

Bird Watching



Bird watching (also known as birding) was originally part of efforts to hunt and kill various species (either for food or fashion). In the late 19th century, however, organizations such as the Audubon Society and the American Ornithologist's Union were created specifically to raise awareness for the need to protect the birds. Today, birding has turned into a top recreational activity for people of all ages and experience levels. There are about 10,000 species of birds on the planet, and they live in just about every habitat on all seven continents. A person can always find a bird to observe everywhere they go!

Backyard Birding



Backyard birding has become one of the most common types of bird watching as it can be done virtually anywhere. The 2006 National Survey of Fishing, Hunting and Wildlife Associated Recreation conducted for the United States Fish and Wildlife Service found that almost a third of Americans participated in viewing wildlife that year. The greatest number engaged in watching birds. Backyard birding occupies more than forty million people, and almost half of them travel to see birds.

Many opportunities are available for the backyard birder to enjoy, from observation and photography to contributing to citizen science.

The Audubon Christmas Count: A New Way to Hunt for Birds



Christmas Bird Count, 1963.

In the late 1800s, the Christmas “side-hunt” was an important holiday tradition. Hunters went afield with their guns in a competition to bring in the greatest number of birds. Concern over declining bird populations prompted Frank Chapman, an early Audubon Society officer, to propose a new holiday event a “Christmas Bird Census,” to count birds instead of shooting them.

Beginning on Christmas Day in 1900, 27 counters at 25 locations from Ontario to California tallied ninety species of birds. By the year 2009 the totals had grown to more than 60,000 people participating in 2160 different counts.

Each Christmas count site is a well-defined circular area that does not change from year to year. When combined with other annual bird census efforts, the Christmas Count date provides a barometer of bird abundance and distribution.

For more than 111 years, the Christmas bird counts have provided an opportunity for citizen scientists to contribute to our knowledge of birds and to understand the importance of the habitats they need to survive.

Developing a local bird count, whether in the schoolyard or another local area, is a great way to better understand local bird species and to participate in the protection of birds. For many people, participation in citizen science projects is motivational because their data is put to use addressing real-world issues of local and global concern.

The eBird citizen science project is one of the world’s largest and fastest growing biodiversity data resources, currently receiving over one million bird observations per month entered by participants. This project asks people to conduct a local bird count (for as long or short a time as desired) and report the kinds and numbers of birds they see. Because of its flexible nature and the fact that data can be collected anywhere in the world in any habitat, eBird is popular among many. Participants can use the outputs of the eBird database to investigate intriguing questions about bird abundance and distribution at a variety of spatial and temporal scales.

You can find more information about eBird and how to participate at www.ebird.org/content/ebird/.

The Music of Birds



The return of bird songs is one of the first clues that winter is officially over. As naturalist Ferdinand Schuyler Mathews wrote nearly a century ago, “It is not possible to listen to the melody of the song sparrow... without realizing that we are released from the cold clutch of winter and set down in the comfortable lap of spring.”

The use of bird song recordings in the field is somewhat controversial. Outside of nesting season, many birders will use sound recordings to lure birds in for a quick glimpse. Some birders frown upon the use of this tool, as it can cause stress for birds that use limited energy to investigate the perceived threat of another bird singing in its territory. Some wildlife refuges and parks have banned the use of sound recordings altogether. Birders should check local rules regarding the use of sound recordings, and always use caution when using this tool in the field.

Birding Clubs



Birding can be a solitary or social experience. Just as there are clubs for hunting, fishing, and other outdoor recreational activities, there are clubs for birders. In the United States, birders have been organizing field trips and seminars with their friends and colleagues for more than a hundred years. One of the oldest bird clubs in the world is the Delaware Valley Ornithological Society, which was formed in 1890 in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

There are bird clubs in just about every state. Some are managed at the state level, but most bird clubs are organized at the county or regional level. Joining a bird club has many benefits. Novice birders who enjoy spending time with others who share their growing interests should consider joining a birding club. Avid birders who have moved to a new region should consider joining a birding club, too. Most often, the best birders in the area are members of the local club and are eager to share their experiences and pass along new skills.

One of the greatest benefits that come with membership in a birding club is the organization of local and regional field trips. Members usually lead field trips once or twice each month. Leaders will often scout out an area prior to a trip to maximize the species tallied. With membership in a birding club, birders often gain access to areas that restrict entry. Organized efforts of birding clubs are more likely to gain permits and permission for access to private property and restricted areas. Members of birding clubs also receive invitations to special events, seminars, workshops, and conferences. Birding club members are usually provided with a subscription to the club's newsletter, website, and online forums. Although some birding clubs are free to join, most require a nominal paid membership.

Birding Festivals



Delmarva Birding Weekend, 2010.



