

Bird Watching Basics

An Introduction for Beginning Bird Watchers

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An Introduction For Beginning Bird Watchers

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If you are familiar with Bird Watching basics, jump ahead to read about recommended equipment and Identifying Birds.

No one knows the sights and sounds of nature quite like a bird watcher.

By taking a half-second look at a small darting assemblage of brown, yellow, and white feathers and adding a call note that sounds something like "chip,"

a "birder" can tell you, not only was that one of 42 different types of warblers, but it specifically was a yellow-rumped warbler.

This is not a boast. It's a simple fact. To distinguish among the 780

species of birds found in North America, birders must quickly process a great deal of information on color patterns, call notes, and even the shapes

of bills. They have to know what to key in on when they see a strange bird

and note its overall size, how it moves through a bush or tree, and the shape of the wings. Such sensory work outs help to develop great visual

and hearing acuity among birders. In fact, birders are generally much more observant than the average person.

To the beginning bird-watcher, however, trying to identify even common

species can be extremely frustrating, and many people give up before they

ever actually begin. A small gray bird flashes up to the top of a bush.

Quick, grab your binoculars! Start flipping through your field guide. Take another look at the bird. Flip back a page or two..suddenly the

bird is gone, but there is a different one lower in the bush. All that page riffling and binocular lifting begins anew.

This pamphlet is intended to help you get beyond this frustrating early

state. It's a crash course in the basics of bird-watching. Study this pamphlet carefully and you'll be well on your way to greater enjoyment of

the world around you because birding focuses on some of the most spectacular creatures on earth. Birds are highly visual creatures - just like people - and some species don't have breath-taking combinations of yellows, blues, reds, blacks, and greens to make themselves more obvious. They also come in a wide variety of shapes and forms, which adds considerably to the pleasures of bird-watching.

Birding will also make you more familiar with the natural beauty of Florida and perhaps will lead you to appreciate how quickly that beauty is being lost. Florida has the third greatest number of different species of any state in the nation, but the continued existence of many of these species is threatened by the 1,000 new residents that move to Florida each day. Many birds simply do not tolerate the urban landscapes created by these new human residents. Thirty-four species are officially listed as being in trouble in Florida and five species have become extinct - never to be seen again. Birding also coaxes you into new country and enables you to take in all the fresh air and impressive scenery that you can hold.

Most important, though, is the fact that birding is simply too much fun to be missed. The type of information presented here is second nature to an experienced bird-watcher, but it can take many months of hard toll for the beginning bird-watcher to grasp the techniques. Even with the information spelled out here, you still have to supply a good bit of patience and sweat to become one of the truly tuned-in nature watchers. We have tried to strip away some of the mystique of bird-watching and expose the bare essentials, but practice and patience are just as important to bird-watching as they are to sports, music, and other recreational activities. You can't expect to record 150 different species on your first outing (though this will be possible later on) or to identify all those confusing birds. You'll have to work at it.

Enough said. Let's get to work.

Bird Watching Basics

Part One: The Equipment

The Equipment

Let's start with the easiest part of bird watching, which is deciding what equipment you need. There are only two absolute essentials: a pair of binoculars and a field guide. Pretty simple, right? This is one more reason to like bird-watching - it's inexpensive. In fact, birding is one of the least expensive hobbies a person can undertake. There are no monthly dues, no rackets to string, no nets to tie up, no golf clubs to buy, no green fees to pay or balls to lose. Binoculars of adequate quality run about sixty dollars, a good field guide costs a pittance, and with these supplies you are well on your way.

Binoculars

Binoculars are a birder's eyes on the world, and they can greatly affect the quality of a bird outing. Good binoculars make for good birding, while bad binoculars lead to missed birds and, even worse, severe headaches induced by blurred images, double vision and eye strain.

