

Notes from Birding 101

What's a birder?

1. Tries to identify birds.
2. Knows how to use a field guide
3. Uses binoculars
4. Travels places to see new birds
5. Keeps a list of birds seen.

Features of bird guides to consider.

1. What geographic area does it include?
2. Is it a convenient size and weight to carry?
3. Is the layout such that information is easily accessible?
4. Does it use photographs or artwork? Which do you like better?
5. Does it include variations of a species - male, female, juvenile, breeding and non-breeding?
6. Does it highlight important field marks

Birding Apps to consider for your phone or tablet.

1. iBird Pro Guide to Birds (\$15) - great all around app with lots of information, calls, paintings and photographs, zoomable range maps and the ability to search based on over 40 characteristics including songs.
2. Sibley Birds 2nd Edition (\$20) - this new edition not only contains all the wonderful Sibley paintings, but a new search engine and the ability to compare birds side by side.
3. eBird (Free) - This useful app from Cornell Labs lets you record species as you see them and keep track of what you've seen as you go. It also keeps a map of where you've walked and how far!
4. Merlin Bird ID (Free) - from Cornell Labs helps you identify birds by photos and by sounds. The sound ID works quite well.
5. BirdNet (Free) - developed with the help of Cornell Labs can currently ID over 3000 birds by recording their calls.

Buying Binoculars

1. Don't go for super powerful. The more they magnify, the harder they are to hold steady. A pair of 8x40 is pretty standard for birding. That means a magnification of 8 times the size and 40 relates to the wideness of the field of view.
2. Spend enough to get a good pair, but for starters, you can get some very good binoculars in the \$50 - \$150 price range. Do a little research.
3. Whatever you get, make sure you know how to use them!!!

How to Focus Binoculars for your eyes.

1. Choose some object about 30 feet away from you.
2. Cover the right eyepiece (the adjustable one) or close that eye.
3. Look through the fixed eyepiece and use the FOCUS KNOB to make the object appear sharp.
4. Now cover the left eyepiece (the fixed one) or close that eye.
5. Look through the adjustable eyepiece at the object. DO NOT TOUCH THE FOCUS KNOB!
6. Turn the adjustable eyepiece until the image is sharp.
7. Now look through the binoculars at anything and focus using ONLY the focus knob. Do not touch the adjustable eyepiece again.
8. Look at the adjustable eyepiece and notice where the mark is so you can reset it there at any time.

How to Use Binoculars

1. Just with your eyes, find what you want to see through the binoculars. Look for movement in the trees or on the ground and keep your eyes focused on that movement.
2. Without moving your head, lift your binoculars up to your eyes as you continue to look at the object. Resist the natural impulse to look down at your binoculars as you lift them.
3. Using a variety of fixed objects, keep practicing this over and over until you always see the object the first time.
4. If you are looking for a bird in a certain tree, pre-focus on the tree so that when you bring up the binoculars, the bird will already be in focus.

How to Identify Birds

1. Look at their SIZE. Use birds you are familiar with for comparisons. Is it robin size, or sparrow size or crow size.
2. Pay attention to COLOR. In some birds, that can be very helpful, but many birds are kind of drab - especially females. If there is color, where is it?
3. Look at the BEAK. This is often a good clue to what kind of food it eats which can help you find what family it belongs to.
4. Look at the SHAPE. Become familiar with the general size and shape of families of birds.
5. Pay attention to the HABITAT and BEHAVIOR.
6. LISTEN to their calls and sounds.

Notes from Birding 101

Why Do Birding?

1. For us it was a retirement activity that neither of us had done before, so we could both learn it together.
2. It really keeps your mind active and forces you to focus on learning new things. Who knows, maybe that will help as we get older.
3. It takes you interesting places you might not get otherwise. Not only does it give you a reason to travel all over the United States, and other countries in search of interesting birds, but you might even find yourself at a local landfill or water treatment plant - favorite haunts for birders.

Hints on Becoming a Birder

1. The best way to LEARN birding is to DO birding!
2. Join a group like Hartford Audubon or CT Audubon. They offer many birdwalks and other activities for both beginning and experienced birders.
3. When you are birding and meet other birders, tell them you're a beginner and ask about what they've seen. Most birders are very friendly and love to help new birders. We've had some who spent the rest of the day showing us around an area.
4. Don't be discouraged. It takes seeing birds over and over and over before they start to sink in. When you're with really experienced birders, they make it seem so easy, but it takes a LONG time. Keep doing it! (See #1.)
5. Focus on becoming very familiar with the common birds first. Learn their GSS (pronounced JIZZ - general size and shape). Once you know them, it's easier to quickly know whether a new bird is one you know or not.
6. A great place to start birding is Florida in the winter time. Lots of birds winter there and they tend to be big birds that stand very still while you thumb through your bird guide.
7. Speaking of bird guides, keep in mind that birds, like people, have a lot of variation in how they look. So don't get frustrated if the bird doesn't look exactly like the one in the guide. Look for key features.
8. Read books about birds. There are many wonderful writers like Edwin Teale, Pete Dunne, Kenn Kaufman and others who are fascinating nature writers.

Books on Birding We Have Enjoyed

1. North With The Spring - Edwin Teale *
2. Journey Into Summer - Edwin Teale *
3. Autumn Across America - Edwin Teale *
4. Wandering Through Winter - Edwin Teale *
5. A Naturalist Buys an Old Farm - Edwin Teale *
6. Of a Feather: A Brief History of American Birding - Scott Weidensaul
7. The Feathered Quest - Pete Dunne
8. Pete Dunne on Birdwatching - Pete Dunne
9. Tales of A Low Rent Birder - Pete Dunne
10. Kingbird Highway: The Biggest Year in the Life of An Extreme Birder - Kenn Kaufmann
11. The Big Year: A Tale of Man, Nature and Fowl Obsession - Mark Obmascik
12. Red-Tails in Love: A wildlife Drama in Central Park - Marie Winn
13. Wild America: The Record of a 30,000 mile Journey Around the Continent by a Distinguished Naturalist and His British Colleague - Roger Tory Peterson and James Fisher
14. Why Don't Woodpeckers Get Headaches - Mike O'Connor
15. Where the Birds Are: A Travel Guide to over 1000 Parks, Preserves and Sanctuaries - Robert Dolezal**
16. National Geographic Guide to Birdwatching Sites - Mel White (Eastern and Western Editions)**
17. The Burgess Bird Book for Children - Thornton Burgess (We just recently read this and thoroughly enjoyed it. It was a fun way to learn a lot about birds with Peter Rabbit and Jenny Wren)
18. A Guide to Bird Watching - Joseph Hickey - My friend Tom Robben knew Joe and says this book really teaches you how to study and learn about birds.

*Note that the Edwin Teale books are out of print but can be purchased as a used book through Amazon.com at very reasonable prices or from CT. Audubon Society who now owns Edwin Teale's Farm.

**#'s 15 and 16 have been very helpful when traveling around the country)

Check the Hartford Audubon Website

HartfordAudubon.Org

This site shows available birding trips and lists many good birding sites in Connecticut