Birding festivals are organized to take advantage of a specific region's bird-friendly features, such as critical migration areas or unique habitats. Some festivals may run for a single day, and some may last more than a week and are often chosen to coincide with an exceptional birding phenomenon, such as a peak migration period or when large, concentrated numbers of birds can be seen easily.

Field trips to local sites are led by expert guides who are familiar with the area's birds and where to find them. Trips may take place by foot, boat, or kayak, and may start with early morning sunrise birding and end with evening "owl prowls."

Educational Efforts



The goal of bird related education is to connect people with nature while building scientific and environmental literacy. Just as birds are an ideal subject of study for a range of scientific questions, they are equally important as a tool in educating people about biological and conservation concepts. Birds have worldwide distribution, abundant species, and rich adaptation, providing an accessible hook for getting people outside, observing and connecting to the environment, and helping them to understand firsthand the importance of the place where they live.

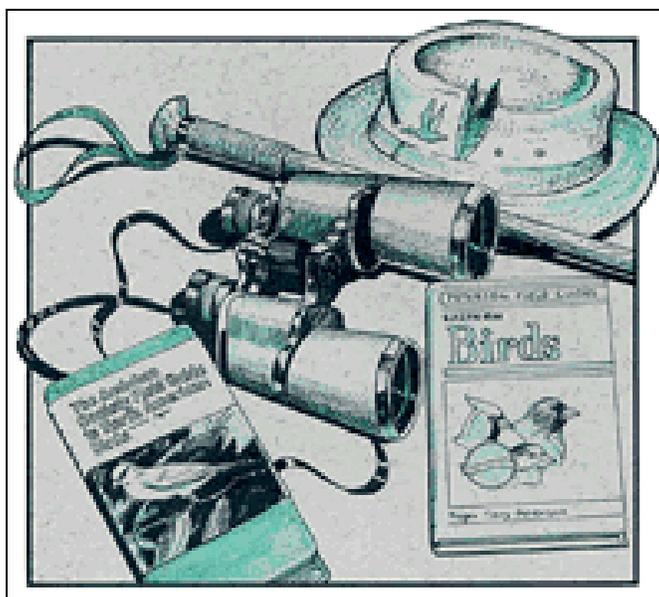
Many organizations are involved in education efforts focusing on birds. Federal and state organizations, nonprofits, bird-related businesses, and many other organizations that operate at a local level, including zoos, nature centers, museums, refuges, schools, and bird sanctuaries, educate people about birds to bring about action to protect birds and their habitats. The field of bird education is comprised of a diverse group of professionals and dedicated volunteers. Bird education leaders throughout the nation have been providing programs and services that promote responsible stewardship for bird conservation.

Through formal school curricula, service learning projects, and community and social activities, youth and adults can learn interdisciplinary subject matter through birds, including lessons about art, nature, and tradition. Bird education comes in many forms and can be as simple as attending a guided walk or as sophisticated as studying field ornithology.

Bird education programs promote responsible, science-based action, awareness, and respect for the natural world. For example, learning about and monitoring birds through citizen science provides important scientific knowledge about local areas and can contribute to understanding, conserving, and managing the earth's natural systems. By engaging people in local environmental monitoring and explicitly teaching them about its importance, we can empower them to see themselves as part of a positive force that is working to ensure healthy ecosystems locally and globally, now and in the future.

Though birds are part of our everyday lives, they still capture our imaginations—with their ability to fly, their colorful plumage, and their amazing capacity for song. Wherever you are, and whatever the season, you can find and learn about the bird species in your area.

Equipment, Technology, and Communication for Birding



The technology used for spotting birds and communicating sightings has advanced significantly over the past several years. However, there is still some basic equipment and gear birders need to see and hear birds and add species to their life lists.

Bird watching is a relatively inexpensive activity. There are two basic tools that birders need to get started: a field guide and binoculars. A field guide is essential for identifying birds. There are many from which to choose, from basic backyard bird guides to advanced guides for identifying warblers and shorebirds. There are also guides that help identify birds in a specific region or country. Field guides have been traditionally used in book form, but with the popularity of smart phones, birders can now download field guides directly to their handheld device.

A good pair of binoculars is a must for any birder. Binoculars don't have to cost a lot of money, but must adequately magnify birds for identification. Many 7x35 or 8x42 power binoculars are affordable and good for bird watching. They should be easy to use and comfortable for long days in the field.

As technology has advanced, the methods used in reporting rare bird sightings have changed greatly. Primarily, online birding lists or forums give instant access to recent sightings, and result in many more people seeing a rare bird that may only spend a day or less in one area. Many birders also record their field trip lists to data-gathering websites such as e-Bird. The information provided by birders to these websites can greatly enhance the knowledge of bird migration, nesting, and population changes.