

The Beginners Guide to Bird Watching

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Chapter 1 – What Is Bird Watching

What exactly is bird watching? If you go walking through the forest and spy a bird, are you bird watching? Do you have to be knowledgeable in the study of birds before you are considered a bird watcher? Bird watching or birding is basically defined as the observation and study of birds with the naked eye or through a visual enhancement device like binoculars. Though some may disagree, bird watching and birding is essentially the same thing, both are the observation of birds in the wild. In the birding community though, there is some disagreement about grouping the two terms into the same category. Many deem bird watching to be different than birding on quite a few levels. They feel that mere bird watchers deem it more as a past time and don't pursue it with the same enthusiasm as a birder. It is felt that bird watchers are more content to observe more locally and don't invest in the same grade of equipment as that of a birder. In short, birders don't tend to rank themselves in the same category as bird watchers.

Birders feel this way because they tend to invest in higher technology equipment and are dedicated to study birds for more than general observation. Many birders will purchase optical equipment such as spotting scopes. They may even invest in auditory equipment in order to identify the species by year. They take note in moult, distribution, migration patterns, and habitat. Birders are also more prone to travel in

order to pursue their passion of birds. It's basically the same sport; one group just takes it a notch higher than others.

So what do you do when you go birding? Birding is a little more involved than merely looking at birds, though you do observe them. Birding also included learning to recognize the birds and identify them. As with any subject you study, you begin to understand the birds and gain knowledge of what they're doing while in nature. Many people outside the birding world don't seem to realize that there are over 800 different types of birds.

Obviously everyone has to start somewhere when they begin a new hobby or sport. You aren't going to automatically know everything there is about birds without researching them. For many it takes years before they gain a firm understanding of all the aspects of birding, and all are still learning as new information emerges. Just for clarification purposes, going to the zoo and looking at birds is not birding. Birding is the observation of birds in the wild or natural habitat, not in cages or captivity.

So do you have to be some retired person with loads of money in order to go birding? Not at all, anyone who has an interest can watch birds. It's something that you can start out young and continue through adulthood. It's an activity that can involve the whole family. There is no

encompassing age or demographic when it comes to birding. It's actually proving to be one of the fastest growing activities in America and is also extremely popular in Britain as well.

So why should I observe birds? Why do other people sit and watch birds? Birds are a beautiful species that are absolutely amazing, especially while in flight. It's breathtaking to just sit and watch them soar so high above the earth, so effortlessly in the clouds. In ancient times, the bird was considered a foreseer of the future. Now in our world of technology, they can still let us know what we can expect in the environment. They can often help us build a stronger bond with nature.

Are there any the benefits that come with birding? To the beginner and novice in birding, there are a variety of benefits that you can benefit from. First and foremost is the fun and pleasure that can be found in birding. There is also a certain satisfaction that comes from searching for the different species of bird. It's almost like hunting without harming your prey. Birding can also be a fun family activity that helps to strengthen the bond between children, parents, and grandparents. Also it helps introduce children to nature and aid them in gaining a respect for it as well.

Birding is a versatile sport that can be either done with or without

others. If you are seeking companionship, then birding can be a great social activity. You can share your interest with friends, family, or even join a birding club. If you seek the chance to get away from everyone for some well deserved solitude, then that is also an option. It's perfectly acceptable to go birding alone. You can go explore nature with the only sounds coming from the birds you are observing.

So now that you have an interest in birding, where do you go? For beginners it can be as simple as stepping out your front door. Start with your own neighborhood; observe the birds in your own backyard, so to speak. Watch their behaviors, look at what they're doing. Once you've done that, try to start identifying the birds you see. Start paying attention when you travel, especially if there is a change in environment. It's likely that you'll see new species of birds when you travel quite a ways from home. This is just the start of your birding experience.

