

# Climate Watch Survey Manual

*Everything you need to know about conducting surveys for Audubon's Climate Watch Program.*

*Last Updated: November 2025*



# Program Overview

According to Audubon's 2019 climate change report, *'Survival By Degrees,'* up to two-thirds of North American birds are vulnerable to extinction due to climate change. The good news is that there are [plenty of opportunities to protect birds](#) from this existential threat, and Audubon members have been leading the way for years. Since 2016, Climate Watch volunteers have collected data which Audubon scientists are able to use to document in peer reviewed research that birds are responding to climate change and shifting their ranges. You can join us in this mission by observing birds in your area, using our specific protocol, and helping us learn about how birds are responding to the changing climate.

## **To Contact the Climate Watch Team:**

[climatewatch@audubon.org](mailto:climatewatch@audubon.org)

## Quick Guide to Climate Watch

Thank you for participating in Audubon's Climate Watch. This page contains a brief overview of the Climate Watch survey protocol. Each section is covered in more detail in the main document beginning on page 7.

- **Climate Watch Roles**
  - Regional Coordinator, Local Coordinator, and Participant role. Details include recruiting and training participants.
- **Timing**
  - Two times per year, with both Winter (January 15 – February 15) and Summer (May 15 – June 15) survey periods of 30 days.
- **Target Species**
  - Selecting a target species for which to survey is a critical first step.
  - Target Species: Eastern, Western, and Mountain bluebirds, White-breasted, Red-breasted, Brown-headed, and Pygmy nuthatches, American Goldfinch, Lesser Goldfinch, Painted Bunting, Eastern Towhee, and Spotted Towhee.
- **Selecting Squares**
  - Select one or more 10 x 10 km squares from the Climate Watch Survey Planning tool to survey.
  - Coordinators should ensure that a minimum of ten squares are selected to survey for a target species in your area.
  - Individuals participating outside of a coordinated area should choose one or more Climate Watch squares to survey.
- **Planning Survey Locations within a square**
  - Identify 12 points that represent the best accessible habitat for the target species within a given square.
  - Points should be 200m apart to avoid double-counting the same areas.
- **Conducting Surveys**
  - Conduct 5-minute stationary point counts at each of the 12 points
  - Surveying one square takes an average of 3-4 hours (2-6 hour range) and each square must be completed within one day.
  - Record observations using one of the methods detailed in this manual with each of the 12-point counts as an individual checklist.

- **Collecting Data**

- There are three methods to record your data: the Audubon mobile app, eBird or on online form. All data must be submitted online using the methods detailed below.
- Each checklist must contain:
  - Start time, duration, number of observers, latitude and longitude, (and optionally - grid-square id).
  - Total number of each species (target species and other bird species you are able to identify) that you see or hear within 100 meters of your location, line of sight permitting.
  - The presence of nest boxes or feeders within the survey area (recorded in comments box if using eBird).
  - Your target species must be recorded on each checklist. (If using eBird, this must be placed in the comments box and please make sure that your comments are set as "public" so that we can access them).
- If using eBird be sure to answer "yes" to the question "Are you submitting a complete checklist of the birds you were able to identify?" to indicate you are submitting a complete checklist.

- **Submitting Data to Audubon**

- There are a few ways to submit your data to Audubon. Due to limited capacity to handle manual data processing please submit using one of these methods:
  - Create eBird checklists for each survey and submit them to Audubon through our portal.
  - Use the Audubon Mobile app on my smartphone to log observations in the field – saved data are automatically submitted for you!
  - Enter survey data manually – input observations of your target species through the online form.

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# Full Climate Watch Survey Manual

## Participant and Coordinator Roles

Like many community science programs, there are different potential roles for individuals interested in volunteering with the Climate Watch project:

**Regional Coordinator:** Volunteers who facilitate the Climate Watch program at a state or regional level by identifying, recruiting, and training local coordinators and connecting individual volunteers with coordinated efforts in their state.

Regional coordinators are critical for volunteers to participate in this program across the state - they will gain valuable experience facilitating this community science effort across a large landscape and serving as the primary point of contact.

