

Editorial

Best Practices on eBird

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Editorial Note: This article was first published on the Bird Society of Singapore's website on 10 February 2026. We have asked the author and the Bird Society of Singapore to kindly allow it to be reproduced here. The article has been edited to make it more appropriate for Malaysian birders.

Introduction: Why should I use eBird?

eBird is a free-to-use citizen-science database, which by now I am sure many of us are familiar with. This article hopes to share with you more about eBird and some good habits you can put into practice when using it. eBird contributes to research and monitoring of bird movements and abundance. By using eBird, all of us can contribute data to aid research and conservation of birds around the world, and we ourselves can benefit in several ways by using eBird too!

Useful Information About Birds

Species pages give us tips on how to identify birds, and provide reference photos of birds of various sexes, morphs and ages (all of which are contributed by fellow eBird users!)

Bar charts provide data showing the abundance of various species throughout the year. This gives you an idea of when to start looking out for a certain species. If you go to the eBird site <https://ebird.org/home> and choose 'Explore' at the top, you will be given two options – to search by Species or Region. As an example, if you choose Large Hawk-Cuckoo *Hierococcyx sparveroides* and at the top enter 'Malaysia' you will get a page with useful data (Plate 1).

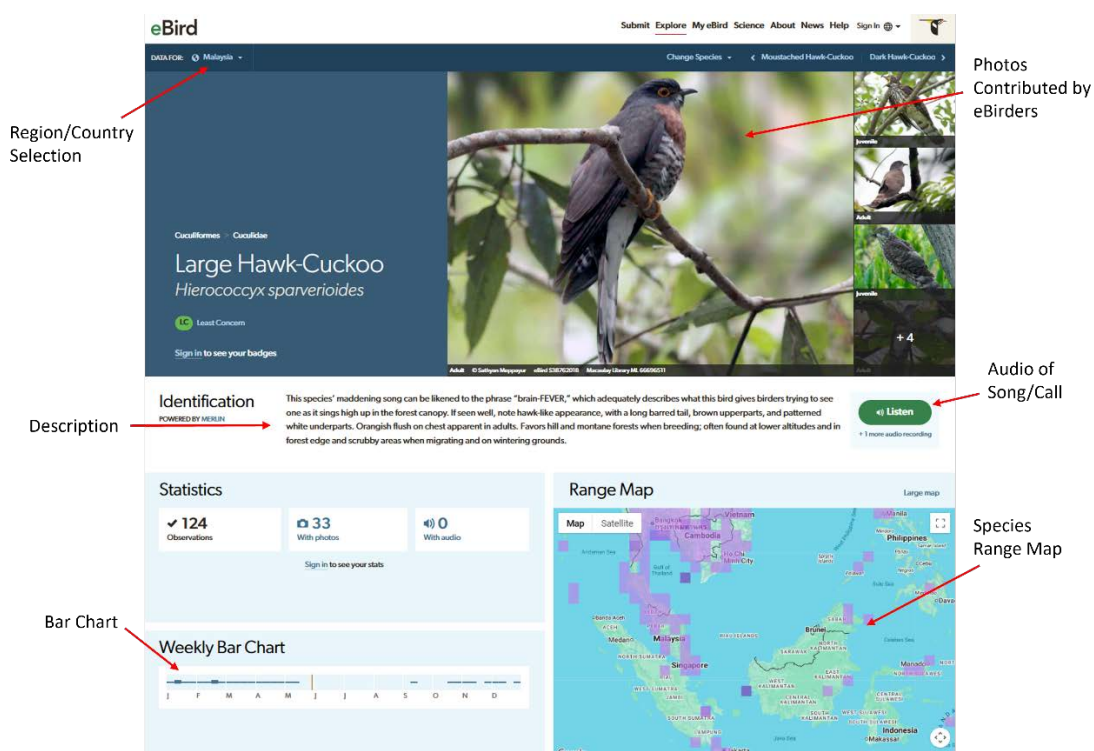


Plate 1: eBird page for the Large Hawk-Cuckoo with Malaysia selected as the region.