Binoculars come in many different shapes and forms and carry such descriptions as "roof prism," "close focus," "armor coated," etc. At the outset, you don't need to spend too much time deciphering this arcane lexicon. If you really get hooked on bird watching, you can learn more about binoculars later and trade in for a better pair. For example, I started off with a \$30 pair of binoculars in 1976, and these were still performing fine until I decided I was really hooked and wanted to move up to higher quality "glasses."

There are a few simple rules to consider and questions to ask when purchasing your first pair of binoculars:

1. Make sure the power (or magnification) is at least 7-power. The power is the first number given in the numerical notation that describes binoculars. For example, a "7x35" pair of glasses will make objects appear as if they are seven times as close as they actually are. Seven-power binoculars are about the minimum needed to see birds well.

2. Make sure that the second number ("35" for a "7x35" pair of glasses) is at least five times as large as the power (e.g., "7x35," "8x40," etc.). This second number describes the diameter, in millimeters, of the large lens that faces the object of interest - the "objective lens. The larger this lens, the greater the amount of light the binoculars gather and thus the easier it will be to see characteristics in dim light or on a dull-colored bird.

3. Are the binoculars too heavy for you to carry and use for at least two hours straight? Don't end up with a hunchback because your binoculars act like a yoke.

4. Can you flex the barrels of the binoculars fairly easily? Are the barrels too flexible? To test to see if they are too flexible, spread the barrels out as far as possible and then hold onto only one of the barrels. Does the free barrel slip or fall from the spread position?

5. When held a foot away, do the large objective lenses reflect a bluish or purplish tinge? If they do, the lenses are color-coated. This coating reduces internal glare in the binoculars and increases the amount of light that actually comes to your eyes.

6. Are the eye lenses clear, free of blotches, spots, and gray areas at the edges?

7. Can you bring the barrels of the binoculars close enough together so that the image you see merges into a single, clear image within a single, perfect circle? If the image isn't singular or clear, the binoculars may be out of alignment or the width of the barrels may not be appropriate for your eyes. These two problems may lead to eye strain and severe headaches. (Those who wear spectacles should make sure the rubber cups around the eyepieces fold back so they can use their glasses with the binoculars.)

8. Are your hand steady enough to prevent an image a block away from jiggling? Binoculars with very high power (over nine-power) are sometime difficult to hold steady.

9. Do the binoculars produce a clear image of an object only 20 feet away? Some binoculars do not focus on objects this close, so you may miss the sparrow or warbler that skulks in a nearby bush.

10. When you look at a telephone pole less than fifty feet away, keeping the pole in the center of view, do you see only the natural color of the pole? Do you see only the color of the pole as you move it to the edge of the field of view? Bad binoculars will have a large, rainbow-colored tinge around the object (known as a chromatism). Good binoculars will have a little chromatism when you move it to the edge, but the less the better.

11. Look at a sign with large lettering. Do the letters close to the edge of the field of view appear as precise and well-formed as the letters in the center of the field of view? Image distortion towards the edge of binoculars is common in bad binoculars - like looking through a fish-eye lens. Look for a pair that has minimal distortion.

12. When you focus on a license plate or small sign two blocks away, are the letters and numbers clear?

Practicing With Your New Glasses

Once you've selected a pair of binoculars, spend some time developing the eye-hand coordination you'll need to spot birds quickly. Most bird-watching is definitely not like watching football. With bird-watching there's much more action - everything is happening at 1/10 the scale and moves 100 times as quickly over an unlimited expanse of space. It takes time for beginning birders to get the knack of spotting an object with the naked eye and then lifting the binoculars up to their eyes to that the object is within the field of view.

I usually recommend that the fledgling birder sit on a porch or find a comfortable spot at a local park and spend time just practicing spotting objects without binoculars, then with them.

Initially set the focus lever on the binoculars so that an object approximately 30 feet away is in clear view. This is a good average distance from which you can learn to focus the binoculars in and out. Next, begin to look for birds with your naked eyes and then find them with your binoculars. Simply, follow the bird around for a while, lowering and lifting your binoculars every so often. Don't worry about identifying birds, yet. Just watch what they're doing. Soon, you'll be able to spot and focus like a pro.