**Coordinator:** Volunteers who manage their group or area's participation in Climate Watch by recruiting participants, training them to plan and conduct Climate Watch surveys, and ensuring that the data collected are submitted to the national Climate Watch team. The coordinator also communicates the science and rationale behind the program, including providing information on the predicted future range changes of the target species. Without a regional coordinator, coordinators will also serve as the main point of contact with the national Climate Watch team and help to improve the program by providing feedback based on their group's experiences.

**Participant:** Volunteers who complete Climate Watch counts in collaboration with their group's Climate Watch coordinator. Participants serve a critical role, collecting data that will validate the current projections of Audubon's climate models. Participants will gain valuable monitoring and data entry skills, ensuring that trends from monitored species are represented in the national analysis.

Throughout this document, we will provide information more relevant to the Coordinator role in 'Coordinator Callout Sections'.

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| <b><i>Coordinator<br/>Callout-Recruiting<br/>Participants:</i></b> | Consider recruiting local Audubon chapter or center members, individuals that participate in other monitoring and community science programs like the Christmas Bird Count, Breeding Bird Survey, eBird, or bluebird nest monitoring programs, etc., and members of other local birding groups or local clubs with an interest in birds or wildlife monitoring. In addition, using social media platforms or website sign-up pages can be a great way to recruit new volunteers. You might also try identifying individuals that have a designated volunteer hour requirement, such as master naturalist programs. |
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|  | Coordinators should aim to recruit ten or more Participants, at least one per square. Please keep the number of observers at each point to a maximum of three to minimize variability. Depending on location and means of travel, conducting twelve five-minute surveys within a square should take approximately 3 hours (2-6 hour range). |
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## Timing

Climate Watch occurs over two distinct time-periods each year, in the winter (January 15- February 15) and in the breeding season (May 15 – June 15). Participants may choose any day within this count period to conduct their point counts. **All surveys within one square must be conducted on one day, but different squares can be conducted on different days.** Participants should attempt to conduct point counts in the morning (before noon) and to complete all twelve surveys for a given square on a single morning whenever possible. If weather conditions or other unforeseeable delays occur, the late afternoon period is an option and **it is preferable to complete a set of point counts in one day including the late afternoon than to split them over multiple days.** Starting close to sunrise is advisable to coincide with the peak of bird activity, particularly during the summer survey.

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| <b><i>Coordinator<br/>Callout-Training<br/>Participants:</i></b> | Coordinators play a vital role in informing local Participants about how to participate in Climate Watch and we ask that you also work to communicate why participation is so valuable by explaining the science behind Climate Watch and how these surveys will help us better understand birds' reactions to climate change. Audubon has a variety of resources available for coordinators to use to impart information on the science background and rationale for the Climate Watch project. These resources include a PowerPoint presentation, links to the Bird and Climate Change Report page for each of the target species, and a 2-page overview of Climate Watch. These resources, as well as many others, can be found on the project website:<br><a href="https://www.audubon.org/news/coordinator-resources-climate-watch">https://www.audubon.org/news/coordinator-resources-climate-watch</a> |
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## Five Steps for Participating in Climate Watch



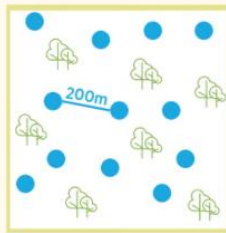
### Step 1

Find a local coordinator (or participate on your own) and select your target species.



### Step 2

Select and claim a 10x10km square to survey.



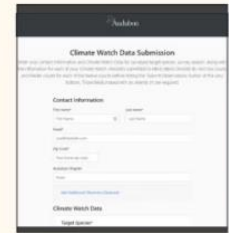
### Step 3

Identify 12 survey points (at least 200m apart) in the best habitat for your target species.



### Step 4

Pick a morning during the survey season and conduct 5-minute point counts at each of the 12 survey points.



### Step 5

Submit your data via eBird, the Audubon app, or the direct input web form.

Everything you need to know to participate in Climate Watch is outlined in these five steps. Be sure to check the climate watch website (<https://audubon.org/climatewatch>) for more resources and video tutorials.

### Step 1: Find your Local Coordinator and Select your Target Species

**Find a Coordinator:** Check the [Coordinator listing](#) and reach out to your local coordinator. If there is no coordinator in your area, no problem! You can participate on your own. Just follow the five steps outlined below. If you are interested in becoming a local coordinator, start by [reading the materials on this page](#).