A quick look at the eBird bar chart would tell you that January to February is the best time of the year to look out for Large Hawk-Cuckoo in Malaysia.

The species range maps show us the global distribution of birds, which can give us an indication of whether we might expect to see a certain species in different parts of the world. Zooming in to the range maps will even show you all the various spots in Malaysia where other eBird users have reported a particular species before, and recent sightings within the past month would show up in red. You may also filter the data to see the sightings for a specific range of months or years (Plate 2). This is a highly useful tool if you are wondering where to go to see a specific target species.

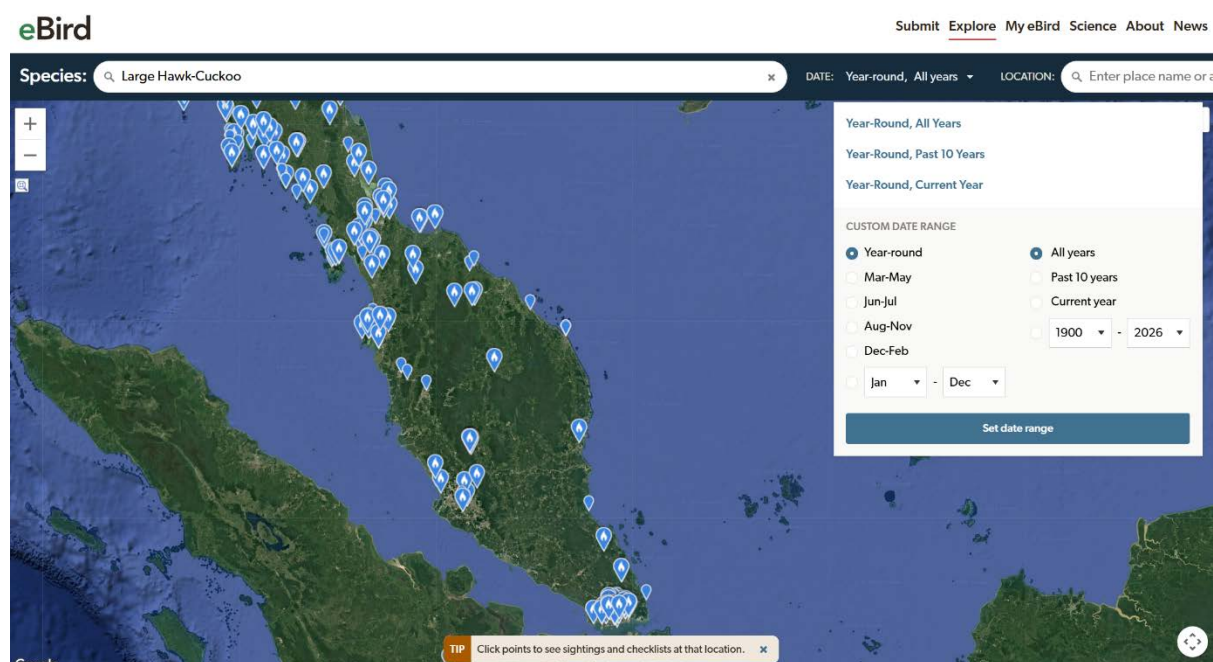


Plate 2: eBird species range map for Large Hawk-Cuckoo with filter to set time period.

