



Birds on a wireless

National Geographic's birding app soars

Whether it's the sighting of the first robin, the honking of geese overhead or the swallows descending on Capistrano, the return of migratory birds is a sure sign that spring is here.

The combination of both birds and warm weather coming back makes this an ideal time of year to engage in some bird watching. Whether you're a serious birder or just want to know what to call the birds you see in your backyard, the technology now exists to put a complete field guide on your mobile device for \$1.99.



KEVIN O'NEILL
InSites

National Geographic Birds: Field Guide to North America is an iOS app that features a digital collection of 995 species of native birds. The \$1.99 price is listed as a limited time special offer, so I don't know what the regular price is, but I'm sure it's less than the \$27.95 price of the printed version. And having it on your iPhone, iPad or iPod is certainly more convenient than carrying a paper book around.

Drawing on tradition

What makes the app soar is the illustrations. Most field guides use drawings instead of photographs. An artist can choose the best poses and lighting to emphasize the identifying markings and features of each species, while leaving out background clutter. It would be nearly impossible to get the same results for

all of the species with photos.

National Geographic is renowned for the quality of its photos, and is just as particular when it comes to illustration. Even though numerous artists contribute to the app, there's a consistent level of excellence in all of the illustrations.

Birds of a feather

All of the bird species are displayed in a Species list that features the name and a "mugshot" of the bird. The list can be organized by first name, last name, family or taxonomy. There are search filters to the right of the list to help you narrow it down. You can filter your search using color, size, habitat, month, region and abundance.

Once you locate the bird you're trying to identify in the species list you can click on it to reveal more information. The information area for each bird is divided into three sections accessible by clicking labeled tabs at the top.

The first section is Description. The top of this section usually features several full-color illustrations of the featured bird, although some species have only a single image. Typically there will be a male, a female and a juvenile, and they will be shown both on the ground and in flight. Labels of distinguishing features can be turned on and off with the tap of a finger.

Below the artwork are three subsections: Overview, Appearance and Behavior. These contain general and specific information about physical characteristics, size, habits, nesting, breeding, eggs and more. You also can add bird sightings to your cus-

tom lists or events that the app lets you create in another section.

The second tab in the information area is Maps. This features color-coded maps that depict the seasonal ranges and migration routes of the bird. There are also written descriptions of the range, habitat and population. The third tab is Sounds, which features actual audio of the birds calls as well as a description.

A bird in the hand

The app has several tools for the more serious birder to help keep track of sightings. My Journal lets you record sightings, locations and events for future reference. The Lists tool allows you to create your own lists to keep track of and save specific species you've sighted or hope to. It also has a collection of lists provided by National Geographic that you can refer to.

There are quizzes ranging from beginner to expert to help you test your bird knowledge. A birder's Tool Kit has lots of information — terms, videos, tips and advice — to help you preen your bird-watching skills.

A News section is updated daily with bird-related articles from numerous, reputable websites. Finally, an Information section gives you the details on app support, credits, a tutorial and more.

National Geographic Birds is a comprehensive, well-designed and easy-to-use app that belongs on your mobile device if you ever venture into the great outdoors.

KEVIN O'NEILL is a graphic artist for The Times-Tribune. Contact him at koneill@timeshamrock.com with links to your favorite websites.