Field Guides

There has been a veritable explosion in the number of field guides published about birds over the last few years. Until the late 1960s, the guide most widely used was Roger Tory Peterson's original *The Birds of Eastern North America*, the first field guide of its kind produced. This book literally made bird-watching a popular activity by explaining how to participate. Today, however, there are specific field guides available for certain regions of the county (Texas even has its own field guide) as well as for specific groups of birds, such as hawks, bulls, shorebirds, ducks, and others. These specialized books may eventually make their way into the library of a birding enthusiast. But most experienced birders, and certainly all beginning birders, need only take a single, easy-to-carry, comprehensive field guide when they venture afield.

Three field guides have been especially popular in the last 10 years and are considered to be the easiest for the beginning bird watcher to use. First, there's Roger Tory Peterson's *A Guide to the Birds of the Eastern United States*, Second Edition, available in most book stores and libraries. Pictures in the Peterson Guide have a clarity and consistency that is hard to find elsewhere. This can be especially important to beginning birders. In addition the guide is limited to birds found in the eastern United States (actually east of the Mississippi), which means that Floridians do not have to sort through multitudes of birds that do not occur here very often.

Peterson also uses a simple, effective method of highlighting the distinguishing features of different bird species: he draws a line to the features on his paintings. Most of the birds have a line indicating distinguishing features such as a black cap, white outer tail feathers, or a russet patch on the wing. These simple, visual indications of key features help save valuable identification time - a bird might fly to the next county in the time it would take to read a description of important diagnostic features.

R.S. Chandler is the principal author of the *Golden Guide to the Birds of North America*, also available in most book stores. Unlike the Peterson Guide, however, this book deals with all 780-plus species that occur in North America. Thus you may spend some time flipping through pages of birds that aren't likely to occur in Florida. But on the other hand, you won't need a second field guide if you take a trip to Colorado.

When it was first published in the late 1960s, the Gold Guide caught a lot of attention because of its novel approach to organizing information. All pictures, written descriptions, and geographic range maps were presented on the same page. Earlier field guides forced the reader to look one place for a picture of

a bird, another place for a written description of its haunts and habits, and maybe a third place to find a range map indicating where the bird occurs. Same-page organization has since become the standard among field guides, and today almost all field guides (including the second edition of the Peterson Guide) arrange information in this format.

Another field guide often used by the beginning birder is the *National Geographic Society Field Guide to the Birds of North America*. This book covers all birds north of Mexico and features the same organization as the Peterson and Golden Guide with written descriptions and pictures falling on the same page. Unlike the other two guides, however, the National Geographic Guide gives better descriptions of the variation that certain birds exhibit in their color patterning. For example, red-shouldered hawks in Florida generally are a lighter color than re-shouldered hawks in other parts of the country. Most field guides mention this, but pictures in the National Geographic Guide actually show this type of variation. For some species, there may be as many as five pictures showing the coloration differences of juvenile birds, subadult birds, males versus females, as well as differences that occur across broad geographic regions. This additional information may help to settle some tricky identification problems.

Once you have selected your field guide, do not - repeat, do not - immediately run off looking for birds, because what you'll actually find instead of birds is trouble and frustration. Many a field guide has spent more time collecting dust than helping to identify birds because the owner didn't learn how to use the guide. Sit down with your field guide when you first get it and read through the complete introduction. Next, look at some of the pictures and figure out where some of the common birds you recognize are located in the field guide (i.e., front, back, or middle).

Field Guide Organization

I have watched numerous beginners spot a bird and immediately open their field guide to the middle pages. They then look to the right ten pages, look left ten pages, and don't find the bird. After looking a few more pages left and right, they heave the guide into the air out of disgust and give up on the whole enterprise.