The links to the respective Malaysia or state-level eBird region pages are shown here:

Malaysia: <https://ebird.org/region/MY>
 Johor: <https://ebird.org/region/MY-01>
 Kedah: <https://ebird.org/region/MY-02>
 Kelantan: <https://ebird.org/region/MY-03>
 Melaka: <https://ebird.org/region/MY-04>
 Negeri Sembilan: <https://ebird.org/region/MY-05>

Pahang: <https://ebird.org/region/MY-06>
 Pulau Pinang: <https://ebird.org/region/MY-07>
 Perak: <https://ebird.org/region/MY-08>
 Perlis: <https://ebird.org/region/MY-09>
 Selangor: <https://ebird.org/region/MY-10>
 Terengganu: <https://ebird.org/region/MY-11>
 Sabah: <https://ebird.org/region/MY-12>

From each region page, you may navigate easily to other resources, such as the Rare Bird Alert (RBA), or Needs Alerts.



eBird Alerts

eBird's 'Rare Bird Alert' (RBA) is an especially crucial tool for serious twitchers or for anyone hoping to see a rare bird species. This page gives a summary of all sightings of species deemed as rare in Malaysia as a whole, or in specific states (be it throughout the year, or during a certain time of the year). The link provided will send you to the Malaysia RBA page, but you may check out the individual states' RBA via the region pages shown above.

<https://ebird.org/alert/rba/MY>

The 'Needs Alert' is also a great tool for listers as it will show you whenever a species you have not yet seen in Malaysia or a specific state has been sighted. The 'Year Needs Alert' is similar, except that it shows you when a species you have not yet seen for the year has been sighted. For those doing a Big Year, this would be a great source of timely information.

<https://ebird.org/alerts>

For these tools, you may subscribe to email notifications (either daily or hourly), or alternatively (as I prefer to do so), go directly to the websites for direct access. These tools may be used anywhere around the world, and can help you as you go birding on your travels as well.

The screenshot displays the 'Malaysia Rare Bird Alert' page. It features a header with the title and a sub-header indicating that the report shows observations of rare birds in Malaysia, including both unreviewed and reviewed/approved observations. A 'You are subscribed' notification is visible, stating 'Sending alerts DAILY. Change' and 'Unsubscribe'. Below this, a section titled 'Observations for last 7 days' lists several sightings. Each entry includes the species name, scientific name, status (CONFIRMED or UNCONFIRMED), date and time, location, and the observer's name.

Count	Species	Scientific Name	Status	Date & Time	Location	Observer
2	Black-naped Fruit-Dove	<i>Ptilinopus melanospilus</i>	CONFIRMED	May 26, 2026 16:09	Pulau Selingaan (Turtle Islands National Park), Sabah, Malaysia	Muhammad Kazee
1	Black-naped Fruit-Dove	<i>Ptilinopus melanospilus</i>	CONFIRMED	May 24, 2026 05:58	Pulau Selingaan (Turtle Islands National Park), Sabah, Malaysia	Jumaidig jay Borneo Eco Tours
2	Gray Imperial-Pigeon	<i>Ducula pickeringii</i>	CONFIRMED	May 26, 2026 06:48	Pulau Mantanani Besar, Sabah, Malaysia	Yuhao Sun
1	Short-toed Coucal	<i>Centropus rectunguis</i>	UNCONFIRMED	May 28, 2026 11:14	Kinabatangan Wetlands Resort, Sabah, Malaysia	Angela Lund
2	Asian Palm Swift	<i>Cypselurus balisensis</i>	UNCONFIRMED	May 26, 2026 08:31	The Dusun, Pantat, Negeri Sembilan, MY (2.801, 102.015), Negeri Sembilan, Malaysia	Niel Bruce
2	Eurasian Coot	<i>Fulica atra</i>	UNCONFIRMED	May 24, 2026 11:17	Fishing Farm, Sabah, Malaysia	Stanley T Shao
2	Black-backed Swamphen	<i>Porphyrio indicus</i>	UNCONFIRMED	May 24, 2026 07:20	Sungai Rambai Paddyfields, Melaka, Malaysia	Chan Chee Keong

Plate 3: eBird Rare Bird Alert for Malaysia.

