

The NGS Handheld Guide

Modern technology has arrived in the birding world. Trendy and hip technology like iPods, voice recognition technology, and now PDAs (personal digital assistants). Yup, they're not just for corporate tycoons anymore.

The National Geographic's *Handheld Birds* is billed as the "first ever North American multimedia software program [that] empowers birders of all levels with an easy-to-use, mobile, and interactive referen[ce]." In other words, it's a Nat Geo (as we often affectionately refer to it) field guide on your PDA. And this medium can go one step beyond our printed field guides by incorporating sound. No more analyzing spectrographs or memorizing mnemonics as our only way of referencing song in the field. Now you can simply play the species' song and call with the press of a button. Although this is the most revolutionary development of *Handheld Birds*, it is certainly not the only worthy feature of this nifty gadget.

The National Geographic *Handheld Birds* comes bundled with a Tungsten E2 PalmOne PDA, or the software can be purchased separately and used on the following Palm-supported devices: Tungsten E, E2, T2, T3, T5, and TIX; Zire 72; LifeDrive; and Treo 650 Smartphone. Startup for the bundled package is quick

and painless, but I have heard a complaint about the cumbersome nature of the procedure for uploading the software to an existing PDA. Meanwhile, versions compatible with Windows Mobile, Symbian, and BlackBerry devices are in the works, and may even be available by the time you read this.

Not previously owning a PDA, I obtained the Tungsten E2 and the *Handheld Birds* software from

Pull-U-In Software, Inc. The uploading of the software to my computer was simple. A waterproof pouch—such as the Aquapac PDA ClassicCase 340, which allows you to use the touchscreen through the clear panel of the pouch—is recommended, and I highly agree with this suggestion.

All 867 species, with more than 1,600 images, from the fourth edition of the *National Geographic Field Guide to the Birds of North America* are included. Species can be searched in alphabetical (starting with either the "first" or "last" name) or



The legendary NGS field guide—along with quite a bit more—now fits easily in your shirt pocket.
© Jeanette Lovitch.

taxonomic order, either by using the wand and scrolling through the list or by using the PDA written letter recognition (called "graffiti") feature.

You can also find a species by searching for a combination of features: Color (13 options), Size (5 options that relate to a familiar species or group), and Location (Region, Month, and Habitat).

This search feature is great, and one of the best tools for beginning birders that the product offers. I searched for a "blue", "black", and "white" bird that was "robin" sized, and was in "Maine" in "December" and on a "feeder" in an "urban and residential" area. My options were then listed as: Blue Jay, Eastern Bluebird, and Mourning Dove, in de-

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scending order. By now, you may have guessed that I was searching for a Blue Jay, and the three choices did indeed include that species—although I am unsure as to how Mourning Dove was added to the mix.

Challenging the search feature a little more, I selected, “gray”, “brown”, and “buff”, along with “sparrow”-sized, and “Maine”, “October”, and “Hedges and Shrublands”. Lincoln’s Sparrow—the bird I was searching for—was listed, along with 13 other species, so there is a limitation here (but 13 is better than 867). Selecting “white”, “brown”, “red/pink”, and “buff” followed by “robin”, “Maine”, and “January” produced Northern Flicker and Red-winged Blackbird but not Redwing, which I was thinking of. (By the way, after selecting various fields, be sure to clear each selection to return to a complete list of all 867 species.) Additional categories, as well as expanded options within each category, would enhance the utility of this feature.

No matter which search parameters we use, we arrive at a species “page”. There we see the species name, scientific name, one or more illustrations of the species (taken directly from the fourth edition of the field guide) on which we can zoom in, a description of the audio (including the mnemonics of the song and call notes), and a “play” button to listen to the recordings.

That last feature is hands-down the most revolutionary aspect of this device. Field guide and audio-playback device all in one pocket! Overall, the recordings are very good and surprisingly clear. Some are of low volume, but the use of headphones or a speaker helps. In some instances, amplification is essential; the Ruffed Grouse recording, for example, is virtually inaudible otherwise. A volume control would be most welcome here. I would also like the ability to play the call note alone, as opposed to waiting for the song to play to hear the call note, which for most species, is included at the end of the recording. It would be nice to split the song and call note(s) into two separate recordings for quick and easy reference.

