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Sommer Park is located at 6329 Koerner Road, Edwards.

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A Note From Our President
My Summer With Bluebirds
Dennis Endicott

Growing up in rural southern Illinois, I always thought it was special when I saw a bluebird. Back then, I found that bluebirds were a longtime symbol of happiness, good health and hope to our Native Americans. Early settlers appreciated the brilliant color and with their presence, also helped keep down the insect populations helping crops to grow.

I also learned that they were cavity nesters, taking up residence in abandoned woodpecker cavities. As such, the limiting factor in their conservation was being able to find a place to build a nest and raise their family. On the early farms, they sometimes used secondary cavities in wooden fence posts.

Doing a little digging into the history, it turns out that from about 1920-1970, there was a major decline in the population. According to one report, the Eastern Bluebird went from being as common as the robin, to being so rare that some birders were concerned with its possible extinction. There were many reasons for the decline, including loss of habitat, indiscriminant use of pesticides, and fewer dead trees and fence posts for woodpeckers to excavate a suitable cavity.

However, many researchers felt the main reason for the decline was the introduction of the House Sparrow and European Starling – both of which are extremely competitive and aggressive for nesting sites.
As the eBird database grows, it is becoming ever more valuable. Your observations are making a huge difference in the understanding of birds at many levels. Scientists are now analyzing your data to find new patterns in bird distribution, abundance, and population trends. Although every reported observation submitted to eBird is valuable, only observations with effort data can be used in these more rigorous analyses, so we would like to promote several bird survey techniques that we consider most valuable in this regard. The most of your birding by conducting traveling counts, stationary counts and area counts in a more meaningful way. In this feature we'll give examples of how to make your observations count for bird conservation!

Recording All Species: The first step is to make sure you record all the species that you detected on your outing. The most valuable checklists are those where you answer yes to the question “Are you submitting a complete checklist of the birds you were able to identify?” found on every checklist page. We know that no one will detect every bird, and we also know that no one can identify all the birds in a flock or all the birds flowering in a field. This question simply aims to see if you are reporting all the birds you encountered to the best of your ability. This way, when we run an analysis or study, we know the reason you didn’t see or identify every European Starlings was because you didn’t identify or encounter any—not because you simply don’t like them! The important thing is that you only report complete checklists where you can truthfully answer yes to the question above because the data will not be included in this dataset. We would much rather have lists that are incomplete than ones that are omitting sightings but marked as complete.

Ways to Count: eBird offers four different methodology choices. We have ranked these from most to least valuable in terms of analysis. It should be stated that any count where you have associated effort information greatly trumps simple "Incidental Observations."

Traveling Counts have proven to be the most effective type of observation for modeling bird populations at large scales. By doing these counts birders often detect a good proportion of the birds in a given habitat. It is critical, however, that your traveling counts not be too long. Our analysts are able to effectively use traveling counts that are 5 minutes. Most birding that is conducted on foot easily falls within this window, but traveling counts by car can often be longer. Please consider breaking up your long traveling counts into shorter, more frequent ones. It’s best if these shorter counts are in a relatively consistent habitat, or does not pass through habitats that are too different. For example, a logical point to break a longer route into segments would be a transition between forest and farmland, as the birds found in these two habitat types are vastly different. Doing so would make information associated with each location — such as vegetation information — more informative. Plot your location at the center of the area traveled, not at the start point or end point. It’s okay to stop and spend time searching flocks of birds more thoroughly on traveling counts, as we are not assuming that you are traveling at a constant speed. You’re birding after all! Note: when back-tracking on a trail, record the distance traveled only in one direction, but do record the total time you spent birding as you traveled out and back.

How to Make Your eBird Checklists More Valuable Pete Fenner

Stationary Counts are a great way to quickly sample a suite of birds in a given habitat by essentially standing in one place (don’t walk more than 30 meters!) and counting everything you see and/or hear. With stationary count data we are able to link the birds you report with the habitat on the ground using remote sensing of vegetation layers. In general, shorter counts from more locations are better. But longer stationary counts are appropriate for birding events such as hawk watching and sea watching, or for counting large numbers of shorebirds, gulls, or ducks on a lake. We recommend a 5-minute stationary count at minimum. A string of 5-minute counts along a road or trail is even better! We often use a GPS for location information and then put the data into a spreadsheet, ultimately uploading it to eBird using the “import data” option. Also consider doing a point count in a randomly selected location near your initial stationary count (within 0.5 miles works well). Pairing stationary counts like this provides valuable additional information about bird occurrence in habitats less frequently visited. Birders tend to stop and conduct counts in places that they think look good for birds. By pairing these targeted areas with random ones, we have a better idea of the overall habitat in the area, and how birds are using it. Oddly, it seems that birds have turned up using this technique and birders find some interesting new birding spots using this random spacing approach. Stationary counts are most informative when birds are also reasonably stationary, such as on territory. During migration and possibly winter, when birds are quieter and moving over larger regions, traveling counts may be more likely to encounter all of the birds that are in a general area. At these times of the year 10 or 20 minute stationary counts work better.