Chapter 2 – The History of Bird Watching

The question of when bird watching or birding was officially considered a past time, hobby, or sport is hard to answer. No one really knows the true date that birding was defined, but many believe it to be around 1968. This isn't just a lucky guess; it's believed to have become an actual past time in 1968 due to the first known birding publication was produced in that year. This publication was called *The Bird Watcher's Digest* and could be describes as more of a newsletter than anything. There were only about 5 pages of literature, but it was the first official document of a bird watching nature. This new literature was founded by the "American Bird Watchers Association" or the ABA as they deemed themselves. With this newly proclaimed association quickly came America's official interest in bird watching.

Once the American Bird Watchers Association was established so was a membership status. You could buy a years' membership for the nominal fee of \$3.00. So what did this newly found literature encompass for the sport of bird watching? For the first time in publication, there was a publication not only providing documentation about birds, but also listing the rules for this new found sport. In 1969 the title changed from *The Bird Watcher's Digest* to simply *Birding* as became the popular term for bird watching, and is still in print today.

The magazine prints and distributes their issues every other month to their readers.

As more issues were published the official guidelines for birding were defined. Also in 1969 it was proposed that the ABA that originally stood for the American Bird Watchers Association be changed to the American Birding Association. By the end of that year there were already 128 members participating in the ABA as well as newly appointed officers in the organization. Between the ABA and the *Birding* publication, birding was becoming a popular sport. With the rising popularity would also bring a change in both the publication as well as the organization.

In the short period of three years the publication was ready to take on a more professional appearance to the bird watching world. *Birding* was made into a more journal like publication in 1971 and no longer took on the appearance of the mere newsletter form that it originated from. The new publication gave readers a variety of articles to read. There was a total expansion on pieces that delved into the true art of birding, no more were there just species lists and opinion pieces, but true reporting pieces that brought a new form of excitement.

The July/August edition of *Birding* in 1973 brought quite a buzz to the

birding community. It was the first issue to have pictures printed in the publication. It was also the first issue to report on the first convention held by the ABA in Kenmare, North Dakota. The edition printed in July/August help define many of the new aspects of the ABA such as their checklist report, newly elected leaders of the ABA, and the newly ratified laws of the ABA. This new issue was popular for many reasons and was a wealth of information to the birding community that was quickly growing in number. The ABA's membership had grown from their original 128 members in 1969 to 1,872 in 1974, a difference of 1744 in as little as five years.

The 1970's brought some evident changes to both *Birding* and the ABA. In 1976 for the first time since the first 5 page publication in 1968, *Birding* printed a publication that was 400 pages; a vast different from its meager beginnings. Also, the ABA recognized their second president, Arnold Small. In 1977 the cover of *Birding* began to take on a different appearance, printing beautiful covers that awed many bird enthusiasts. There was also a bit of disturbance in the birding community between east coast versus west coast. It seems that many were annoyed with the Californian birding styles that were constantly being praised.

From its beginnings in 1968 to 1988 *Birding* had gotten behind

schedule in its publications as well as harder to understand. It was up to Editor Paul Lehman to bring the journal back to its origins and back on track. He focused on making the magazine easier to understand for readers and outlined a number of focal points to expand on. In 1989 Lehman made good on his commitment and came out with a very different looking magazine that boasted a completely new layout. Lehman helped take the magazine back to being the true form of communication for the birding community.

In 1992 the ABA focused on the demographics of their member. They soon realized that a majority of its members were over 40, as a whole, they were getting older. Alarmed with the statistics, they focused on gaining a younger demographic by offering reduced membership as well as youth camps. They realized that without some sort of change, the sport of birding could begin to dwindle. Although membership was up to 10,200 active members, the concern of gaining young birders was still an issue for the ABA community.

It being 2007, almost four decades have passed since the first publication of *The Bird Watcher's Digest*, now known as *Birding*. The hopes of the ABA have been recognized, and the art of birding is rapidly growing among North America and Canada. As many have been taking notice, with growth also comes change. The new birders don't necessarily hold on to the same ideals as the older generations of

birders. The new generation is also more focused on the newly emerging technology that many old timers might shrug away from. The *Birding* magazine is also feeling the impact of the new generation due to their updated staffing crew. Change is in the air both in the ABA community as well as *Birding* publications, but change is not always a bad thing, with change comes a new opportunity for all of those in the birding community.