Keeping of personal lists

Apart from being an excellent source of information, eBird can also serve as a place where you can store information about your birding trips and adventures, including the date, time, location and list of birds seen during each trip. eBird can also help you to keep track of how many birds you have seen in a certain country, or even around the world! Personally, I treasure



each and every moment I spend birding, and each experience I have had seeing a bird holds a special meaning to me. As time goes on, it may be easy to forget where and when you saw a specific bird, however making use of eBird to faithfully log your checklists (Plate 4) helps you to store information and photographs of your birding experiences in one place.

My eBird

My Checklists

1124 Checklists [Show all details](#)

	DATE/TIME	LOCATION	COUNTY	STATE/PROVINCE	REGION	
1124.	04 Jun 2026 11:15 AM	名古屋市-鶴舞公園 (Nagoya-Tsuruma Park)	Nagoya	Aichi	Japan	
1123.	01 Jun 2026 11:00 AM	名古屋市-水分橋緑地 (Nagoya-Mizuwakebashi Greenspace)	Nagoya	Aichi	Japan	
1122.	31 May 2026 9:47 AM	高山市-豊平 (Takayama-Tatamidaira Flat)	Takayama	Gifu	Japan	
1121.	30 May 2026 4:34 PM	高山市-宮川-松本橋と宮川大橋の間 (Takayama-Miya River-Matsumoto Bridge to Miyagawa-Chashi Bridge)	Takayama	Gifu	Japan	
1120.	30 May 2026 2:06 PM	高山市-宮川-柳橋と家事橋の間 (Takayama-Miyagawa River-Yanagi Bridge to Kaji Bridge)	Takayama	Gifu	Japan	
1119.	30 May 2026 12:50 PM	高山市-宮川-筏橋と柳橋の間 (Takayama-Miya River-Ikada Bridge to Yanagi Bridge)	Takayama	Gifu	Japan	
1118.	29 May 2026 10:22 AM	春日井市-みろくの森 (Kasugai-Miroku Forest)	Kasugai	Aichi	Japan	
1117.	21 May 2026 10:45 AM	Sungei Seletar		Singapore	Singapore	
1116.	20 May 2026 7:35 AM	Central Catchment Nature Reserve (CCNR)		Singapore	Singapore	
1115.	16 May 2026 12:00 PM	Singapore Straits (including SG/Indo/M'sian waters)		Singapore	Singapore	

Plate 4: 'My Checklists' page on eBird

Mobile app or desktop site?

After you have registered for eBird and downloaded the mobile app (available on both Google Play Store and Apple Store), you may be wondering if there are any differences between the app and the desktop site. Here is a quick summary.

Mobile app	Desktop site
More user-friendly experience of submitting checklists.	Submission of checklists may be slightly more challenging.
You have the option of keeping your checklist running while birding to keep track of the time and distance travelled using GPS.	Does not allow for live running of checklists. Use of the desktop site is more for submission of checklists after you have completed birding. You would have to estimate the distance travelled and duration spent birding.
Does not support attachment of media (photos and audio) to checklists.	Allows you to attach media to your checklists.
Does not allow mass uploading of checklists via Microsoft Excel.	Allows mass uploading of checklists via Microsoft Excel

Personally, I prefer to submit my checklists using the eBird mobile app first, then upload my photos and audio to my checklists via the desktop site afterwards.

eBird Best Practices

As previously mentioned, eBird data is used by scientists for research purposes and helps in conservation of birds around the world. As such, we should aim to keep the data that we key into eBird as accurate as possible.

1. Only key in species you are confident of identifying

Keying in species you are not confident in identifying, or are not sure if you really saw them will affect the reliability of eBird data. For example, if you see terns which are too far out and you are unable to get photographs or good looks at them to identify them confidently, you should key them into your checklists as 'tern sp.' instead of assuming that all of them are Little Terns. In reality, they could be White-winged Tern, Whiskered Tern, or some other kind of tern. If you are not sure of the identification of any sightings, don't feel shy to ask an experienced birder directly, or on a Malaysian Nature Society or Wild Bird Club Malaysia Facebook group.