Area Counts are highly valuable because you are giving us an estimate of the area you’ve covered and a count of all the birds you’ve found within that area (fly-overs are okay!). This is desirable because it allows us to calculate density, or the number of birds covered. Area counts should be at least 20 minutes long, and the more thoroughly you cover a smaller area the better. Place your point at the center of the area sampled. We rank this count type as third best because it is flawed, but because it is the least frequently selected option among eBirders.

Incidental Observation: Too many birders choose incidental observations (previously called “casual observations”) simply because they don’t understand the techniques above or feel that they are unqualified to provide effort information. In reality, any time you leave the house with birding as your primary objective, chances are the time you spend in the field can be categorized as a traveling, stationary or area count. Incidental Observations are to be used primarily for bird observations made while birding was not your primary purpose. For example, if you saw an Osprey flying over while checking the mail, or intermittently observed some birds in your yard while doing yard work throughout the day. The importance of using Incidental Observations only as a last resort cannot be over overstated. Data recorded without effort are of use for more limited analyses, typically mapping and seasonal distribution information.

In a Vehicle – Travelling vs. Incidental: If you are driving along en route to a birding site and see two Peregrine Falcons and a Common Buzzard out the window, is this kind of a count is it? Even if you were keeping your eye out for anything you saw, isn’t it possible to be detecting species with the assumptions of a traveling count – so you are logging an Incidental Observation. If you drive slowly down a road with your windows down for several minutes and count everything you see, perhaps even stopping periodically, then that is a Travelling Count. The difference between the two situations is when birding was your primary purpose.

Please consider trying one of the above techniques to help make your observations more meaningful for eBird! For additional assistance, you can find it at the “help” tab on eBird!
In 1978, citizen scientists and birders formed the North American Bluebird Society (NABS, nabluesociety.org). They designed and optimized bluebird boxes and recruited and trained volunteers to set up networks of bluebird trails. Then, educating the public on the importance of setting up and maintaining bluebird nest boxes helped the bluebird population make a remarkable recovery. Although bluebirds still need to have suitable boxes, and a dedicated public and trained volunteers, the reboune in bluebird population is a conservation success story.

With this as background, this summer I joined a team of volunteers to monitor a tract of 40 bluebird nest boxes out at the Wildlife Prairie Park. With the careful guidance of long-time bluebird monitor and volunteer Pete Fenner, I had plenty of expert advice on monitoring bluebirds. But, the word monitor sounds a little passive, for at times we had to take actions assure a successful fledging event. Monitoring helps catch signs of problems early on. We checked each box 2 or 3 times per week.

One of the early lessons I learned was the importance of location to eliminate or at least minimize the problem of predators and competitors. Having the nest boxes away from known predators (e.g., a nearby cat) and competitors (e.g., House Sparrows and using a predator guard to keep raccoons and snakes from the nest were high on the list. There are several other easy steps to help with success. For a simple, short introduction to monitoring bluebird nest boxes, there are several NABS Fact Sheets that I highly recommend. (Good excuse to use Google! There is more way information out there, but I need to keep this column short.)

In addition to providing shelter for Eastern Bluebirds, we also provided an opportunity for Tree Swallows. We also had House Wrens nest in some of the boxes. With House Wrens, it was something of a love/hate relationship. I love House Wrens, but I hated it when they attacked Bluebird nests. With many of the sites, in particular those that were adjacent to dense woods, we sometimes added a “wen guard” onto the box to discourage them from overtaking an active bluebird nest. These devices created a more torturous path that the bird would need to take to enter the nest box. The bluebirds didn’t mind, whereas House Wrens were discouraged. Note that we delegated a number of additional nest box duties to other members of the team—national, state, and local. It was our goal to keep them away from the bluebirds. House Sparrows and Starlings could also be problematic, but with careful selection of nest box locations they were not as big a problem.

One of the aspects I had not considered when working with a team of bluebird monitors, was the importance of keeping in touch and record keeping. There are several members of my team (actually, I feel that I am part of their team) that I have never met in person, yet from email updates, I feel I know them as personal friends. In addition to the above team members, I have worked with Dianna, who maintains an Excel spreadsheet detailing dates and number of eggs, date hatched, expected fledge dates, and other essential information on each nest box. Having frequent spreadsheet updates helped all of stay coordinated and focused on what our tasks were.

This season, as of July 13, although a few nests are still active and have eggs and nestlings not yet counted, we have successfully fledged 101 Eastern Bluebirds and 32 Tree Swallows (along with a bunch of House Wrens) at the Wildlife Prairie Park.

My thanks and deep appreciation to our entire team: Herb Unricker, Dianna Carothers, Leanna Kijanowski, Jean Palomares, Mike Herman, Maury Wallace, Sandy Swearingian, Pat Stauhammer, and the staff at Wildlife Prairie Park: Calli Smith and Adrienne Bauer.

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