This happens because the person hasn't learned how bird species are arranged in the field guide. It's no wonder they get frustrated. Field guides, just like dictionaries and phone books, are ordered according to a precise system that determines where different birds are located in the book. If you were looking up the word "aardvark" in a dictionary, you wouldn't begin somewhere in the middle, would you? Similarly, if you see a sparrow-like bird sitting on the ground, don't start searching through the middle of a field guide because all sparrows are located in the last quarter of all field guides.

Field guides are organized according to "systematics" or "phylogeny," which simply means that, in a field guide, "birds of a feather flock together." Systematic order is based on the evolutionary history of birds - which birds, according to likenesses in their present-day appearance, most probably evolved from common ancestors. You can learn more about this ordering

system by reading your field guide. The point is that birds having similar physical appearances occur very close together in the field guide. You won't find sparrows on the same page with hawks or a loon facing a warbler. All sparrows, loons, warblers, hawks, and even gulls and blackbirds are located many pages away from one another.

There are four essential levels of classification by which birds are grouped. When we refer to birds of the same species, for example, a group of 15 crows, we are using the most specific level of classification. Different species are grouped into a genus, then different genera (plural of genus) are grouped into a family, and finally different families are grouped into an order of birds. As you may guess, species in the same genus are much more closely related to one another - and look more alike - than species in different genera. Likewise, families grouped in a single order are more similar to one another than families grouped in different orders.

If you separated birds of North America into these different components, you would find that there are about 780 species grouped into 334 different genera grouped into 74 different families grouped into 20 different orders.

The most convenient and logical classification level for the beginning birder to focus on is the family. There are simply too many genera and species out there for a novice to grasp easily, and identification to a particular order is too broad to be challenging. More importantly, by learning the general shape, size and appearance of the different families of birds, you will develop the powers of observation that characterize a good birder. In fact, you probably already know more about some of the families than you realize. For example, if you can recognize a laughing gull you already know a lot about the general sizes and shapes of all the gulls. Similarly, by knowing what a cardinal looks like, you know a good bit about finches - namely that they have very thick, pointed bills. Similarly, the bluejay, which often spends a lot of time gobbling the seed in birdfeeders, is a proud member of the jay family and gives you a "search image" for the features of other species in this family. The purple martin is a member of the swallow family and can help you develop a mental picture of what other members of this family might look like.

Furthermore, armed with the ability to recognize a few bird families and a good, local field guide, you can go anywhere in the world and immediately find yourself head and shoulders above non-birders in terms of bird identification skills - even though you don't have any familiarity or experience with the local birds.

So, when you get your field guide, spend time looking at its organization and the way it groups families of birds. Divide your field guide into quarters and make a short list of where different families are located (e.g., first quarter, second quarter, etc.) and keep this list handy. Also look for common species that you already know and use these as a guide for learning the common characteristics of other species in the family. Remember, you should begin birding using your head, not running around chasing after elusive thrushes and confusing fall warblers. Look casually, not frantically, at birds you don't know. Equipped with your spyglasses and trusty field guide, you

can now begin to get acquainted with all those flitting bundles of feathers.

Bird Watching Basics

Part Two: Identifying Birds

Identifying Birds

By now you're familiar with the organization of field guides and with some of the different families of birds. You have binoculars and can spot an object with your naked eye and then look at it through the binoculars without having to search for ten minutes. Most importantly, you've avoided the frustration - so far - of trying to associate a particular name with a particular bird. Now, to accomplish this feat, let's go over some helpful techniques for learning to identify families and species of birds.

The first thing to remember is: *don't make bird identification hard on yourself*. There are two general rules to keep in mind during your first few months of bird watching: 1) eliminate as many species as possible from consideration before you ever attempt to identify anything, and 2) the bird is most likely a species that commonly occurs in your area, not some strange exotic that blew in from a thousand miles away.

These rules are closely tied to one another, and they focus on making birding easier by reducing the number of choices you have to consider. For example, in Florida there is only one type of hummingbird that occurs regularly, the ruby-throated hummingbird (verify this from your field guide, if you like). Several other hummingbirds have been seen in Florida on occasion, but why worry about trying to identify these uncommon vagrants until you have more experience with our most common species?

