

PATCH BIRDING

FINDING TIME FOR A SMALL CIRCLE OF THE WORLD

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Listening to one of the hosts, Alvaro Jaramillo, on the Life List podcast discussing his local patches and his five-mile radius patch piqued my interest. I then decided to set up a few patches of my own on eBird. I've always enjoyed birding my local area because family and work obligations didn't leave me much time for avian pursuits. Since I could usually reserve a few early hours on weekends, birding my local patch meant less time driving and more time birding.

There are several benefits to visiting a local patch. Having birded for years in my county (Suffolk) in New York State, I rarely encounter any new species. I've found that one of the more enjoyable and engaging alternatives to focusing on chasing year birds, or trying to find a new county bird, is to spend time in my local patch, observing nesting birds and confirming their breeding activity, and to monitor the behavior of adults and juveniles throughout the breeding season. For example, I have witnessed Great Horned owlets flapping their wings to attempt liftoff; a female Baltimore Oriole diving into a tent caterpillar nest to gather caterpillars to feed her young; and a recently fledged Virginia Rail chick darting across a small pool in the salt marsh.

To set up my five-mile radius patch (5MR), I searched "draw circle radius map" on Google and used one of the free programs to find what birding spots fell within the circle. I live on the Bayview Peninsula in Southold on the North Fork of Long Island, and to my surprise, I found that there were twenty-eight hotspots in my patch. I'm fortunate to have access to a variety of habitats including a bay, an estuary, freshwater ponds, saltmarshes, and a freshwater marsh within the patch.

My local preserve, Wolf Preserve, has also provided me with an abundance of great bird experiences. Since the preserve is a quarter mile from my house, it is the hotspot I have visited most frequently through the years. The preserve has been recently renovated with additional trails and improvements made to the existing trails. Through the years, Wolf Preserve has rewarded me with such highlights as a very cooperative Black-billed Cuckoo, locally rare Yellow-bellied Flycatchers, striking Wilson's and Bay-breasted Warblers, Purple Finches and Northern Saw-whet Owls.

Investigating a local patch has its special rewards—the opportunity to discover a bird that is a patch "first," or better still, a county or state "first," or even a lifer. Last year, my sightings in local patches were bountiful. In my Orient patch, I encountered Stilt Sandpipers, a Marbled Godwit, and a Long-billed Dowitcher, extremely rare visitors to the North Fork. An extraordinary discovery in this patch was a Magnificent Frigatebird soaring with Turkey Vultures over

Main Road in the town of Orient. This was a state first for me and one of my most exciting finds. Luckily it held aloft for quite some time in the area and a good number of local birders were able to catch up with it. At another time, while looking for birds and Odonates in my 5MR, I found the holy grail of patch birding—a life bird—this one an Alder Flycatcher. Coincidentally, the following week, I was on a family trip to Delaware County, New York, for the first time, and I discovered that Alder Flycatchers were common in that part of the state.

Patch birding has changed my frame of mind in a positive way. As a younger birder, I would often “chase” sightings of rare birds that were on the Rare Bird Alert hotline or, later, online or emailed to me, and travel long distances to preserves frequented by more skilled birders. I lived for the successful chase. But over time, the excitement of the chase began to wear thin. My feeling of joy at finding a new bird changed to a sense of relief that a trip hadn’t been wasted. On the other hand, if my pursuit of a species had proved to be unsuccessful, my frustration level increased dramatically. By contrast, patch birding has allowed nature to address me. I visit a local preserve with an open mind to enjoy what I find. The satisfaction of discovering a vagrant bird or a locally rare breeder far surpasses the satisfaction of a successful chase of a rare bird. There is an additional reward. By submitting valuable data on eBird, patch birders have the satisfaction of providing detailed information to scientists studying local bird populations.

My patch-birding experience has been liberating. Though I still enjoy the challenge of chasing a new species, I don’t feel upset if I fail. I find solace in the thought that I’ll just have to wait until I find the bird myself in one of my local patches. I feel quite satisfied to have time for a small circle of my world and the species that dwell there. As a patch birder, I have become, in some ways, a steward of places on the North Fork that are important to people and birds.