

## The Self-found Concept: a fun approach to birding and a way to compare lists across different eras

### Background

At the inception of the New York State County Listing Project in 1992, the highest reported list totals were 368 for a NYS life list (Dorothy Crumb), 349 for a Kingbird Region (Manny Levine in Region 10), 324 for a county (Manny Levine in Nassau), and 306 for a NYS year list (Robert Connor in 1992). From today's perspective, those numbers suggest a different world, where birding was very different from what we've come to know: the respective highs reported as of 2024 now stand at 463 (Patricia Lindsay), 432 (Shai Mitra in Region 10), 396 (Shai Mitra in Suffolk), and 361 (Anthony Collerton in 2012). Clearly the listing game has changed, and it is much easier to amass larger lists more quickly now than before.

Contemporary year-listers will likely marvel at [the challenges Connor faced](#) as the first to surpass 300 species in NYS in a year.

Prior to the information revolution, New York birders birded mostly independently, or in coordination with friends and clubs. Chasing previously reported birds was exceptional and mostly aimed at occasional mega-rarities that were cooperative and wondrous enough to permit what was perceived then as a sort of luxury, or even vice, quite apart from ordinary birding. In our 1990s Long Island birding circle, Tony Lauro introduced a humorous and mildly derisive code that expressed our mixed feelings about chasing "OPBs" (other people's birds). That following up previously reported birds was regarded as unusual then, and that it was outside of our ordinary birding routine, is documented in my journal entry from 12 February 2000: "Pat, Joan Quinlan, and I met at the New Forum Diner in Bay Shore and plotted to sweep Long Island for OPBs. We were inspired by the predicted cold, windy weather, which didn't sound ideal for the beach, and also to some degree by Pat's and my perverse plan to see 300 species on the island this year." This "OPB frenzy" was an opportunity for me to see my first New York State Monk Parakeets in Green-Wood Cemetery, our first Long Island Barred Owl in Prospect Park, difficult year-birds such as Barrow's Goldeneye in Bayville and Tufted Duck in Riverhead, and a long-staying rarity, a Common Gull at Shinnecock Inlet. My narrative focuses on these successful chases, barely noting in passing self-finds such as Little Gull, Iceland Gull, and Short-eared Owl, which nowadays would be widely targeted for chasing themselves.

Listing was utterly different a quarter century ago. Our New York State Year List topped 300 species for the first time in 2000 (304), and we would not break that mark again until 2007, which was a remarkable year in New York birding (319 species for us). Indeed, 2007 marked the launch of the iPhone, was still about three or four years prior to the widespread adoption of eBird, and its bounty of rarities inspired Pat to compile "[How we all go birding](#)," which was a sort of historical marker we sought to plant in the rapidly shifting birding terrain. It might be time for an updated review of the sociology of birding.

## **Listing Self-found Birds in the Information Age – Ground Rules**

Paul Buckley, whom I believe was the first to top 400 in NYS, introduced us to the self-found concept as an enjoyable way to motivate discovery, but also as a way of tempering the competitive code, and to allow some semblance of fair comparison among lists from different eras. The basic idea is to value self-discovery above chasing and twitching. The rules are simple in principle but with numerous gray areas in practice. The best codification of them was produced by the Punkbirder blog, which is no longer available, but other, often very technical and legalistic, formulations can be found online. For the convenience of participants in NYSOA's New York State and County Listing project, I offer the following ground rules, slightly simplified and updated from the old blog, accounting for five major issues:

1. Joint finds
2. Clinched later on
3. News ignorance
4. Re-finds
5. Rare breeders / winterers

### **1. Joint finds**

If more than one person is present at the discovery of the bird, the following people can count it as a find: whoever first noticed the bird; whoever clinches the identification; anyone present who contributed to the correct identification of the bird at any time between the discovery and the clinching.

Generally, "present" implies birding together cooperatively and being within earshot. The worst kind of potential abuse here might be habitually stalking skilled bird-finders in order to glom on to their finds, without contributing anything.

### **2. Clinched later on**

The problem: you find a potential rarity, but don't get enough to clinch it, and it's later found and clinched by someone else. Can you count it? The Punkbirders were pretty strict on this point, asserting that the finder must remain present and striving through the clinching to be able to count it, but I think it is more reasonable to require the finder to correctly assess the bird's potential identity and to report this information, thus assisting significantly in the clinching. If you "saw an odd bird" and gave up on it, only to have someone else come by later to find and identify it, the sound of you slapping your forehead is the proof that you did not "find" it! The more common problem nowadays is taking large numbers of photographs and recordings of birds that one did not recognize at the time, and having these identified after the fact. This does not constitute finding—one must adequately recognize the living bird's significance and potential identity at the time one observes it to count it as found.

### 3. News ignorance

What if you found a rare bird that you had heard nothing about, only to discover on reporting it that it had already been found and reported? Common sense should prevail here—on seeing a crowd at Jamaica Bay, it is not permissible to stick your fingers in your ears, hide behind a bush, and scan where everyone is looking until you “find” what they are looking at. Also, increasing numbers of rarities are coming to light through birders who cultivate contacts with nature lovers, photographers, etc. to gain tip-offs of “interesting” birds, which they then follow up on and clinch. If you were not present when the person reporting the bird and its potential significance to you first observed it, your follow up is not a find.

### 4. Re-finds

This is a major gray area. If one finds a rarity at or near the location where that same species has been recently reported, the key is that one must be sufficiently far away from the previous reports or that sufficient time has passed since the most recent report to make one “genuinely surprised” by one’s find. Furthermore, there is no single objective distance or time span that will apply in all instances. For example, if a large, conspicuous bird like a Brown Pelican were reported heading your way along the beach, and you were able to anticipate it and see it from even 20 miles away, your sighting is not a find (unless you can prove your bird is a different individual). For small, inconspicuous birds, the minimum distance required for a re-find to count as self-found would be smaller, for instance three miles for sparrows and warblers.

### 5. Rare breeders/winterers

This is another major gray area. Many species occur in very small numbers but very regularly at particular sites, year after year. My view of finding these is more generous than that of the Punkbirders, who stressed being the first to “find” the Harlequin Ducks at Point Lookout in a given season, or finding a singing Sedge Wren sufficiently far away from currently known hotspots. I don’t have a real solution for this problem except an honest self-appraisal of how much guidance one needed to find and identify the bird. To count, this should be close to zero guidance.

Prioritizing finding birds over twitching presents some conflict in terms of time and resources, but in practice almost all birders enjoy both. Clarifying the distinction is not only potentially fun--and also interesting in allowing more meaningful comparisons across different eras--but it might help birders to think more critically and purposefully about how they pursue the hobby/art/science of birding.

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