In the same vein, there are some species which are not identifiable to species during certain times of the year, or unless certain criteria are met. One example is Black-nest Swiftlet and White-nest Swiftlet which cannot be identified to species in the field unless they are seen on their nests. Instead of assuming the swiftlets we see flying about to be one species or the other, we should key in our observations as "dark-swiftlet sp." instead. The table below shows some examples of some birds we should not identify to species.

Species	What to key into your eBird checklist
Black-nest Swiftlet White-nest Swiftlet (also known as Edible-nest Swiftlet) While these are some of the most common birds in Malaysia, they cannot be identified to species without a view of a bird on its nest, or an exceptional view of the extent of feathering on the tarsi with a bird in hand.	dark swiftlet sp. (for birds seen flying around and not on their nests)
Mossy-nest Swiftlet Despite being known from Sumatra, Java and Borneo based on specimens and nesting records, in the field, the species is not identifiable away from the nest from Black or White-nest Swiftlets. There are no confirmed Mossy-nest colonies in Sabah away from Gomantong Caves and only a few known nesting sites in Sarawak.	dark swiftlet sp. (for birds seen flying around and not on their nests) Note: Comment from eBird reviewer James Eaton
Bornean Swiftlet Not possible to identify in the field unless extreme attention & numerous photos from all angles and lights. On current knowledge, it is only known with certainty from the upper elevation of Mount Kinabalu.	Bornean/Plume-toed Swiftlet Note: Comment from eBird reviewer James Eaton
Chinese Pond-Heron Indian Pond-Heron	pond-heron sp. (for birds in non-breeding plumage)



Species	What to key into your eBird checklist
Javan Pond-Heron These three species cannot be differentiated while in their non-breeding plumage. They typically start to develop their breeding plumage from March to May, before they return back to their breeding grounds. They are usually only identified to species during these months.	
Pin-tailed Snipe Swinhoe's Snipe	Pin-tailed/Swinhoe's Snipe (for birds seen without a view of the spread tail)
Blue-and-White Flycatcher (default species in East Malaysia) Zapppy's Flycatcher	Blue-and-White/Zapppy's Flycatcher (for female or immature male birds)
Himalayan Cuckoo Oriental Cuckoo Himalayan Cuckoo: no acceptable field reports of this species were found since 1980 in Peninsular Malaysia and since 1960 in Bornean Malaysia. Oriental Cuckoo: No acceptable records were found for Peninsular Malaysia.	Himalayan/Oriental Cuckoo (Field reports of Himalayan/Oriental Cuckoo should be referred to as such unless diagnostic measurements and/or a record of vocalizations can be obtained.) Reference: MNS Bird Conservation Council. 2021. <i>A Checklist of the Birds of Malaysia</i> . 2020 Edition. Kuala Lumpur: Malaysian Nature Society. (MNS Conservation Publication No. 22)

While rare species will still be subject to review from eBird reviewers, common species will easily slip under the radar and automatically be accepted into eBird. Just because you have more species on your checklist, or have seen more individuals of a particular species, it doesn't mean you are a superior birder! Let's do our part to be responsible in reporting our sightings and try to keep eBird data as accurate as possible. In addition to the species you see, also do remember to include the species you **hear** as well - but again, only if you are confident of your identification.

2. Try to provide an accurate estimate of the number of birds seen instead of using 'X'

While there is the option of putting an 'X' to show that a bird is seen (without providing an exact count), it is always best to provide a count of the number of birds seen. Even if you are unable to count the exact number, it is still good to give an estimate. As a general, stay conservative with your counts. For example, if 20 white-shouldered starlings fly by, and 10 minutes later, another flock of 20 flies by again in the opposite direction, they are likely to be the same flock. In some cases, it might feel daunting to count the many birds you are observing, for example, if a flock of 237 Asian Glossy Starlings fly by you, a ballpark figure of 200 to 250 will be alright.

