

# WHERE IS THAT BIRD ANYWAY?

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In the age of GPS and mapping apps, answering the question of “Where is that bird?” should not be that difficult - but it may be trickier than one might think along geopolitical borders (i.e. country, state, and county lines). There is a long history of a bird’s location being determined by geopolitical borders. The American Birding Association’s (ABA) recording rules read in part, “*The bird must have been within the prescribed area when encountered...Within means that the bird must be within the prescribed area when observed, although the observer need not be. For example, if an observer on the U.S. side of the Rio Grande identifies a bird across the river on the Mexican side, the bird may be counted on his/her Mexican list but not on his/her ABA Area list.*”<sup>1</sup>

As a County Compiler for the Pennsylvania Society for Ornithology (PSO) the local example that I deal with all the time is along the Susquehanna River which forms the geopolitical border (i.e. the county line) between Cumberland and Dauphin counties with the county line being the shoreline of the western bank of the river. So, if I am standing at West Fairview Boat Launch (WFBL) in Cumberland County and see a bird anywhere on or over the river, I am actually viewing a Dauphin County bird even though the observer (me) is located in Cumberland County.

Simple enough, right? That is until eBird enters the picture. As birders well know eBird has and continues to make a huge impact on the birding world. Included in this impact is how to determine the location of a bird. For eBird the location of any bird is not where the bird is located but where the observer is located, which is opposite of the ABA standard. In part the eBird rules read as follows: “*This means that if you are standing at Salineño, Texas, and you see a Lineated Woodpecker flying over the trees on the opposite side (thus in Mexico), this "counts" in eBird for your U.S. and Texas list. Our reviewers should also validate the record.*”<sup>2</sup>

For a vast majority of reports the difference between how the ABA and eBird determine a birds location makes little difference. Where the difference comes into play is when the location of a rarity or vagrant needs to be determined. A case in point is a Cinnamon Teal that was reported on the Susquehanna River in April of 2014. eBird has reports of the bird in both Cumberland and Dauphin counties. Remember the whole of the river is actually Dauphin County but since two eBird reports were submitted from WFBL, which is Cumberland County, eBird includes Cinnamon Teal on the

Cumberland County list even though the bird was never actually in Cumberland County. The comments in the 2 checklists themselves make it clear with one stating, “*continuing male; with 1 male Blue-winged Teal; mid-river*” and the other, “*mega; continuing male floating downriver with three Blue-winged Teal; I lost it behind down islands as it neared the Taylor Bridge, perhaps a bit east of mid-river; distant views from here.*” Fortunately the birder in question included comments for if he had not one might wonder if the bird was actually seen in the confluence of the Susquehanna and Conodoguinet Creek (in Cumberland County) and hence a first county recorded.

Fortunately, eBird itself recognizes that how it accounts for a birds location might cause some problems in the face of long standing birding practices and provides some suggestions on how to treat situations about vagrants and rarities along geopolitical borders. In the cited document eBird goes on to say, “*However, in cases like this where you are seeing a very rare bird in another country, state, or county, please do make it clear in your checklist comments where you saw the bird. Lineated Woodpecker still does not have a confirmed record for the United States, so having these notes would be important for those using the data.*”

eBird also provides for duplicate checklists to get around the problem, “*In eBird it is also OK to report birds seen on the opposite side of a border. If you go back and check your woodpecker photos and realize it was in fact a Pileated Woodpecker, you'd want to get that in the official record as a first country record for Mexico. In this case, it is OK to use this hotspot for La Gloria, across from Salineño, to report your bird which will then show up on your Mexico and Tamaulipas list. However, these should always be reported as Incidental checklists (and thus, not reporting all species) since you were not on foot in the area and could not do a complete survey of the birds seen at the site.*”<sup>3</sup> For the Cinnamon Teal example, 2 checklists would have been submitted, both including the teal - a complete checklist for Cumberland (where the observer was standing) and an incomplete checklist for Dauphin (where the bird was located). I understand why they suggest this as it ensures that Dauphin County records show that the teal was actually present in Dauphin. If the only report of the bird came from observers standing in Cumberland then the species would not show up on eBird bar lists etc. as ever having been in Dauphin. Yet this does not solve the problem of the

Cinnamon Teal showing up in Cumberland County records.

Fortunately, eBird provides yet a third way to report a vagrant or rarity on a geopolitical border, and to me as a County Compiler this is the best way to report it in the options they provide. “*Some birders care deeply about their state and local lists. If reporting a bird on the complete checklist from where you are standing is not something you wish to do, then we recommend considering your checklist "incomplete" (not reporting all species) since you are intentionally excluding a bird that you saw on your survey. This is OK, and in this case you would report one checklist using a Traveling or Stationary protocol (with distance, duration, and start time) but indicating that not all species were reported; the bird of interest would be left off this list. For the second list, plotted on the other side of the border, you would report as Incidental.*”

Of course, I would have no qualms (this is me speaking here and not eBird) if standing on the edge of a river (like the Susquehanna) that forms a geopolitical border to enter a complete checklist for the river (you can do this by placing your location on eBird in the river itself - there is actually a hot spot at WFBL) for though I am standing in Cumberland my view of the river and Dauphin County is not impeded in any way because I am standing on Cumberland soil. Again, this is my position and not that of eBird.

I don’t think for a moment that this article addresses all questions on how to report vagrants and rarities along geopolitical boundaries but I hope those who read it gain a better appreciation of some of the issues with reporting along county lines, and the options that are available in reporting on eBird that will help PSO County Compilers preserve the integrity of county bird lists.

If you have questions about these issues, email or call the county compiler(s). The compilers name and contact information is included in each of the county reports in PA Birds.

<sup>1</sup> ABA Recording Rules and Interpretations (version 2014b)

<http://listing.aba.org/aba-recording-rules/>

<sup>2</sup> eBirding along County, State, and Country borders  
<http://help.ebird.org/customer/portal/articles/2238491>

<sup>3</sup> ibid

<sup>4</sup> ibid

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