



# The birdPod

*A World of Bird Songs in Your Hand*

JEFFREY A. GORDON

On any list of my favorite ways to spend time and money, watching birds and monkeying around with digital gadgets are sure to be right near the top. And even though many birders consider the two to be largely incompatible, I always get a charge out of trying to find worthwhile birding applications for the endless procession of high-tech gizmos that crowd the Internet and the superstores.

From its release in late 2001, Apple's iPod seemed to offer great possibilities for birding use. Small, ele-

gant, and user friendly, with almost unbelievable storage capacity, it seemed certain that this new toy would find its way into the hands of many bird watchers. I know it quickly found its way into mine.

I'd have to say that the iPod has delivered on almost all its promises, and subsequent versions have only improved it. Over the past 30 years I've spent an awful lot of time, energy, and money lugging around an ever-changing arsenal of tape recorders, cassettes, microphones, compact discs, minidisks, and speakers, searching for the perfect way to have quick access to large numbers of bird songs in the field. Though each new system had its advantages, the iPod beats them all for portability, ease of use, and storage capacity. It also eliminates the need for struggling with multiple tapes or discs, and rewinding or fast forwarding to get to a desired song. Its ability to display text even frees one from carrying CD booklets or tape labels that list the species presented and their order.

But what about those of you who don't own computers, the usual vehicle for acquiring and organizing files that the iPod can play? Or maybe you own a Mac or PC, but just aren't up for tinkering around with the details—you're looking for something convenient. Perhaps you've got all the hardware, the appropriate bird song CDs, and have



learned enough about the free iTunes software that Apple distributes so that you have successfully been using it to listen to bird sounds, but are annoyed by the vocal announcements of species' names that precede each song.

A new company called birdPod has stepped up to offer useful solutions for each of these types of birders. For noncomputer users, they sell iPods preloaded with bird sounds that can be used with no further fuss or elaboration. If you want digital capabilities without the expense and potential hassle of owning a computer, look no further—this is your answer.

If you have the computer but don't have bird song recordings and aren't especially looking forward to fiddling with it all, you can get bird CDs—they use the excellent *Stokes Field Guide to Bird Songs*—along with their birdPod software that automatically handles the organization. You can buy an iPod from them or a third party, but I'd suggest doing it through birdPod—the overall package will likely be cheaper.

And if you're like me, already having the trifecta of an iPod, a computer, and the Stokes CDs, you can purchase just the birdPod software, which strips the name announcements, divides up tracks that have more than one species, and adds a variety of data that you can choose to display or not, such as text descriptions and/or mnemonic renderings of each vocalization. It also adds a number of premade playlists, which group species by taxonomy or habitat.

In the end, all users will end up with the same thing: an iPod with semicustomized bird sounds and playlist. Those with computers and the desire to do so can also make their own playlist groupings. This is a powerful ability, especially because the provided

habitat groupings are somewhat awkward. For example, the "wetlands" playlist includes both Swainson's warbler and common loon, two species that have little or no actual habitat overlap in practice and whose vocalizations are unlikely to be confused.

It's much more useful to have playlists specifically tailored to the areas you actually bird, and I suspect that over time, these will become available through birdPod, or just by sharing them with your newly geeked-out birder friends. In the meantime, they are easily done on your own, if you know which species you want to include.

In the end, I think the people at birdPod have provided a valuable service to a large segment of the birding community, making the application of nifty new technology easier and more accessible. From a practical standpoint, their products offer excellent value, especially for those who buy the iPod, CD, and software all in one package. For those who already own the hardware, the software is perhaps a bit pricey (\$69 for either East or West, \$118 for both), but when you compare the time savings and convenience versus individually editing each track yourself, it's still a pretty nice deal, saving you hours of rather boring work. Think of it as paying someone to organize your closets, a luxury with some very tangible benefits, especially if, like me, you're unlikely to get around to it on your own.

*Jeffrey A. Gordon is a writer, tour leader, and ecotourism consultant who lives in Lewes, Delaware. He is a frequent speaker at birding and nature festivals, club meetings, banquets, and other events.*