3. Include photos, audio and/or comprehensive descriptions for rare species

When submitting your checklists, you may realise that some species are labelled with an 'R'. This would denote a rare species for the location (either year-round or for that specific time of the year). You would then be prompted to insert comments for your observation, as well as to add photos, videos or audio to substantiate your sighting. This is particularly important, as this helps to show eBird reviewers that your sighting is accurate and genuine, particularly when you are the first (and perhaps only) person to spot it. This is crucial as the eBird reviewers have

to exercise due-diligence when confirming sightings, and cannot confirm a sighting of a rarity which does not have sufficient evidence to back it up. For sightings of continuing easily identifiable birds seen by multiple observers and consistently showing each day, it is acceptable to state 'continuing' under the checklist comments. However, perhaps if the bird's appearance is highly irregular and you are also the sole observer for that specific day, or if the bird is one which is difficult to identify (e.g. Oriental vs Collared Pratincole) it would still be important for you to provide good documentation to back the sighting up. Please do an additional check if an 'R' appears to ensure that you have not mistaken a more expected species for a rarer one, as the filters have been put in place by the eBird reviewers who are knowledgeable of the region's expected species.

While photographs are the best evidence, we do know that not all birders carry a camera or we may not have our cameras with us all the time, and also that sometimes the birds are just too quick for us to get a picture. If no photographs are available, your descriptions become all the more important to prove the presence of a rarity.

When inserting comments for rare species, it is important to describe the following:

- Appearance of the bird such as:
 - o Size (Usually by comparing to other common species, for example, "slightly bigger than Javan Myna")
 - o Proportion (Was the tail long? How were the wings shaped?)
 - o Colour (Describing species colours for different body parts can be very helpful!)
- Behaviour of the bird
 - o For example: Did you notice any specific flight pattern, was the bird wagging its tail, was it hunting using a specific technique?
- How similar-looking species were eliminated
- Duration of sighting
- Distance to the bird
- Whether binoculars were used
- Whether photographs were obtained (and if so, remember to upload them!)

Merely stating "perched on a tree", "flying about", "confirmed by guide" or "feeding" does not help to prove a rarity! Do try to make sure you describe birds to the best of your abilities. It is perfectly fine if you did not get to see or take note of every single feature of the bird, but just be honest about what you saw, and why you reached your conclusion about its identification. This will help the eBird reviewers to make a well-informed verdict on your sighting.

4. Input location accurately and make use of eBird hotspots whenever possible

[Make use of eBird hotspots instead of creating a new custom location.](#)