One of the easiest ways to exclude birds is to go through your field guide and put an "X" next to those that do not typically occur in your geographical area. Put these aside for the time being. By doing this you drastically reduce the number of birds you have to worry about identifying since there are about 300-400 birds that are regularly seen in Florida! By the way, don't worry about marking up your field guide. A field guide personally adjusted to meet your needs is the best friend you can have when alone in the field. I kept extensive notes in my first field guide - in fact, on one page it was hard to see the drawings amid all my scribbles. Just be sure to use a pencil or permanent ink so that the words won't smear if you leave the book in the rain or drop it in the mud occasionally.

I received a long-distance phone call the other day from a woman who thought she had a spotted owl in her backyard and wanted to know why she couldn't find the bird in her field guide of eastern birds. It's no wonder! Spotted owls occur in several western states but they're as rare as two-pound diamonds east of the Rockies. This woman had recently seen a picture of a spotted owl in *Natural History* magazine, so when she saw an owl that looked like the picture she immediately went looking for

spotted owls in her field guide, passing right by barred owls, which look similar and, more importantly, are common throughout the Southeast. It took me approximately ten minutes to convince her that it might be a barred owl and that perhaps she should look more closely at this bird. She eventually agreed with me, but this was a perfect case of a beginning bird watcher making things harder than they had to be.

Another way to eliminate choices is to consider the time of year the bird might occur in your area. The range maps included with field guides display this type of information, but many beginners learn more quickly if they simply place a colored dot next to the picture of the bird. For example, put a red dot next to birds that are year-round residents, put a blue dot next to birds that are winter visitors but leave Florida for the summer, put a green dot next to birds that are summer-time visitors but leave Florida during the winter, and put a black dot next to birds that pass through Florida during migration.

The range maps and information presented in field guides help determine whether a bird is common or rare, migratory or residential in your area, but a more precise information source is the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission's "Checklist of Florida Birds," prepared by Dr. Henry Stevenson. This checklist provides information on the relative abundance and time of occurrence for all birds officially sighted in Florida. By referring to this booklet, you can make very exact notes in your field guide about the status of different species. Write to the Nongame Wildlife Program, Florida Game and Fresh Water Fish Commission, 620 S. Meridian St., Tallahassee, FL 32399-1600 for free copies of this publication.

Those procedures will quickly eliminate a lot of confusing birds from consideration. For example, there are approximately 180 birds that breed in Florida and another 20 or so that hang around in small numbers during the summer. So if you see some unknown bird in the middle of July, don't consider the 700 species shown in your field guide. Instead, you only have to choose from 200 or so different birds. Simple, right?

Identification Clues

The way that some birds skulk about, you'd think that they were afraid of showing off their pretty colors and didn't want anyone to identify them. And this is the case, no doubt, as they must somehow evade predators from both above and below. Often their quick movements allow us only a fleeting glimpse. Despite birds' shyness, however, there are five basic clues you can look and listen for that will allow you to solve the bird identification puzzle: 1) the bird's silhouette, 2) its plumage and coloration, 3) its behavior, 4) its habitat preferences, and 5) its voice.

This may seem like a formidable amount of information to gather, but in truth you often need only one or two of these clues to identify a bird. Sometimes the key to identification is simply knowing which clue to look for first when you see an unusual bird. As your birding abilities increase, you will be able to pinpoint the important clues with greater ease and certainty.

Silhouette

The mere outline of a bird is sometimes all that's needed to know which bird you're seeing. There's really a lot more information in a silhouette than you may initially realize. For example, from a silhouette you can tell whether a bird is large or small, short-legged or long-legged, crested or not crested, plump and roly-poly or slim and sleek, long-billed or short-billed, short-tailed or long-tailed, etc.

