an instant, the 360 degree ramp onto the Verrazano Bridge destroys the illusion and morning breaks over my Expanded Patch.

For several reasons, I drive much more than most birders—and much more than I otherwise would prefer. Against the many costs of this lifestyle, I've gained intimate familiarity with many local sites over an area that is relatively large, but also contiguous and ecologically cohesive. Comparing and contrasting my favorite places has evolved into a system of purposeful coverage, and it is not an exaggeration to note that I have birded every publicly accessible outer coastal vantage between Conference House Park at the southern tip of Staten Island and Quicksand Pond, on the Rhode Island-Massachusetts border, as well as a large and representative sample of such sites from Cape Charles, Virginia to Portland, Maine. I'm the first to acknowledge that my birding career is unsustainable and unsuited for mass adoption; but I believe that the concept of an Expanded Patch can be generalized and applied at almost any scale. My thesis is that many birders have an Expanded Patch, even if they're not aware of it as such, and that purposeful attention to it is worth the effort.

An Expanded Patch is an area of sustained interest and coverage, across which a birder learns the nuances of status and distribution. Criteria for delineating them are provisional at this point. Because species richness varies so much from region to region in New York, raw species totals are of limited use. As I ponder reaching 300 species at a single site (Robert Moses State Park) and 400 in a county (Suffolk), I recognize that participants in the NYS County Listing project have achieved 300 in just seven of 56 mainland counties. But in any area, sites that are birded in patch-like fashion should be distinguishable from areas covered less regularly in terms of ratios among single sites, between single sites and entire counties, and among counties.

It is easy to identify patch birders by their relatively high species totals at local sites and to ask where, beyond a core patch, the single-site totals drop off steeply relative to those of other birders. What I mean by "steeply" is not arbitrary, even if I am not yet sure of the best criteria. For me, there are many sites throughout Suffolk County where I've recorded at least 60% of my total at RMSP, and even more where I've seen more than 50% and which I feel I know intimately. Notably, the sites with totals 50-60% of RMSP would have >60% if my core patch were not such an outlier in its species richness. Thus, 60% relative to a max site appears to be a good criterion to identify sites that one covers intensively; and the number and spatial distribution of these sites can be used to delineate an Expanded Patch.

Because counties are a unit of focus for many birders and also tracked in eBird, it's easy to see where one's site and county lists drop off relative to one's home territory. If one's Expanded Patch is roughly the whole of a single county, there ought to be few sites in adjacent counties where one has recorded more than 60% of one's single-site max. Conversely, if one finds many such sites, this might indicate an Expanded Patch spanning more than one county. At the next scale, it's easy to find where one's lists for contiguous counties exceed (or fail to exceed) 60% of one's home county total. Testing these criteria against my experience, my totals for adjacent Washington (RI) and Nassau Counties are both 85% of my Suffolk total—and both are clearly (to me) within my Expanded Patch. In contrast, my total for adjacent New London (CT) is just 25% of Suffolk's. In Kent and Newport Counties, adjacent to Washington, my totals also drop off sharply, to 27% and 48%, respectively, at least according to eBird. Closer examination of my historical records might bring Newport closer to EP status, but clearly I haven't been birding there intensively during the live eBird era.

Westward on Long Island, my county totals decline progressively, but not sharply, through Queens (75%) and Kings (64%)—and next-in-line Richmond (61%) is also within my EP, according to the 60% criterion, as I feel it ought to be. Beyond these counties, the drop-off is steep in adjacent New Jersey (not worth calculating), and even in New York (30%) and Bronx (28%) Counties, both within my home *Kingbird* Region 10. The boundaries of my Expanded Patch are thus very distinct, encompassing an east-west coastal swath featuring gradients in human population density, land use, and plant communities.

Identifying the boundaries of your own EP could accomplish several things. It will likely reveal particular sites around the margins of your core patch that deserve more attention, or a neglected corner of your county that could be brought up to the level of coverage applied elsewhere. It may reveal that you already have a multi-county Expanded Patch!

