

App in the hand finds birds in bushes as you roam

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Jory Langner shows off the BirdsEye application on his iPhone in Delmar, N.Y., on Tuesday, Dec. 8, 2009. BirdsEye, recently released for iPhone and iPod Touch at a cost of \$19.99, was developed through a collaboration of some of the top ornithologists in the country using content from the Cornell University Lab of Ornithology, the Academy of Natural Sciences and field guide author Kenn Kaufman. (AP Photo/Mike Groll)

(AP) -- When Jory Langner finds time for a field trip during an upcoming visit to Washington, he won't have to ask local birders where to find candidates to add to his life list of birds sighted.

All he'll have to do to is pull out his [iPhone](#) and fire up BirdsEye, a new bird-finding application that gives users instant access to recent reports of [birds](#) spotted near their location, tells them where to look for specific birds, and keeps track of their list of all the birds they've ever seen.

The application debuts just ahead of the National Audubon Society's

annual Christmas Bird Count, an effort that enlists as many as 55,000 bird watchers around the country - from the kitchen window crowd to slog-through-the-woods diehards - who report back the kinds and numbers of birds they spot. The count, which runs from December 14 through January 5, collects data used to track the health of bird populations, identify trends and guide conservation.

"If you don't know the area, whether you're new or traveling through, it's a really good way of finding birding hotspots nearby," said Langner, 60, a software designer. "I'm really looking forward to using it during my upcoming trips around the country."

BirdsEye, recently released for iPhone and iPod Touch at a cost of \$19.99, was developed through a collaboration of some of the top ornithologists in the country, using content from the Cornell University Lab of Ornithology, the Academy of Natural Sciences and field guide author Kenn Kaufman.

"This application has pieced together a network of experts to make possible something no one has done before," said Pete Myers, CEO of Environmental Health Sciences, an environmental journalism organization based in Charlottesville, Va.

Myers got involved in the BirdsEye project when Todd Koym, a programmer who works for him, hatched the idea two years ago. Myers contacted prominent birders he knew when he was senior vice president of the National Audubon Society, and they were eager to help.

It's not an electronic field guide to help identify birds. There are plenty of those around. This is new: a bird-finder. It taps into eBird, the massive, constantly updated database of bird sightings maintained by the Cornell lab and the National Audubon Society.

Here's how it works.

Suppose you're a bird watcher on a business trip or visiting relatives across the country and you have some spare time to take in the local fauna. Where's a good place to go?

You start BirdsEye and poke "Find Nearby Birds." Using the iPhone's built-in GPS, it calculates your location and gives you a list of all the birds ever recorded in the area or just the ones reported recently. If you've entered your lifetime bird-sighting list, the application can show you just the birds not on your list.

Users of the iPod Touch can enter their location manually if there's no Wi-Fi access.

If the list includes a bird you've never seen, you can tap on it for a map showing where the bird was reported - say, a nearby park. You head over there and find woods, fields, and a pond. Where to look? The application has a brief narrative by Kaufman telling whether the bird is likely to be in treetops or grassland, alone or in a flock. It also has photos and recordings of the bird.

About 40,000 birders enter up to 2 million sightings a month into eBird, said Brian Sullivan at the Cornell lab.

"We've been contacted by lots of other application developers," Sullivan said. "This is the first that uses eBird data. The database is open source for any developer to use."

The biggest limitation to the eBird database is that it has many observations from heavily populated areas and fewer from more remote locales. An application that makes it easy for birders to log sightings from the field would likely improve the database, Sullivan said.

BirdsEye doesn't allow users to upload data to eBird now, but it will in the future, Koym said.

"You might think of bird watchers sitting in the woods eating granola and writing with lead pencils," Kaufman said. "But most of the birders I know are eager to go high tech and use whatever is available to find birds."

Myers, who travels extensively in his work, found the application proved its worth the first time he tried it.

"I have a pretty decent life list, with 571 birds, so it usually takes some work to find something new," Myers said. But during a trip to San Francisco, he turned on BirdsEye and it told him there had been sightings of red-masked parakeets nearby the previous day. "I had never seen one. So I followed the map it gave me and found about 60 of them within a half hour."

On the Net: <http://www.getbirdseye.com>

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