At the bottom of the screen, we see a tool bar that offers five selections: “Home”, “Appear[ance]”, “Range”, “Sounds”, and “Behave[ior]”.

The home toolbar allows us to return to the species homepage (the first screen with the illustration, etc.), but also provides us with an introduction to the species, a brief summary of the family, and “Cool Facts”, which often provide fun trivia or an interesting tidbit. For example, the “Cool Facts” for the Black-and-white Warbler tell us that it “has an unusually long hind toe and claw on each foot. This adaptation allows it to move securely on the surface of tree bark. Unusually aggressive for a warbler, the Black-and-white Warbler sometimes attacks and fights Red-



A particularly exciting feature of the NGS *Handheld Birds* is its audio component. © Derek Lovitch.

breasted Nuthatch, Black-capped Chickadee, and other species.”

Next is the meat of the field guide—the “Appear[ance]” section. Unfortunately, this very important category is the one that needs the most improvement. We are given five options under this menu: “Illustrations” (a link to the full-screen pictures), “Key Features” (a convenient summary of a few of the most pertinent field marks to note), “Plumage”, “Similar Species”, and “Description”. I was pleased to find more written description and information than any printed field guide provides. I believe that although a picture is

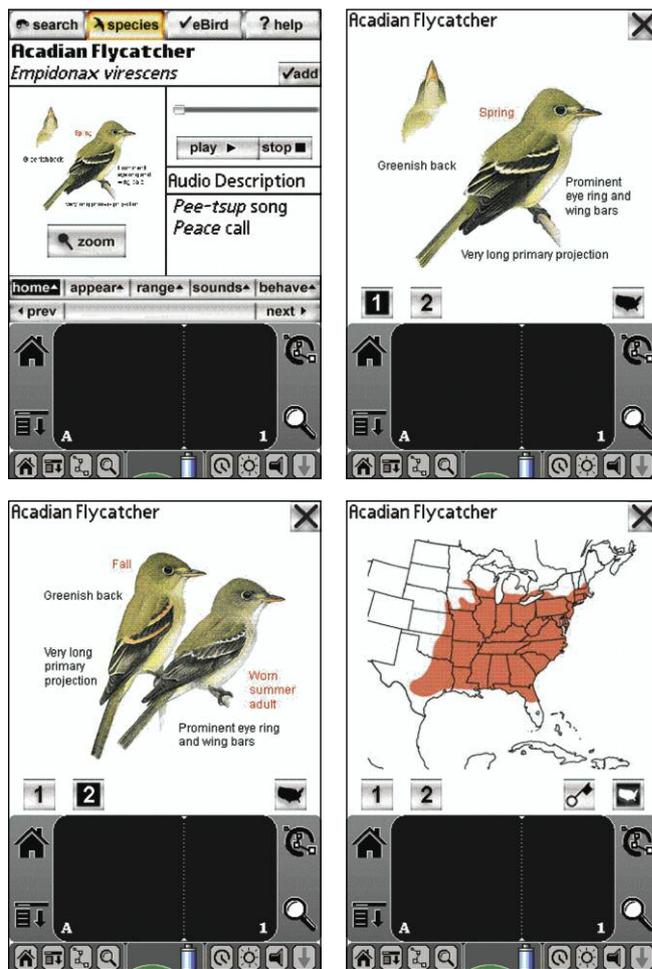
worth a thousand words, a written description is critical in helping birders—especially those less experienced—understand which field marks to look for.

At times incomplete, at other times redundant, the “Appear[ance]” section could use a little reorganization, in my opinion. Although the “Similar Species” entry is usually quite good, there are some instances in which I would have preferred a little additional information and more thorough comparisons with more species. I would also like to be able to click on the name of the “similar species” that are listed, and be taken directly to their images, for quick and easy cross-referencing.

