

iLike my iPod!

In the crisp air of an April morning, the faint call of a bird wafted down to me from high up in the fir trees. A Black-throated Gray Warbler? Hard to tell. I whipped out my iPod, scrolled down to “Black-throated Gray Warbler”, and hit the play button. As the first broadcast phrase faded, a tiny bird flitted down from the treetops and landed in a bush not ten feet away. I lifted my binoculars to the beautiful warbler, which sang a few notes and then retreated into the forest. I was impressed. That warbler is usually hard to track down, but with the iPod it was easy. You can take advantage of this new technology to take your birding to new heights, too.

Birders are catching on to what has become a national craze for the iPod, a relatively new gadget from Apple that plays and stores music and sound files. Smaller than a deck of cards, the iPod fits neatly into a pocket and can be taken anywhere. Save your bird recordings onto it, hook up a small external speaker, and you are ready to go. In the field, it is now possible to quickly access and broadcast any song, in any order. No more fussing with tapes or CDs to draw in that rustling rail or sneaky sparrow. The beauty of the system is in the design; it is user-friendly, efficient, and reliable.

Just ask Rich Hoyer, a WINGS tour leader and iPod user since May 2005. “Such a great tool,” he

says. “The little iPod and a small external speaker now take the place of a heavy and bulky Sony TCM tape player, a stack of about six cassette tapes, and a mess of laminated cards with the bird names and counter numbers. And it now takes no more than 10 seconds for me to pull up any bird voice, from a selection of about 500 voices, on a typical South American tour.”

With its system of sorting by playlists, artists, albums, and songs, the iPod shines by making your entire music collection available in an instant.

Navigating through the simple menus is done with one button and a small wheel, both of which fit under your thumb. The number of music files you can fit on an iPod varies with the model, but can be almost unlimited: The latest 60-gigabyte model holds about 15,000 songs, depending on the average length per song. This is as much memory as an average computer hard drive’s.

It takes some initial effort to set up and input your digital sound collection. The iPod setup is managed from a free computer program called iTunes, which works on both Macs and PCs. Within iTunes, you can organize the files. At its most basic level, you can use iTunes as a music library by copying your CDs into the computer, one by one (which requires a CD drive), and placing their contents into one larger collection. Then you can sort the files into personalized playlists, burn your own CDs with any combination of songs, and load the music straight onto an iPod. You do not need to purchase an iPod to use iTunes for organizing your music. iTunes has other features, such as sharing capabilities and access to the Apple store, where you can buy most popular music for \$0.99 per song.

To manage bird recordings in iTunes for iPod use, it is generally best to purchase one of several commercially available CD compilations of bird songs, such as the popular “Stokes Field Guide to Bird Songs” or Peterson Field Guide “Birding by Ear” series. Then copy the contents of the CD into iTunes, which takes a couple of minutes. Once all the recordings are in your music library, you can start sorting which ones you’d like to have accessible and place them in separate playlists. If you do not manually organize the songs, they will sort alphabetically by artist, album, and song titles. To take it a step further, a sound-editing program such as Audacity (free on the Internet) or Amadeus is useful for removing human voices on the recordings and for slicing multiple-species

Noah Strycker

5253 Southwest Rose Place

Corvallis OR 97333

birdboy@bkpix.com



Above: Must-have field equipment for the modern birder: an iPod loaded with bird recordings and a portable speaker. © Noah Strycker.

Right: An iPod loaded with bird recordings and a portable speaker make it possible to call birds in for closer viewing. Photo of the author by © Bob Keefer.

tracks to isolate single species.

An iPod costs considerably less than a good pair of binoculars and is just as useful in some birding situations. There are several different models, ranging from the tiny 512-megabyte iPod Shuffle (120 songs; \$99) to the 60-gigabyte iPod Photo (15,000 songs; \$449). The larger models have additional features, including photo storage and slideshow capability. All can be used as





The iPod is light and portable, making it ideal for field use. Photo of the author by © Bob Keefer.

external hard drives to back up files on your computer. Rechargeable batteries last up to 12 hours. I recommend a Creative TravelSound external speaker, which runs about \$50.

One alternative already on the market for birders is called the BirdPod. This is simply an iPod that has been preloaded with the Stokes bird recordings in various playlists for ease of use. The BirdPod runs about \$100 more than a regular iPod; get details at <www.ibirdpod.com>.

Does all of this sound complicated? It really isn't. Anyone with some computer experience can set up an iPod fairly quickly and start using it in the field. I now take my iPod on most birding outings, for reference if not broadcast.

Common sense applies whenever using tape playbacks with wild birds. If you are in a heavily birded area, your presence can disrupt birds' activities. Be considerate of intrusive behavior. The American Birding Association's Code of Birding Ethics states: "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 that is rare in your local area."

Like other birders, Hoyer finds that his iPod helps him get great looks at birds without much fuss. "While leading a tour in Rondonia, Brazil, in October 2004, I heard some Crimson-bellied Parakeets zipping over us through the rain forest canopy," he relates. "With my iPod, I was able to bring up the call notes of the species very quickly—the birds were still within earshot. With only a very brief playing of the sound file, they did an abrupt U-turn and landed in the understory right over our heads. They sat there eyeing us for several minutes, long enough for me to get a few digiscoped images."

Doubtless, the tour participants will be bragging about those parakeets for years to come. By making such close and colorful encounters possible, the iPod is one more tool to promote education, conservation, and the enjoyment of birding.

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