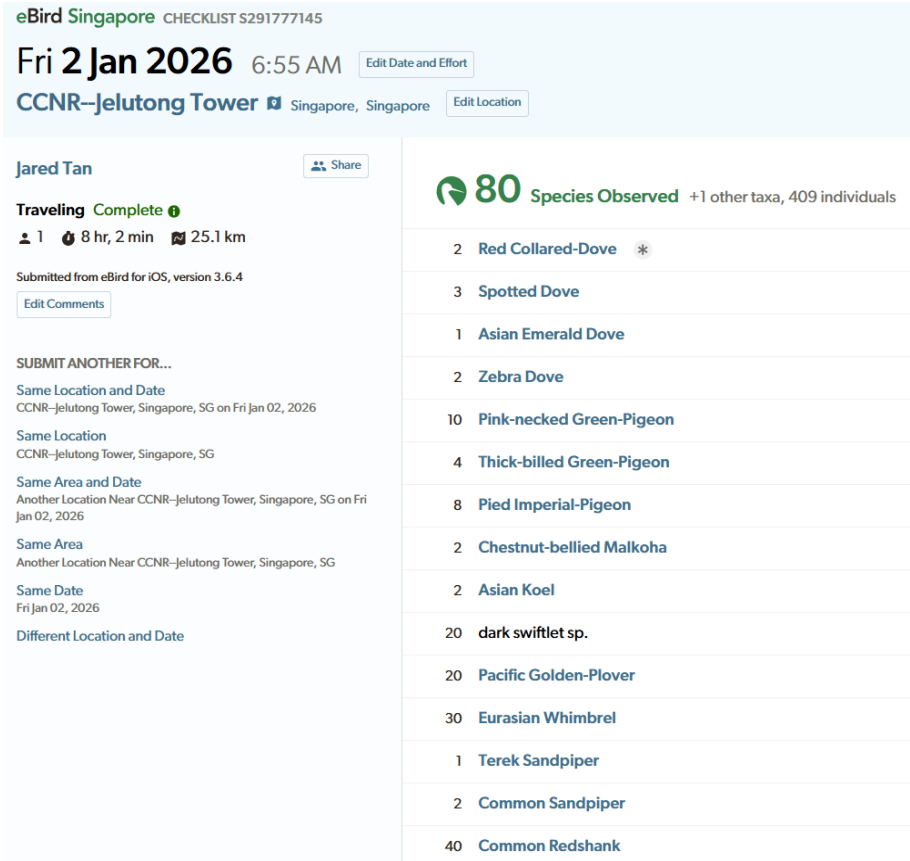
Generally, try to key in the location based on an existing location available in eBird (i.e. selecting "Gunung Pantu Recreational Forest--Pantu Bird Sanctuary and North Area" rather than creating a new custom pinned location). This will be beneficial as your checklist and sightings will be classified under the existing data for that location. If no existing hotspot is available for selection, it is ok to create a new pinned location as well. You can even suggest new hotspots for the eBird reviewers to consider! Alternatively, if you would like to use your checklist to

show people a specific pinned location to look for a specific bird, it is also ok to create a custom location.

Input locations accurately

Do also ensure that you input locations accurately. For example, you saw a bird in Gunung Pantı Recreational Forest, make sure that your checklist location is as such. It is actually quite common to see people mistakenly setting the location of their checklist as their home address!

It is also quite common to see some eBird users creating long, continuous checklists spanning multiple locations, which is misleading for other users and affects the accuracy of eBird data. For example, if you start your day in Singapore with a trip to Jelutong Tower in the Central Catchment Nature Reserve followed by Sungei Buloh Wetland Reserve, and record all your sightings in one checklist, this would lead to a 'jumbo' checklist of 80 species, spanning 8 hours and 25 km being created (Plate 5). While the location says 'Jelutong Tower', several species in the checklist are not found in the Central Catchment forest, and instead found along coastal mudflats such as Pacific Golden Plover, Eurasian Whimbrel, Terek Sandpiper, Common Sandpiper and Common Redshank. In fact, the high number of species, long duration and distance should set alarm bells ringing when seeing checklists like this.



eBird Singapore CHECKLIST S291777145

Fri 2 Jan 2026 6:55 AM [Edit Date and Effort](#)

CCNR-Jelutong Tower [Singapore, Singapore](#) [Edit Location](#)

Jared Tan [Share](#)

Traveling Complete [i](#)

[1](#) [8 hr, 2 min](#) [25.1 km](#)

Submitted from eBird for iOS, version 3.6.4

[Edit Comments](#)

SUBMIT ANOTHER FOR...