My biggest complaint in this section is with the “Plumage” and “Description” categories. Often, they are redundant. In other cases, important identification features are given in one section and not the other. Sometimes, “Description” is only a brief mention of bare part colorations (such as with most of the dabbling ducks). It would make sense to combine these two categories, and simply sort the information within the entry. In fact, with a little creativity, most, if not all, of the categories in this menu could be combined into one succinct but informative entry.

Another complaint is the use of the red type for every word that appears in the glossary—in each of its occurrences. This is distracting, to the point of overwhelming more important text. Although a quick link to a glossary for uncommon terms is absolutely fantastic, I think it is a bit overdone here. Instead, a colored type could be used for emphasizing key information, for example, for highlighting the “Key Features” within the text instead of isolating them on another page.

Also, I would prefer even shorter descriptions than those provided onscreen; it is awkward to have to scroll down several screens to get all the information on a single



© NGS Handheld Birds.

species. I’m not sure what the best answer would be here, but I do think that something needs to be rearranged. At the very least, it would be helpful to have the information

A Word of Caution

From National Geographic’s *Handheld Birds* to birdJam to the Song Sleuth and other devices, we are seeing more and more birders hit the field with audio recordings in hand. Although it is unlikely that the occasional playing of a recording will cause adverse effects, we all know stories of birds being “taped out”. Whether with pishing or playing a recording, a bird’s business is interrupted when it has to confront the intruder or check out what all the fuss is about. Especially in cold weather or while feeding hungry nestlings, these interruptions are not welcome. A bird’s caloric budget is so tight that wasting energy on some silly birders is the last thing it needs.

As more and more of us take gadgets for playing songs into the field, there is a greater chance that birds will become bothered—or worse—by our actions. With that in mind, I strongly urge you to heed the ABA Code of Ethics, Section 1B:

To avoid stressing birds or exposing them to danger, exercise restraint and caution during observation, photography, sound recording, or filming. Limit the use of recordings and other methods of attracting birds, and never use such methods in heavily birded areas, or for attracting any species that is Threatened, Endangered, or of Special Concern, or is rare in your local area.

The complete ABA Code of Ethics can be downloaded from the ABA website <aba.org/abaethics.htm>.

It is further worth mentioning here that in many places, such as U.S. national parks, audio playback is *illegal*.



presented in these sections consistent among all species—compare the Acadian Flycatcher example above with the dabbling ducks mentioned earlier.

The “Range” options include the Range Map (from the fourth edition; it would be nice to see the fifth edition updates included), a written description of the range, the species’ habitat, and a “Conservation” section. I greatly welcome this final addition. The entry for Henslow’s Sparrow is poignant:

Uncommon and local. Declining in the northeastern portion of its range, and apparently increasing in some other parts, the Henslow’s Sparrow has been identified as the highest priority for grassland bird conservation in eastern and Midwestern North America by Partners in Flight, a cooperative effort of many organizations dedicated to bird conservation. Henslow’s Sparrow does not have federally protected status in the United States, but is listed as endangered in seven states, as well as Canada. PIF is promoting establishment of large grassland conservation areas for this and other species. The Conservation Reserve Program of the U.S. Department of Agriculture, which assists farmers in setting aside land for conservation, has apparently enabled population increases in isolated cases.

That is certainly more information than could be provided by a standard printed field guide.

The next menu is for “Sounds” and provides us with another way of playing the audio. Here, the “Voice” option is for the written description of the vocalizations. My only (minor) quibble here is that on the homepage this section is entitled—more accurately—“Audio Description”, instead of simply “Voice”.

Next, we see the “Similar Sounding” option, which is a fine feature. By clicking on this option, we are taken to a page that includes a listing of similar-sounding species and a written description of some of the differences. The best part is that you can click on the species that are listed and immediately play their song and call—a great learning tool, and a great way to confirm a vocal identification. Here, my only complaint is that I would like to see more options of similar species listed for most species. For example, the similar-sounding species listed for Black-capped Chickadee include Carolina Chickadee and Eastern Phoebe. However, I think Boreal, Chestnut-backed, Mountain, and Gray-headed Chickadees should also be included here.

Finally, we see the “Behave[ior]” menu, with a written description for both “Foraging” and “Reproduction”. I think this is a nice additional benefit, and I hope future ver-

sions increase the amount of bonus information, especially for the less common and vagrant species.

