

RememBird

We all know the value of birding by ear. From locating a Blackburnian Warbler singing in the highest branches of an old hemlock to hearing the chip note of a sparrow hidden in the brush, the aural aspect of birding adds greatly both to our enjoyment and ability as birders. Many of us take the auditory component of birding a step further by using a recording device to “remember” what we hear out there. Additionally, pocket-sized micro-cassette recorders are great for note-taking. The only problem—for me and for many other birders—is that it’s just another thing to carry and another thing to forget on the kitchen table.

The value of recording devices is clear. The convenience of always having one handy is less clear. Which brings me to the subject of Red Crossbills. Each of the nine “types” of Red Crossbill exhibits traits of “good” species, and the whole Red Crossbill complex is a candidate for a multi-way “split.” In the field, each type is most readily identifiable by its call note. But if you’re like me and have a tough time identifying subtle differences in the flight calls of crossbills, wouldn’t it be helpful to make a recording in the field that you could identify later? And if you’re also like me and averse to carrying a clunky recording device in the field, wouldn’t it be a dream

come true if using a recording device were as automatic as grabbing binoculars as you head out the door?

Enter the RememBird.

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The RememBird—billed as a “digital audio recorder/player for birdwatchers”—is a small, lightweight device that records birdsong and field notes without requiring you to take your eye off the bird—such as that calling Red Crossbill. Two separate

microphones are built in, one at the distal end of the device for recording birdsong and one at the close end for recording dictated field notes. The distal microphone has a built-in wind baffle to improve recording fidelity. An additional, higher-quality, external microphone is available for separate purchase.



The RememBird enables you to record bird sounds in the field, as well as your own spoken field notes. *Image courtesy of © Software Hothouse, Ltd.*

The unique shape and size of the RememBird are designed to attach with Velcro strips to the underside of most full-size roof-prism binoculars, but the unit can also be carried in a pocket or with a wrist strap. Lack of waterproofing, however, may reduce the practical value of this unit in the field. The brochure states, “You should keep it as dry as you keep your binoculars.” I’m not sure what that means, as both my binoculars and I have been thoroughly soaked more than once. So I think

you'll need to separate the RememBird from the binocular—that's the benefit of using Velcro—when the skies open up.

The "Always Listening" mode records everything you hear or say within a preset time limit (before the sleep mode kicks in to save battery life). Another option is a simple press of a button that will begin and end recording sessions. Separate buttons are used for recording dictation vs. birdsong, due to the higher storage capacity requirement of birdsong recordings. The "Notes Recording" microphone is strategically placed to allow the user to whisper into the microphone, so as to minimize the chance of disturbing the bird—or other birders. An included mono earpiece is used to listen to the recordings, and it has controls for rewinding, fast forwarding, and volume.

Indoors, you can upload your recordings as MP3 files via a USB connection. The data are automatically cataloged and time-stamped, but you can annotate, edit, and play recordings and export files.

Overall, I was pleasantly surprised by the quality of the recordings that I made in the field. I clearly heard the "long call" of a Herring Gull about 100 yards away on a calm morning, and I was easily able to make out the call notes of an Ovenbird in the understory on a breezy morning with traffic noise in the background. Recordings made within about 50 feet were really quite good, with diminishing success—as expected—with increased distance from the subject and/or with increased background noise. For the size of the package, the RememBird provides a remarkably good recording (definitely adequate for identification later) and a convenient way of recording those valuable field notes.

Removable memory cards are available with pre-recorded libraries (North America, Europe, Brazil, and others) that in-



The RememBird solves the problem of the bulkiness and awkwardness of most other sound recording devices. It affixes conveniently between the barrels of your binocular, and it is easy to use in the field. *Image courtesy of © Software Hothouse, Ltd.*

clude songs and calls for most species. This is a lot of information in a tiny package, and would be especially valuable when visiting foreign lands. At least for the North America library, which I listened to, most of the recordings were of high quality and utility. They covered 98% of ABA Code 1 (widespread) and Code 2 (range-restricted) species. The navigation system, however, takes some getting used to.

In summary, the RememBird is one of a number of current offerings heralding a new era of technological applications to birding. The RememBird is imperfect, but it does offer a good glimpse of how tomorrow's birders will increasingly rely on audio technology both in the field and back home at their computers. There is little doubt that the creators of the RememBird will continue to improve their product, and inspire others to develop and improve similarly useful technologies for birders.