**Select your Target Species:** Climate Watch is focused on target species for which our climate models have strong predictions and which have a high detectability in the field. Currently we are focusing on Eastern, Western, and Mountain bluebirds, White-breasted, Red-breasted, Brown-headed, and Pygmy nuthatches, American Goldfinch, Lesser Goldfinch, Painted Bunting, Eastern Towhee, and Spotted Towhee.

You can access a [printable bird ID guide of the 12 target species here](#).

Work with your coordinator to determine for which species you should conduct surveys, first focusing on one target species.

Learn how to select your target species and claim a square (Step 2 below) using the Climate Watch Tool by watching our [Getting Started Tutorial](#) (14 min).

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| <p><b><i>Coordinator<br/>Callout-Selecting<br/>Target Species:</i></b></p> | <p>We ask that Coordinators provide guidance to Participants on the target species for which they should plan surveys. First, prioritize species for which you have surveyed previously in your area, as repeat surveys for the same species groups in the same locations are the most valuable. Next, you can choose based on which species have the strongest predictions for change according to the climate models (the strongest orange and red [worsening climate suitability] or green and blue [improving climate suitability] squares on each species map), which species have the most local interest or conservation concern, or which species have the most accessible habitat in your area. Participants in your area may conduct surveys for multiple target species but we ask that you complete a minimum of 10 squares for each target species before surveying for additional target species. As an example, surveying 10 squares for Eastern Bluebirds would produce more valuable data than surveying 5 squares each for Eastern Bluebirds and White-breasted Nuthatches. You may survey for different target species within the same squares although the 12 survey points within a square for each target species will, in most cases, be different (see below).</p> <p>If you have multiple target species in your area and the habitat is consistent across species, you can survey for multiple target species simultaneously. For instance, if there are both Western and Mountain bluebirds in your area and they use similar habitats you can conduct one set of 12 surveys within a square for both bluebird species. Depending on habitat use by the target species in your area you may be able to survey for multiple nuthatch species simultaneously as well but generally not bluebirds and nuthatches as the two groups require you to target different habitats. The exception would be if in your location bluebirds and nuthatches reliably use the same habitats (for example, in heavily agricultural areas where both groups are restricted to small patches of natural habitat).</p> |
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## Step 2: Select and Claim One or More Squares

Participants should work with Coordinators (if applicable) to select squares within or around your location in which to conduct surveys. Each group should aim to conduct surveys in a minimum of 10 squares in their area for a target species. Participants can

conduct surveys in one or more squares, and can split points within squares with others as long as they are done on the same day and morning. Consider the following criteria in priority order when selecting which squares to survey:

1. If your location has previously participated in Climate Watch you should target the same squares year to year. Square selection may vary between summer and winter but try to survey the same points in the same squares summer-to-summer and winter-to-winter for the same target species to collect comparable data.
2. Prioritize squares outlined in orange and red (where models predict worsening climate suitability) or in green and blue (where models predict an improving climate suitability) or squares with the largest numerical change in climate suitability, positive or negative. There may not be any orange/red or green/blue squares in your area and surveys from squares with smaller predictions for change in climate suitability and from the yellow (stasis/no change) squares, are also valuable.
3. Select squares with appropriate and accessible habitat for the target species.
4. Select squares that are close to where Participants live to minimize travel time.

Once you are ready to select a square, use the [\*\*Climate Watch Tool\*\*](#) to do so.

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| <p><b><i>Coordinator<br/>Callout- Additional<br/>Squares:</i></b></p> | <p>If you are interested in conducting additional Climate Watch surveys beyond the 10 squares with 12 surveys each for a given target species, we ask that you prioritize another set of 10 squares with 12 surveys each for a different target species, completing another full set of surveys. The next best option for additional efforts would be to survey additional squares with 12 surveys each for your original target species.</p> |
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Step 3: Identify 12 Survey Locations in your Square.