My own patch-style birding has produced a good number of self-found rarities across the six-county EP. I've also seen many rare birds found here by others, and my life list for the EP has grown large, to 418 species. Curiously, chasing rarities within an EP will make each individual county list look worse against the overall total, whereas birding each county intensively will improve this ratio. I've seen 92% of my six-county total in Suffolk, 78% in Washington and Nassau, 70% in Queens, but only 59% in Kings and 56% in Richmond. These numbers suggest that I have a four-county core EP (Washington-Queens), and, indeed, the number of species I have seen in all six counties is just 185, whereas I've seen 260 species in each of the four counties, Washington-Queens.

Building an Expanded Patch is an ecological education available to any birder, and therefore, potentially at least, environmentally progressive. The opposite of birding an Expanded Patch is not birding a smaller patch, but rather any number of things that many of us do already: air travel, chasing rare birds out of patch, focusing on statewide year lists year after year, etc. The ethic of the Expanded Patch is simply a rationale for purposeful reallocation of effort, in any degree.

If you expand your patch, there will be some laughs. I recall my dueling worries as a CBC compiler, between (a) contriving elaborate schemes, involving multiple parties, poachers, and raiders, to round up a staked-out Yellow-breasted Chat (which

would ultimately be missed) on a western Long Island CBC, even as I was toiling (b) to compile the Napatree CBC, where the problem was sorting out the seven chats recorded a few days earlier, not really very far away. And I remember enjoying a rare bird with friends in a New York City park and noting their innocent confidence in the abundance and ubiquity of Northern Shovelers, whereas I had just recorded the species for the first time ever on the Block Island CBC, which dates back to 1925. My long association with my EP has placed me in interesting conversation with generations of up and coming birders, and the many challenges they face. None is more characteristic of my EP than the problem of seeing Black-legged Kittiwakes. Abundant and widespread, but highly irregular inshore and difficult to identify, many newer birders from NYC tally impressive lists of real vagrants before connecting with a kittiwake. My seemingly high contact rate naturally inspires curiosity (and no doubt frustration), but it is nothing else than the product of relentless effort in the appropriate contexts, across the breadth of a well-chosen EP. On my first CBC, the day after Christmas, 1982, Bob Conway drove me to Point Judith before dropping me off for my assignment. He wanted me to witness the epic flight of kittiwakes that Dick Ferren was tallying, which totaled 4,826.

For me, the six contiguous counties comprising Staten Island, Long Island, and southwestern Rhode Island have rewarded my purposeful effort with insights into identification, distribution, migration, dispersal, and vagrancy that I treasure deeply. I've directly observed the almost incomprehensible resilience of the natural world, such that there are still many sites in my Expanded Patch that offer the contemporary observer similar ornithological (if not aesthetic) experiences to those described by Ferren, Buckley, Bull, Cruickshank, Griscom, Hathaway, and Giraud—despite the grotesque mutilations ceaselessly inflicted on this beautiful corner of the world. Aldo Leopold wrote, “One of the penalties of an ecological education is that one lives alone in a world of wounds. An ecologist must either harden his shell and make believe that the consequences of science are none of his business, or he must be the doctor who sees the marks of death in a community that believes itself well and does not want to be told otherwise.” As I vacillate between hardening and doctoring, at least I can make a strong case that purposeful birdwatching is fun and productive. Some doctors for the future might even be born of it.

Table 1. Some metrics of personal birding effort across six counties in coastal New York and Rhode Island.

County	Species Seen	County Total/ 6-Co. Total	CBCs	Birding Visits/ Square Mile
Washington	327	0.78	80	2.82
Suffolk	387	0.92	63	1.65
Nassau	327	0.78	22	0.86
Queens	289	0.70	0	0.84
Kings	244	0.59	1	1.05
Richmond	232	0.56	0	1.37
Total	418	.	166	1.61