Size is an important aspect of a silhouette that is often very difficult for many beginning birders to grasp. This trouble results partly because field guides vary the scale of their drawings from page to page to show appropriate details. Often a very large hawk on one page appears to be the same size as a small flycatcher on another page.

Field guides do list the size of birds in inches next to the pictures, but if you don't have some type of scale in mind these numbers are of little use. The "ruler" that I use in the field is a mental association of three familiar birds with three general size classes. For example, an English sparrow is 5-6 inches in size, a mockingbird is 9-11 inches in size, and a common crow is 17-21 inches in size. Now, using phrases like "larger than a crow" or "smaller than a sparrow," you have an immediate impressions of the approximate size of any bird. You also have an immediate frame of reference for your field guide if you associate each of these three species with 5, 10 and 20-inch size classes.

The shape of a bird's bill is also an extremely helpful clue that is obvious from a silhouette. Finches, like cardinals, have short conical bills. Woodpeckers have chisel-shaped bills for working dead wood. Hawks, eagles and falcons, on the other hand, have sharp, hooked bills that make quick work of meat.

Plumage

Plumage characteristics are what really draw a lot of people into bird watching - they like seeing those pretty colors. The distinguishing plumage clues that identify different species are known as "field marks" and these include such things as breast spots, wing bars (thin lines along the wings), eye rings (circles around the eyes) and, of course, coloration.

Many field marks are concentrated around the head, so don't worry about checking the more discrete parts of a bird's anatomy. Pay particular attention to whether or not there is a dark line running "through" the eye (an eye line), a stripe above the eyebrow, whiskers along the side of the face, or a crown on top of the head.

Some field marks are best seen when a bird is in flight. A flying marsh hawk can be identified from nearly a mile away with good binoculars because the bird has a bright white patch on its back and rump, which is easiest to see when the bird is in flight.

Some families of birds can be broken into even smaller groups based on one or two simple field marks. For example, warblers are fairly evenly divided between those that have wingbars and those that do not. So if you see a warbler-like bird, look quickly to see if it has wingbars. Sparrows, on the other hand, can be separated into two smaller groups based on whether or not the breast is streaked. Look for other broad distinctions for other families.

Behavior

A bird's behavior - how it flies, forages, or generally comports itself - is one of the best clues to its identity. Hawks have a "serious" demeanor, crows and jays are "gregarious," and cuckoos are...well, not really. Woodpeckers climb up the sides of tree trunks searching for grubs like a lineman scaling a telephone pole. Flycatchers, on the other hand, wouldn't climb a tree trunk if their lives depended on it. They spend most of their time sitting upright on an exposed perch. When they see a bug cruising into range they quickly dart from their perch, snag the meal, then return to the same perch or another one nearby. Finches spend a lot of their time on the ground in search of fallen seeds, as do mockingbirds, catbirds, and brown thrashers. Some wading birds, such as snowy egrets and reddish egrets, are very active foragers and chase their prey around in shallow waters. Other wading birds, such as great blue herons, are less impetuous and hunt slowly, with great patience and stealth.

Even the way a bird props its tail gives some clues as to which species or family it might be. Wrens characteristically hold their tails in a cocked position and often bounce from side to side. Spotted sandpipers and Louisiana waterthrushes bounce their tails and rumps rapidly up and down as if doing a stylish dance step. Some thrushes and flycatchers, on the other hand, move their tails frequently but slowly, with a wave-like motion. You can even identify some birds just by the way that they fly. Most finches and woodpeckers move through the air with an undulating flight patter, flapping their wings in short bursts and then tucking them under for a short rest. One group of raptors, the falcons, flies with strong wingbeats and rarely hovers. Another group, the buteos or soaring hawks, circles the sky suspended on outstretched wings. Yet another group, the accipiters or bird hawks, usually flies in a straight line with alternating periods of flapping and floating.