Chapter 3 – How To Bird Watch

If you really have the desire to bird watch there is a certain way to go about it for beginners. Remember, as mentioned before, anyone can take up the sport of birding, it just takes time to get acquainted with the ins and outs. The first step is to acquire a pair of binoculars, adjust them to your preference, and try them out a few times before you actually need them. The binoculars are so that you can get a better view of the bird without having to get so close that you might scare it off. Also, not all binoculars are created equal; there are different types that offer different functions. It might even be helpful to ask a salesman to explain the differences between different models.

It's good to get in the habit of locating birds with your eye first, without the aid of the binoculars. This is important because you have a greater range of vision with the naked eye than you do with binoculars initially. When focusing primarily through binoculars you might miss the chance of locating the bird due to the smaller field of view. Binoculars have the primary objective of narrowing in on an object for better definition. It's wise to wait on using the binoculars until you have already found your target.

Now that you have the primary equipment needed, it's time to go look for birds. How do you find the birds? It's a good idea to learn the

habitats of birds so you know what to look for. It's important to note that each species of bird have their own habitat preference, birds are much like other animals that in each breed, or species is different. Once you know what to look for and where to look, the task of finding birds will become much easier. It's also helpful to listen as well; you may often hear the bird before you see it.

So you've found your first specimen, what exactly are you looking for beyond identifying that it's a bird? Although it may be difficult to decipher, color is definitely something to look for when birding. If you have the opportunity to observe color, you are very lucky because normally it's hard to view colors correctly, even for the most seasoned birder. The difficulty in observing the correct color of a species is due to many factors such as lighting as well as shadows which make it hard to be accurate.

Size is another factor to consider when birding. Size can help you rule out certain other species quite quickly. For example it is quite obvious that a small bird such as a Mountain Blue bird wouldn't be put in the same category as a large bird such as a Heron or Hawk. Size can also be deceiving though. You must take into consideration the conditions that you are observing the bird in. If the bird is flying overhead, the size of the bird may appear much larger or smaller than it actually is. If you find yourself in this situation, it is sometimes helpful to compare the

size of the bird to something equal in distance that you are familiar with such as a tree.

Shape and profile is also something to look for when birding. It's highly suggested to invest in some sort of bird guide. A bird guide is easy to take into the field with you and will help you to identify birds. Once you become familiar with the certain characteristics of birds through the guide, you will be able to rule out certain types on shape and profile alone. A bird guide is also helpful when you are out in the field and spot a bird you are not familiar with. The guide provides information as well as pictures to help guide you through and is helpful to beginners as well as those familiar in the sport of birding. Once you become more comfortable you can graduate to the National Geographic Field Guide to the Birds of North America 3rd edition.

Also not required, but very useful are a notebook, backpack, and a hat. The notebook is for you to record what you see when observing. The more you write, the more you tend to observe, then later you can review your notes. The backpack is so you don't have to lug everything around by hand. You can also keep things such as bug spray, water, and a snack as well as anything else you might want to take along. The hat is obviously for your head. When out birding you are being exposed to the elements and the hat will help shade your eyes from the sun without interfering with your use of binoculars.

It's also helpful to find a check list for your area. This will help you know what to expect when birding. Checklists can be found through many state and national parks, as well as online through your local department of wildlife website. Birding.com also has checklists for every state and province in the United States, Canada, and every country in the world. This can be found by clicking on the bird checklists link and choosing your desired location.

Another fun way to get involved in birding is to find a birding trip in your area. Depending on where you live, sometimes local bird trips are advertised in local newspaper or magazines. These trips are usually led by a local park ranger or a member of one of the many birding and wildlife societies. You can look online at birding organizations for information or contact your local rare bird alert phone number; this can be accessed by state at birding.com which is quite a handy reference. When you call the number they first go through a list of rare birds in your area, and then sometimes mention any trips at the end of the call. Usually these trips are free of charge, but it is wise to check if there is a fee beforehand.

Now that you have a better understanding of bird watching or birding, it's time to go enjoy your newly discovered interest.

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