

THE CYBER-NATURALIST by Leonel Richard, Published in the Miramichi Leader
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In today's fast-paced world, news and information can be gotten in an instant. As fast as it can be uploaded to the web it's available to all who are connected. We have television channels that pump out the news 24/7 and radio stations that do the same. We've come a long way since the days when we had to wait until the five o'clock news on TV to find out who did what to whom and who had gone through a disaster somewhere in the world.

While most of us still get our news from newspapers and television, we can and often do supplement it with faster media such as is available on the web.

The same applies to our personal lives with the proliferation of online social networks. The nice thing about those is that even though we don't interact face to face, the contact is still valuable and the information most of the time is useful. Photos from digital cameras can be uploaded to Facebook and viewed in real time by friends and family almost anywhere in the world.



The naturalist community uses all those tools to its benefit. If you wish to hear what others are seeing in your area, you can join a Blog or Forum such as "Birding New Brunswick" or "NatureNB". The main goal of these is the sharing of photos and information. This can also be a great place to announce special events or upcoming fieldtrips.

Websites such as "E Bird" provide a location to keep track of your list of birds seen along with their location. This information can be used by others who wish to add that rare bird you spotted to their own lifelist.

If you don't care to read long paragraphs there is "Twitter". Here you can read or write in 140 characters or less. This is a good way to keep up with organizations or interest groups without being encumbered by details. It's not as useful as the other online networks but it's still part of the information tool that is the world wide web.

The internet itself is full of information with websites by individuals, learning institutions, organizations and merchants. The naturalist will find places to purchase items that can't be bought locally such as fieldguides and binoculars. He or she can also join a group of people with similar interests and discuss topics with members from the four corners of the globe.



Other sites are information based such as "Dendroica" where you can hear the songs and calls of all our local birds to better identify that warbler you heard but did not see. Another one called "All about Birds" has a lot of information including videos to assist you in identifying birds. There are dozens of such sites to help you identify everything from dragonflies to trees so the amateur need not have access to a University library anymore.

The 21st century naturalist can also find useful the portable electronic gadgets such as digital cameras, mp3 players, IPOD apps and even designated birdsong players such as the "Identiflyer". Some need a separate speaker while others such as the "IPOD" or the "Sony S series Walkman" have their own small but effective speakers built in. Any use of these devices should be done discreetly and never for long periods so as to avoid stressing the birds. Another use for these devices is for recording birdsongs in the field to identify them later at home.

Birdsong CDs can be purchased online and then loaded onto your device using any home computer. The different setups used by birders are quite varied and show the resourcefulness of the user. For years I used my car CD player and birdsong recordings downloaded from the internet. All of these are great tools to help us learn about nature.