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Citizen science: the origin and application of eBird

By ARCHBOLD BIOLOGICAL STATION

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Dr. John W. Fitzpatrick.

COURTESY PHOTO

In the late 1990's, a group of ornithologists, scientists that study birds, and bird conservationists articulated a simple idea: that there were millions of birdwatchers world-wide, and their numbers were growing even as those of the birds themselves were declining. They recognized that each birdwatcher had unique experiences and knowledge about birds they had seen and that knowledge, gathered together in the form of checklists of birds seen in particular areas at particular times and freely shared on the internet, could change the science and conservation of birds forever.

Dr. John W. Fitzpatrick (known by everyone as “Fitz”), the Director of the Cornell Lab of Ornithology and former director of Archbold Biological Station, was at the forefront and by 2002, he and his team had launched eBird, an on-line resource where birders could enter when and where they went birding, and a list containing a count of all the birds they saw or heard. It started just in the US but had grown to include the entire world by 2010.

Over half a billion bird observations have been entered and the data increases by 100 million each year. It is now the world’s largest citizen-science project. At an award ceremony for this innovation, Dr. Fitzpatrick said “eBird was an audacious idea, the notion that humans can act as biological sensors through bird watching... By instantly recording trends in bird populations, eBird acts as a real-time monitor of ecosystem health around the world.”

Dr. Fitzpatrick is a bit of an ornithological prodigy. He identified his first bird from a field guide in kindergarten, and studied birds across South America throughout college and graduate school, describing new species and new behaviors. In 1972, he was an intern at Archbold Biological Station where he met Glen E. Woolfenden, who had recently begun his now famous long-term study of Florida Scrub-Jays. Thus began a life-long collaboration between the two, which ultimately attracted Dr. Fitzpatrick to Archbold as its Director in 1988. In 1995, he became the Executive Director of the Cornell Lab of Ornithology, but he has continued his long-term collaboration on the scrub-jay project and he and his students return to Archbold every year to collect data. The Cornell Lab of Ornithology, under Dr. Fitzpatrick’s leadership, has grown to be one of the preeminent centers for the study of birds and their conservation in the world and eBird is the crown jewel among their many achievements.

eBird data contributed to a recent paper in the journal *Science* that showed that bird populations in North America have declined by over three billion, nearly 30% over the last 50 years. The causes of these declines might be diverse, but eBird can help identify where bottlenecks might be occurring on the breeding grounds, during migration, or on the wintering grounds, or even in specific habitats or sites. Dr. Fitzpatrick thinks that citizen-science can educate people about the role birds play and how they affect us, and increase “understanding about how humans and natural systems can begin coexisting more stably than we do today.”

Archbold Biological Station is pleased to announce that Dr. John Fitzpatrick will present a webinar on Thursday, June 18th at 3:30 pm titled “How birds can save the world: Lessons from eBird, the world’s largest citizen science project.” He will show how eBird generates remarkable data about bird populations and individual species across their entire range. This talk is geared toward very general audiences of all ages and is accessible even to individuals with only passing interest in nature.

The free webinar will be hosted on Zoom, Thursday, June 18 at 3:30 p.m.. Interested parties may register online at www.archbold-station.org, or attend the Facebook Live-stream. Visit eBird online at ebird.org. For more information, call 863-465-2571 during business hours Monday through Friday 8 a.m. to 5 p.m.