Same Location and Date
CCNR-Jelutong Tower, Singapore, SG on Fri Jan 02, 2026

Same Location
CCNR-Jelutong Tower, Singapore, SG

Same Area and Date
Another Location Near CCNR-Jelutong Tower, Singapore, SG on Fri Jan 02, 2026

Same Area
Another Location Near CCNR-Jelutong Tower, Singapore, SG

Same Date
Fri Jan 02, 2026

Different Location and Date

80 Species Observed +1 other taxa, 409 individuals

2	Red Collared-Dove	*
3	Spotted Dove	
1	Asian Emerald Dove	
2	Zebra Dove	
10	Pink-necked Green-Pigeon	
4	Thick-billed Green-Pigeon	
8	Pied Imperial-Pigeon	
2	Chestnut-bellied Malkoha	
2	Asian Koel	
20	dark swiftlet sp.	
20	Pacific Golden-Plover	
30	Eurasian Whimbrel	
1	Terek Sandpiper	
2	Common Sandpiper	
40	Common Redshank	

Plate 5: Screenshot of a 'jumbo' eBird checklist.

Someone experienced enough would be able to tell that something is off about this checklist, however those new to birding may not know this, and may end up going to Jelutong Tower

to look for the Eurasian Whimbrels and Common Redshanks and be sorely disappointed when none are seen at the location!

On the same note, even locations in somewhat close proximity to each other should be split to separate checklists. For example, if I visit Kranji Marsh, Neo Tiew Harvest Lane, then head to Sungei Buloh Wetland Reserve, I should submit three different checklists instead of submitting one large checklist under 'Kranji Marsh'.

While we benefit from the sightings of other eBird users, let us try to be responsible eBird users and keep our data as clean and accurate as possible so that our data can be used for research and also in turn benefit other eBird users as well. When eBird reviewers come across such checklists, they would have to **flag the entire checklist** and remove the checklist from public view to preserve the eBird data quality.

5. Make use of List-building Checklists to record your pre-eBird life lists

While it is preferred for eBird users to key in all checklists accurately based on exact dates and locations, eBird also recognises that historically, a lot of birding activity was recorded at a coarser scale of day lists, trip lists, or life lists, and submission of such detailed checklists may not be possible. As such, eBird has provided special guidelines on how you may input your historical life lists, with the use of 'List-building Checklists'. A List-building Checklist allows you to add in all the species you have seen in a certain region and can span multiple locations within that region. You do not need to put in the exact count of birds seen, as you can simply use an 'X' to show that you have seen each species before.

These checklists will be flagged and will not show up on the eBird public output, but will show up under your personal eBird bird count for each region. This way, you can still record your total number of birds seen without affecting the accuracy of eBird data being used by researchers. If the eBird reviewers come across checklists used for list-building which are not correctly flagged as such, they would have to manually flag them and remove them from public view.

You may refer to this link for more information:

<https://support.ebird.org/en/support/solutions/articles/48000804866-enter-your-pre-ebird-life-list>

6. Work together with eBird reviewers

The eBird reviewers are constantly reviewing submissions of rarities throughout the year. They may contact you regarding rarities after you submit your checklist. When that happens, it doesn't mean that they are looking down on you or do not trust you! Rather, they need to exercise due diligence to ensure that high and consistent standards are kept in the eBird database. Rather than just leaving reports of rarities with insufficient documentation unconfirmed, as far as possible, they would hope to contact observers to find out more information about each sighting, so that they do not miss out legitimate records.

To make things as smooth as possible, do your best to provide media/thorough descriptions on your checklists and reply to the eBird reviewers via email accordingly. Unfortunately,

sightings of rarities without sufficient documentation will not be able to be confirmed on eBird. Nevertheless, unconfirmed sightings will still be added to your personal eBird counts.

It is worth remembering that the eBird reviewers are merely volunteers and use a substantial amount of their free time to help the birding community. If you happen to disagree with their comments about a sighting that they have contacted you about, please do so in a respectful and constructive manner. Although this happens rarely, there have been cases of people being abusive towards eBird reviewers.

On a final note, I would like to remind everyone again to be responsible eBird users, being conservative about sightings and keeping checklists as accurate as possible! Let us continue to take the time to enjoy the birds around us and learn more about them together. eBird is a community effort, and I am sure it will continue to grow both in Malaysia, Singapore and around the world in the years to come.

Acknowledgements

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