

Seeing More Birds

North America is home to over 900 species of birds, and over 300 species have been recorded from most states in the United States. Because birds fly, and especially because birds migrate, it is probably possible (in theory, anyway) to stand or sit almost anywhere and, over a long period of time, see almost all the species recorded for the area.

For example, even though my home is in a residential area in an older suburb, I regularly see species that one would not expect. Every spring and fall, I see large flocks of bugling Sandhill Cranes overhead, and I am always awed when I reflect that the ancestors of these birds probably flew the same route when mastodons wandered the area. I regularly see Great Horned Owls, Cooper's Hawks, and Red-tailed Hawks from my yard (I've had a Cooper's use my bird bath), and I have had two game birds, a woodcock and a bobwhite, in my yard.



I have seen Winter Wrens in the bushes at the base of a high-rise building in Chicago's Gold Coast, and I have *looked down* on hunting Peregrine Falcons from the same buildings. I have seen migrating thrushes in underground parking garages, and hummingbirds land on the tip of a fishing rod far out on Lake Michigan.

Nevertheless, the "trick" to seeing more birds relies on having a plan or using a strategy. This leaflet suggests different methods experienced birders use to see as many species of birds as possible. Have fun seeing how well these suggestions work for you!

Keeping Lists

Although the pleasures of birdwatching transcend seeing large numbers of birds, many birdwatchers do enjoy the challenge of seeing as many different

species of birds as possible. In fact, birdwatchers who do concentrate on listing as many species as they can from a given area during a given time are usually called *birders*. Keeping various kinds of lists is an enjoyable way to keep track of what you have seen.

The Life List

Most birdwatchers keep a **life list**, which is exactly what it sounds like: a list of all the birds seen during a birdwatcher's birding career. The simplest life list records the bird seen, where it was seen, and when it was seen. Such a list can be kept on note cards or computer spreadsheets, and there are many commercially-available life list software programs. These programs usually let the birder sort and organize the data to produce all the other lists described below. Cornell University's Laboratory of Ornithology's eBird (ebird.org) is a free online program anyone may use.

Regional List

Many birdwatchers enjoy keeping a **regional list**, a record of all the species seen for a given region. The region may be nation, a state, a county, a township, a community, a park—there are many possibilities. Such lists are very valuable, too, because they give a good idea of a bird's distribution and abundance.

Year Lists

Another list that many birdwatchers keep is a **year list**, which records the species of birds seen during a single year. These are especially interesting if combined with a regional list, because the birdwatcher can notice changes in local bird populations. It is also fun to keep a yearly **yard list** of birds seen in and from one's yard.

Of course, there are other kinds of lists. I've met birders who keep lists of birds they see in non-bird-related ads or during a movie or television program that does not deal with wildlife. Other birders keep

lists of nesting birds, or birds with young, and birds seen in unusual places.

Tip 1: Visit Different Habitats

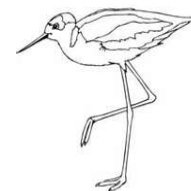
It should come as no surprise that the best place to see waterfowl is in the water, and the best place to see a meadowlark is in a meadow. Every species of bird has its preferred habitat, so by visiting as many different habitats as possible, birdwatchers increase their chances of seeing many different species.

Locations where several different kinds of habitats about each other are often the best places to see many different species of birds. In fact, the areas called **edges** are usually highly productive.

Tip 2: Timing Is Everything

Maybe not *everything*, but timing is important. Seasonally, spring and fall, when migrants are passing through, give birdwatchers a chance to see species not usually found in their area. Summer, of course, brings many species of birds that nest in the area, but then migrate in the fall. Winter brings its own set of birds, such as juncos, redpolls, and different kinds of hawks and owls.

There is a lot of truth to the saying, "The early bird catches the worm." Most species of birds are most active early in the morning (before 10:00 a.m.), when they defend their territories, hunt for food, and sing. Late in the afternoon there is another period of activity. In coastal areas, low tide is a good time to see shorebirds hunt the exposed beaches.



On the other hand, owls and other species are active at night (of course, if it is early enough, there is a good chance of seeing an owl that stayed up late), so if a birdwatcher wants to see a particular species, then he or she has to stay up late.

Tip 3: Visit Different Regions

Although birds are often seen outside the areas where they are typically found, species have their **ranges**, and one's chances of seeing a particular species are increased by visiting the region in which it is normally found. Certainly,



visiting another part of the country provides birders with an opportunity to explore different habitats. Mangrove swamps and cactus forests are not part of the Midwest areas I bird, so if I want to see a spoonbill or a roadrunner, I need to travel.

Another aspect of traveling to different regions is that even familiar species may appear more “exotic” in another area. Song Sparrows in the Pacific Northwest are larger, darker birds than the ones seen in the Midwest; cardinals in the South do seem to sing with a drawling “Southern” accent; and House Finches in Arizona appear more faded than the ones found in the East.

Tip 4: Watch the Weather

This tip is more problematic than the preceding. If more birds are seen during fair weather than foul, is it because there are more birds—or because there are more birdwatchers? Cold fronts often bring in large numbers of fall migrants and stop the northern flow of spring migrants (causing a phenomenon called **fallout**). Coastal birdwatchers know gales bring in birds usually found far at sea. Nevertheless, small birds often stay hidden in sheltered areas during windy conditions and are hard to find. Gentle rain seems to encourage some birds, but heavy rains and storms discourage most bird activity (the same is generally true of snowstorms, too).

Many birds, like people, seem to become lethargic during hot spells, so during midday many fewer birds may be seen. See Tip 2!

Tip 5: Look Again

It pays to take a second look, especially with large flocks of birds. Flocks of grackles and Red-winged Blackbirds often contain a Rusty Blackbird or two; flocks of Mallards may have another species associating with them. Pay attention to birds that seem separated from the main flock or which somehow look different—larger, smaller, darker, etc.

Tip 6: Get Help

Always ask other birders where they think the best places are to see birds. Every experienced birder I know has his or her favorite spot. Also, there are many “birding hotlines” available online to alert birders of rare species seen in an area. On field trips, ask the experienced birder to point out the field marks on a bird so that you will be able to recognize the bird the next time you see it.

Tip 7: Go Birdwatching!

Everything in this leaflet comes down to this: get out as often as possible for as long as possible to as many places as possible if you want to see more birds. There is always “the law of diminishing returns” (of course, if you start early in the day, the birds become less active later on and so are not seen as often), but the number of birds seen is



directly related to how much time is spent in different habitats.

Seeing More Birds:

Tips for the Beginner

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