Participants should then identify their twelve survey points within each square. Survey locations can be plotted on the [\*\*Climate Watch Tool\*\*](#) or you can capture their GPS coordinates in the field. There are a number of factors to think about when planning your survey locations:

- Select survey points in the best possible habitat for the target species within each square. Identify the best habitats based on your personal knowledge, the knowledge of Coordinators and other local experts, the satellite maps provided, or in-person scouting of the area.
  - Note: while you are allowed to identify your point count locations “on the fly” in the field, be sure not to select them based on the current presence of individuals of the target species as this would not provide an accurate sampling of the target species’ distribution. Instead, identify appropriate

habitats and conduct surveys there regardless of the initial presence of the target species.

- Note: you may target different areas across the summer and winter seasons based on differences between winter and summer habitats of the target species. You may also use the same points for a target species between winter and summer if the habitat use is the same in both seasons in your location.
- After considering the best habitat available in a square, you should prioritize placing your points so that you can complete all of your surveys in one day as opposed to spacing your points evenly throughout an entire square.
- Survey points should be a minimum of 200m from any other survey point in the square to prevent double counting. You can estimate this distance as two football fields or using pacing in the field or measure it using the online maps provided.
- Survey points should be physically and legally accessible – you should be able to drive or walk there safely in winter or summer and have the proper permission to access the property. Do not enter private property without prior permission. *Also be aware that some parks and refuges require a permit for bird monitoring.* Please make sure to inquire in advance to confirm you can obtain permission for this activity.
- Be sure to consider visibility and elevation when selecting your survey locations and consider consulting a topographic and/or satellite map or doing in-person scouting to identify points with the best view of your survey areas.
- Take care to note hunting seasons within public lands in your location, particularly in the winter, and avoid areas with active hunting.
- Feel free to select survey locations with nest boxes and/or feeder stations for the target species within the survey area but please note their presence in the comments box of your eBird checklists (if you use that method) and when submitting each checklist into the portal and on the Audubon app form for those surveys.
- If conditions at one of your survey points have changed significantly since the last survey period, and the area no longer represents appropriate habitat for your target species please move your survey point to the nearest location with appropriate habitat within the same square.
- **One checklist must be recorded for each of the 12 survey locations even if you did not observe the target species, or even if you saw no birds. Data on the absence of birds or bird species is very important in the analysis.**

Learn how to think through suitable survey sites for your target species and use our Climate Watch Tool to plan and plot your points by watching our [Planning Your Survey Sites Tutorial](#) (17 min).

## Step 4: Conduct Surveys

First, consider the weather and conduct your surveys only if the conditions will not jeopardize your safety or impact the detectability of the target species. A light breeze or intermittent precipitation will not affect detectability, but avoid conducting surveys in steady rain, snow or during periods of high winds.

Surveys should be done as **stationary** counts, meaning you stand in one place and record birds seen or heard from that location, and should be conducted **for exactly five minutes** each **with a maximum of three observers** to reduce variability. You should record each **five-minute survey separately** and enter each checklist individually (see the Entering Data section for detailed instructions on entering your data). During each survey be sure to record:

- Date, start time, length of survey (even though it must be 5 minutes)
- Number of observers (1-3 observers maximum per survey)
- Latitude and longitude (where did you bird)
  - Your location will be captured if you are using eBird or Audubon mobile app, otherwise record it as Latitude and Longitude using a smartphone or GPS unit, or mark it on a paper map for entry into later on. Be sure to capture and record coordinates in decimal degree format (e.g., 32.30642° N 122.61458° W, not 32° 18' 23.112" 122° 36' 52.488").
- Total number of each species (target species and other bird species you are able to identify) that you see or hear within 100 meters of your location, line of sight permitting.
  - Keep separate totals for each species seen on each survey.
- Record what target species you surveyed for and the presence or absence of any nestboxes or feeders at your survey location in the comments section of your eBird checklist or in the Audubon app, or on your field sheet.
- If you count for more than five minutes for other purposes start a new list at that point so you can enter just your first five minutes of observations for Climate Watch.
- If you are interrupted, or distracted significantly during your five-minute survey period, consider starting another five-minute count at that location.

Learn how to conduct Climate Watch surveys by reviewing our Conducting Surveys Tutorial (10 min).

