

## Why Watch Birds?

Birdwatching is a hobby that can be enjoyed by nearly everyone, everywhere, anytime. It can be done alone, with the family, or with a club. Birdwatching stimulates the mind, exercises the body, and refreshes the spirit. Birdwatchers have a chance to contribute to our knowledge of birds and nature in general.

## What Do I Need to Watch Birds?

Birdwatching requires little in terms of equipment.

*Binoculars* are the most expensive item birdwatchers use. The most common sizes are 7x35 and 8x42 (most birdwatching books explain what these numbers mean). More powerful binoculars are difficult to use under most conditions. Very good binoculars are available at reasonable prices, but it pays to buy the best you can afford.



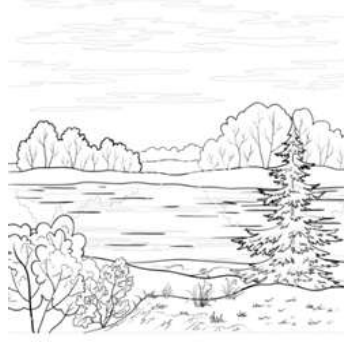
*Field guides* are essential for learning to recognize birds. Many good guides are available, and each has its virtues. A trip to a library will reveal some of the choices. Check a few out and try using them before buying one. (Newer editions use current names and include accidental species from Europe and Asia that are seen in North America.)

*Notebooks* are good for recording the birds you see, as well as describing the birds you are not able to identify. Buy one that can easily slip into your pocket.

*Clothing* should be comfortable, of course, and suitable for weather conditions. Remember that birds have excellent vision, so stick to neutral, muted, earth-tone colors. *Hats* are almost always a good idea in the field. *Footwear* should be appropriate for the conditions in the field; lightweight hiking boots are favored by many birders.

## Where Can I See Birds?

Your own yard or a nearby park are good places to begin watching birds, and over time a surprisingly large number of species can be seen. Several factors can dramatically increase the number and variety of birds seen. One is time of day: early in the morning is the best time.



sunny, open fields.

Different habitats attract different kinds of birds. Different species are found in cool, dark forests than are found in

A good place to begin watching birds is a place where different habitats merge. These places are called *edges*, and they contain species from adjacent habitats.

Explore several different habitats by hiking a trail that passes through habitats. Following a stream or river is also productive.

Don't overlook the attraction water has for birds. Especially in winter, open water brings in gulls, many species of ducks, and an assortment of other species.

Finally, because many birds migrate, unusual species can be found almost anywhere during the spring and fall.

## What Should I Look For?

It may seem silly to say so, but the first step in identifying an unknown bird is deciding what it is not.

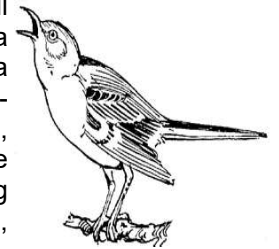
Most people can look at a bird and say, "That's a duck, not a sparrow." The next step is to decide what known bird the unknown bird looks like: "This looks like a sparrow, but its beak is sharp and pointed, not blunt."



Begin by noting the bird's general shape, size, and color. Then pay attention to details: what shape is its tail? What shape is its bill? Are there "field marks," such as a streaked, spotted, or plain breast? Do you see wing-bars, eye-stripes, or eye-rings? Does the bird have a crest? Are there tail patterns or rump patches?

Also note the way the bird behaves: is it perched? How does it hold its tail feathers? Does it wade or swim? If it is soaring, are its wings held flat, or do they form a vee? Is the bird climbing a tree? If the bird is flying, does it hover, glide, soar, or dip? What shape are its wings and its tail?

Birds produce a variety of vocalizations, including songs and calls, and experienced birders rely on these to locate and identify many species. Most field guides describe vocalizations, but listening to recordings is a better way to begin associating the bird to its call. Try describing the call you hear: is it sing-song, like a robin? Is it a chip or a trill, like a Chipping Sparrow or a Dark-eyed Junco? Is it high-pitched, like a starling? Is it a whistle (cardinal), a coo (Mourning Dove), a warble (House Finch), or a name-sayer (chickadee)?



## ***In the Field***

Imagine it is spring and you decide to take a bird walk. It would be fun to go with a partner or a small group, but you decide to go solo. You have binoculars, field guide, notebook, and a snack. You are dressed appropriately for the weather.

The best time of day to watch birds is early in the morning. Birds need to refuel and are most active, and migrants are resting from their journey (many birds migrate at night).

You decide to follow a small river flowing through a local nature preserve. As you leave your car, you pay attention to the birdcalls and songs you recognize: the caroling of a robin, the whistle of a cardinal, the cheery “chick-a-dee-dee” of a chickadee.

Since it's morning, you decide to head west along the river. When using binoculars, it's best to have the sun at your back so that the bird is not a silhouette. Also, adjust your binoculars to fit your needs. More than one birder has struggled with binoculars, only to discover they were not properly adjusted!

You walk slowly along the river, paying attention for movement, not only in the branches overhead, but in the bushes and on the ground in front of you. Many birds are ground-dwellers and are found low or near the ground. Also, you don't want to trip over a root or a rock.

You stop occasionally to scan the river, its banks, and the branches overhanging it. You may see swallows sweeping the surface for insects, a kingfisher waiting to plunge after a fish, or a heron eying a frog. When you identify a bird, list it in your notebook.

You scan the trees in a systematic manner, left-to-right and top-to-bottom. You listen for chirps and calls that alert you to birds. If all goes well, you can easily

see thirty or more species on a good spring morning—and since it is spring and the migration is on, tomorrow can bring an entirely different mix of species!

Remember that it is not necessary to identify every bird you see. The biggest difference between an experienced birder and a beginner is that the experienced birder has misidentified more birds.

## ***Additional Reading***

There are many good books available to help beginning birders, and a trip to a library or a bookstore will reveal the choices. Just because a title is dated does not detract from its usefulness. The following books cover a range of topics and are highly recommended. Field guides have been omitted.

Dunne, Peter. *The Art of Finding Birds*. Mechanicsburg, PA: Stackpole Books, 2011.

Guttman, Burton S. *Finding Your Wings: A Workbook for Beginning Birders*. New York: Houghton-Mifflin, 2008.

McElroy, Thomas P., Jr. *The Habitat Guide to Birding*. New York: Knopf, 1974.

Perrins, Christopher, ed. *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Birds*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009.

Stokes, Donald W. *A Guide to the Behavior of Common Birds*. Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1979.

# Beginning Birdwatching: How to Start Seeing the Birds Around You



by  
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