I find the “Help” button to be useful. I’m not a big “read the manual first” kind of guy, so it is nice to be able to quickly look up additional instructions in the field. The Help Guide is arranged in a simple-to-search Table of Contents, and information is presented clearly and succinctly, which I find is not always the case with many software products.

Also included is an “Introduction to Birding”, which includes basic information such as taxonomy, feather topography and anatomy, and conservation and birding ethics.

There is also a handy checklist feature built right into *Handheld Birds*. After creating a new list, you can choose from previously entered locations, or add a new location. Then, on the sightings screen, you will see a list of all of the birds in your region (rarities can be shown or hidden). When you select a species, you can use the “graffiti” or keyboard inputs to enter quantities. This convenient in-the-field list generator will certainly be the most appealing aspect of *Handheld Birds* for some folks.

You begin each entry by entering the date and start time, and finish by selecting the type of observation (“casual”, “stationary count”, “traveling count”, or “exhaustive area count”) along with the number of people in the party, and whether you are reporting all species. And you can instantly upload the checklist to your PC for importation into a spreadsheet or you can directly upload to Cornell’s eBird website (where you can then further manage your lists).

Taking *Handheld Birds* into the field, I discovered one additional limitation. While using this product on my store’s bird walks, I found that it was difficult to share with folks, especially when holding it myself to point out field marks, due to the inherent light-angle issues of an LCD screen. In fact, in bright sun, it is impossible for anyone other than the holder to see the screen. The addition of a sunshield of some sort would certainly help.

Overall, I think that this is a great product, and it is worthy of being considered as the next addition to your Tools of the Trade repertoire. The single most significant shortcoming when comparing *Handheld Birds* to a standard printed field guide is that we can see only one species at a time. No plates of similar species all side-by-side for easy comparison. (But maybe future editions will have a split-screen feature?) Anyhow, I am not ready to say that *Handheld Birds* will replace our Sibley, Peterson, and Nat Geo guides; instead, I believe that it is a wonderful addition to our toolbox. The combination of field guide, audio, text, and checklist all in one pocket-sized product is unique.

What's New—birdJam

In the November/December 2005 issue of *Birding*, pp. 666–668, Noah Strycker summarized the benefits of using an iPod for birding. Now we have a new product which makes that simple, but very useful, tool even simpler: birdJam, formerly known as birdPod.

birdJam can be purchased bundled—and therefore pre-loaded onto an iPod Nano—or birdJam Maker can be used in conjunction with an existing iPod and the Stokes Eastern and Western CDs. The plug-and-play bundled option is great for first-time iPod users, but anyone with iTunes experience will have no trouble using birdPod Maker. The installation is simple and painless, but it is time-consuming; it took me about an hour and fifteen minutes from beginning to end.

Instead of fussing with the editing of each track to delete the narrations, birdJam does that for us. The full edition of birdJam, bundled with an iPod Nano, includes 650 bird songs—all of the tracks from the Stokes Eastern and Western CDs, but without the narration. As an added benefit, photos are provided for some of the most common species.

Species lists are sorted in a few different ways. “All” species are sorted alphabetically, but unfortunately not also in taxonomic order. The “East” and “West” grouping can be sorted either taxonomically or alphabetically, however. Habitat groupings and a few family groupings are included, although I am unsure as to why finches are included in the “Sparrows” group. The “Crazy Birds” grouping is more for entertainment (featuring the stranger avian vocalizations) than utility. I really like the location groupings, which include the New River, Rio Grande Valley, and Space Coast birding festivals. Likely, most users will get the greatest benefit by using the iPod’s “On the Go” feature to make their own groupings. My one complaint is that changes that have been made to the AOU *Check-list* over the past few years have not been included. For example, loons are still placed first when sorting by what birdJam calls “phylogenetic [sic] order”.

Meanwhile, there is the new Backyard birdJam, which provides a selection of 100 species, in both Eastern and Western editions. Although a few of the included species are not necessarily what some of us think of as “backyard birds” (Horned Lark, for example), it is overall a very good sampling of common species, and should be especially popular with beginners.