Habitat

Even though a bird occurs in your neck of the woods, this doesn't mean the bird will be common wherever you go. Birds segregate themselves according to habitat type and are sometimes quite picky in selecting an area as home. Wading birds and ducks, for example, prefer watery habitats rather than dry upland areas. Pine warblers and brown-headed nuthatches associate primarily with pinewoods and are less common in areas containing large numbers of oaks, hickories, and other deciduous trees. Some Florida birds, like the snowy plover, are restricted primarily to the sandy coast, while others, including the limpkin, occur mostly along river swamps and freshwater marshes.

Beginning bird watchers must usually spend many hours afield before they are able to associate different species with different habitat types. I suggest that you develop a key to habitats that you frequent and keep notes of where you see different species. Make the habitat key simple at first, using terms like salt and freshwater marsh, pinelands, deciduous forest, beach, urban area, farm and pastureland, etc. Then elaborate on it as you learn to distinguish among different Florida habitat types. You can put abbreviations such as "SM" (for salt water march), "PW" (for pinewoods), and "FP" (farm and

pasture) next to the pictures of birds in your field guide after you have some feel for where the birds occur. Most field guides actually provide this information in the written description accompanying different species, but this abbreviation system may help save time.

Voice

I've often thought it would be rewarding to teach blind people how to "bird listen." Most birds have unique songs and calls, and once you've gained a few years of experience, voice is all that's needed to identify many of the birds you encounter. Bird calls are a form of advertisement that is usually directed specifically to other members of the species. If each species didn't have a distinctive call or song, there would be a lot of confusion out there. Just as you can tell that the person on the other end of the phone is Uncle Ted and not Aunt Jora, so too can you learn to distinguish the different voices of birds.

Some people find that listening to tapes and records helps them to learn the calls of birds. Dr. William Hardy has produced a record specific to Florida called *Sounds of Florida Birds* that may be of help. It is available at some local nurseries and outdoors stores. However, nothing helps you learn a call better than hearing the call, finding the bird that makes the noise, and then simply watching the bird sing for a moment. There's something about the association of voice and bird that helps to fix both in memory.

Additional Tips

Going afield with experienced birders can often help to speed you along the bird identification learning curve, and a variety of private and public groups offers bird tours throughout Florida. The local chapter of the Audubon Society is perhaps the best starting place to find out more about birding trips in your area. Write to the Southeast Region of the National Audubon Society (928 N. Monroe Street, Tallahassee, FL 32303) to get more information on your local chapter.

There's also a nice guide to the birding hotspots in Florida, written by James Lane. Simply entitled *Birding in Florida*, Lane's book is available at some outdoors shops, nurseries, and at many national wildlife refuge visitor centers. This book contains very valuable information on where to go and what to expect to see for many different areas of Florida, as well as fairly detailed maps to the areas.

Birding is not the easiest sport in the world to learn, but is definitely one of the most rewarding. To offset those first outings when you frustratedly flip through your field guide, there will be many years' worth of pleasant and intriguing field trips. You see, birders learn something new every time they go out. If they don't actually see a new species for the first time, they might see an old species do some new trick. They might even come across something startling, like a rare European bird that somehow strayed far from home.

The constant variety and challenge of birding are two important attractions, but so too is the camaraderie. At last count, there were something like four million active bird watchers in the United States and another 10 million casual bird watchers. That's a lot of people poking their heads into bushes

and craning their necks toward the sky.

I've developed a good number of lasting friendships as I've cruised some isolated road and happened across a kindred soul bedecked with binoculars and a field guide. We shoot the breeze for a while, exchange notes on what we've seen that day, and then we walk along together for a short while to find out what new birds are hiding in the bushes ahead.

Later, we go our separate ways but, before parting, we might exchange phone numbers with a request: "If you ever find something good or want to go out sometime, give me a call."

You're never alone when you're a birder.

Jim Cox is a biologist with the Commission's Office of Environmental Services. He assists in protecting important wildlife habitat and conducting nongame bird surveys. He occasionally teaches birdwatching classes for Florida State University.

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