

Protocol for the Oregon 2020 Yard Counting Project

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Oregon2021@gmail.com



Besides a love for birds, what do we all have in common? We all live somewhere! (Well, ok, we all have a lot more in common than that, but you get the message).

The Yard Counting project recognizes the value of data gathered from where we live. It can be really exciting to track the number of species we find in our yard, but many of us forget that actually counting the numbers of birds we find is also super valuable and interesting. The Yard Counting project encourages us to remember our “home birds” (Yeah, homey!).

A primary value of yard counting is that you are probably the only person who will ever generate data from your property. Even if you are just renting, you have private access to that property. It is your opportunity to leave a wonderful legacy of information about what birds were present there at this point early in the twenty-first century. Many of us have interests in the genealogical history of our families. Now, via eBird, you can provide a legacy of information about what birds you counted. Future family members and citizens can look back decades and centuries from now to know what birds you were seeing each morning while you drank your morning coffee. Pretty cool, eh?!

Recommended counting practices

For the Yard Counting Project, we highly recommend a very simple type of bird count called the stationary count. A stationary count, which some people call a point count, involves standing (or sitting drinking your morning coffee) at one place for a specified amount of time and counting all birds you see or hear (including fly-overs) from that location.

We prefer stationary counts over other types of counts (like traveling counts; you can find more information about other counting methods at eBird [here](#)) because when we know exactly where you were, we can then relate the birds you encountered at that location with habitat data from that location available via satellite imagery. Other types of counting methods reduce the usefulness of these bird-habitat relationships because we do not really know exactly where you were when you detected the birds you report. So, whenever possible, do a stationary count.

Here’s how you do a stationary count.

- 1) Select your location. This can be your porch, out your kitchen or dining room window, or somewhere out on the back 40. It's all up to you. Pick a place where you will feel comfortable making repeated visits so you can maintain some consistency. It's ok to have more than one location. A small yard, say under 3 acres, can be done with one location. But if you have trouble hearing birds in the backyard when you are in the front, you can do a stationary count in both locations. Just be sure to name them differently so you can keep track of the data separately. For example, you might have a stationary count called "Elm Street-northside" (meaning the front yard) and "Elm Street-south side" (meaning the back yard).
- 2) Note the start time for your count. Generally speaking, you should count for no less than 5 minutes. Remember that even if you are finding just 1 bird in 5 minutes, those data are valuable. If you have a really birdy day, stay longer than 5 minutes, just be sure to note the total amount of time you spent during that count. You can also add comments about conditions if you feel the weather, traffic noise, or other circumstances (that blankety-blank neighbor's dog just will not shut up!) affected your ability to count birds.
- 3) Start identifying and counting birds! We recommend that you write down the birds as you encounter them. We use small pocket notebooks for this. Others like the BirdLog app for their smartphone. If you are sitting at home and have wireless and a laptop, you can also just open up your eBird account and enter the birds directly into eBird. That's real luxury! And what a time saver. Pat yourself on the back for being so efficient. Have a great time!
- 4) Consult our tutorials for help if you need tips on finding your location or data entry within the eBird system.

Extra fun

eBird has pages set up to facilitate comparing your yard lists with lists generated by your friends. This kind of friendly competition can really help keep you motivated to consistently contribute observations from your yard. For more, check [here](#).

Concerns?

Some people worry about making the location of their home known over eBird. We understand. We recommend you do a couple of things. First, when submitting sightings in eBird, do not name the location "my home" or something similar. Just call it a name that makes sense for its general location, such as the name of the street or intersection. If you are very concerned, you can click on a location that is a couple houses away from yours, if you live in a densely populated area. But we ask you to be very careful with this approach. The value of the data depends on linking observations of bird species and numbers to the habitats where the birds were counted. If you move your location too far away from your house, the habitat may differ too much from what is actually in your own yard.

Are you qualified?

If you know how to identify birds, you can contribute! You need not be an expert with all birds and their sounds, but it sure does help, no doubt about that. However, if you know your birds reasonably well and you just enjoy exploring, then you are qualified. The main issue to keep in mind is that we should avoid “false positives” at all costs. A false positive is basically a species identification error. We determine that a species is present when it is really not. These kinds of mistakes are very difficult to detect once data are entered, especially if they involve misidentification of a common bird. The eBird system does a good job of detecting rarities that need to be inspected, but it cannot detect misidentification of common birds. So, whenever you have any doubt at all, leave it out.

Timing of surveys

You can do surveys any time. A couple of issues to keep in mind: Spring and summer breeding season surveys are going to be more fun and successful in the morning, within about 4 hours of sunrise. Birds sing more then, so you will find more of them. Outside of spring and summer, birds are usually harder to detect so longer counts are better than shorter counts. A 5-minute count may work great in spring and summer, but you may not find as many birds then. Aiming for a minimum of 10 or 15 minutes may be better outside of spring and summer. If you have feeders, 5 minutes might be plenty all year long.