## Step 5: Submit your Data

Visit our [data submission page](#) to find information and forms for the three options to submit your data to Climate Watch. Here are the three options available for submitting data:

### 1) Create eBird checklists for each of my survey points and submit them to Audubon.

- Use [eBird.org](#) or the eBird mobile app to record your Climate Watch survey checklists. Then log on to the web version of eBird (do not use the mobile app for this step), copy the checklist ID of each checklist, and [submit your checklist info through Audubon's portal](#). Make sure your "Hide my checklist comments" setting is unchecked within your eBird account Preferences. Please do not select a nearby eBird hotspot when you select your point location.

### 2) I will use Audubon's Mobile app on my smartphone to log observations of my target species in the field.

- Use [Audubon's mobile app](#) to record observations of your Climate Watch target species. First make sure you are running the mobile app version 6.5.1 or higher. To access this form within the app, tap on "My Audubon" and you will see the option to create a Climate Watch checklist at the bottom of the list. Once you have saved your checklists through the app, Audubon has the data and you are done. Note that checklists can only be created and edited during the 30-day Climate Watch survey period.
- The Audubon Bird Guide is a free and complete field guide to over 800 species of North American birds, right in your pocket.
- Built for all experience levels, it will help you identify the birds around you, keep track of the birds you've seen, and get outside to find new birds near you.
- This app can be used to capture your location in the field in real time, where coverage is available, and has a Climate Watch checklist form to record your data while doing your Climate Watch surveys.
- Once you have saved your Climate Watch data into the app, the data is automatically available to Audubon.

### 3) I will enter my survey data manually (not using a smartphone or eBird checklists).

- If you do not have a smartphone, you can submit observations of your Climate Watch target species on the web (visit the [data submission page](#) for the current season's submission form). Once you submit your 12 checklists per square (submit one form for each checklist), Audubon has the data and you are done. Note that there is no ability to edit a Climate Watch checklist through this option. If you are unable to select the correct date when accessing this form, please clear your cache and try again.

Learn how to submit your data by reviewing our Submitting Data Tutorial (13 min).

## Best Practices for Data Collection and Reporting

**Record and submit your data regardless of whether or not you saw any target species at a given point.** An important part of this effort is conducting surveys in areas where the target species are not yet likely to be. Data documenting the absence of target species is an important part of tracking when target species show up in new areas or abandon others, so be sure to record and submit your surveys even when you do not observe any individuals of the target species.

**Be sure to include which target species or target species group you surveyed for.** This ensures that we can match your target species with your checklist data for our data analysis.

In addition, **the presence or absence of nestboxes or feeders is important** component of detection for our target species, so we ask that you record this information as well.

**Participants should return to the same points in future seasons.** As an option, coordinators may want to provide instructions on how to name points/locations. This will help the group remember where surveys are occurring and help if participants need to transfer survey responsibilities in the future. There are a number of ways to do this but many Coordinators have suggested naming conventions that include the square number, the survey number out of twelve, the species that you are targeting habitat for, the lat/long, and any other information that can help guide someone back to this same spot next year. For example: USA-CA-03489, 1/12, WEBL, -122.163 x 39.744, 300 feet from the water fountain

**Ebird users should be sure to answer “yes” to the question “Are you submitting a complete checklist of the birds you were able to identify?”** to indicate you are submitting a complete checklist.

- Note: this question does not ask if observers were able to identify all of the species they saw, but rather is making sure you are not intentionally excluding species that you were able to identify. Answering yes allows us to assume that if you did not indicate the presence of a target species they were not present.

**There is an option to record only the presence or absence of target species** and not collect a full-checklist of all species. If participants wish to use this method, they will be using either the Audubon app or method #3 in the “Submitting Data to Audubon” section.

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| <b><i>Coordinator<br/>Callout- Additional<br/>Squares:</i></b> | Participants should enter each of the 12 surveys from each square as separate checklists. Each group should aim to submit a minimum of 120 checklists (10 squares x 12 surveys per square). |
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**Please submit all Climate Watch survey data to Audubon within 15 days of the end of each count period. Thank you for participating in Climate Watch!**

Information on Audubon's Climate Watch program can be found at  
<https://www.audubon.org/conservation/climate-watch>

Contact: [climatewatch@audubon.org](mailto:climatewatch@audubon.org)