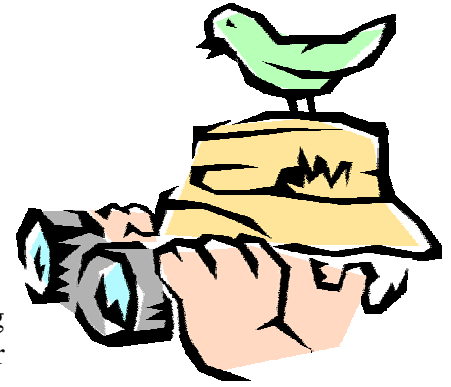


# Basic Birding at the John Heinz National Wildlife Refuge at Tinicum

(Compiled by Mark S. Cary with advice from various birders. We have not put in web addresses in order to save space as your internet search engine will usually find the address. )



## Birding is Fun

Why do people like birding?

- A healthy walk outdoors (usually in the mornings when the birds are most active, so it's a great reason to get up and go)
- Most birding is not strenuous and is good for all ages
- A chance to experience Nature up close and personal
- Identifying birds keeps the brain active and in tune
- For some, birding can be a competitive sport as they strive to identify the most species
- But for most, it is a great way to spend some time outdoors, often in the company of other birders

You can start easy, and the John Heinz Wildlife Refuge is a good place to start. The Refuge offers volunteer-led birding walks at 9 am (sometimes 8 am) most Saturdays and Sundays all year round. You can get a schedule at the front desk. We usually end by 11 to noon, and you are always welcome to leave early. We usually walk no more than a mile or so, rarely going farther than the observation platform on the em-poundment. Birders at all levels are welcome on all of the walks.

Birding is year round. Many birds are migratory, so the cast of characters change with the seasons. In winter, birds are easily seen because of the lack of vegetation and there are fewer species to keep track of. Spring brings the bright colors of mating, followed in summer with eggs and chicks. The migrants return in the Fall heading south.

There is drama. One recent winter we sighted a Painted Bunting who went the wrong direction, migrating here instead of to Florida from the Carolinas. She was a brightly colored southerner living amongst the grey and white Juncos who fly down from the North for the winter. In February, she disappeared. We hope she survived and took the right direction home in the Spring.

## Seeing Birds

Successful birding is mainly a matter of being observant, with your eyes, ears, and brain as the primary tools. When you walk, lift up your eyes and let them register movements in the background or run them up and down tree trunks and limbs looking for "bumps." When you see a bird, focus on it, and then raise your binoculars to your eyes while still watching the bird. You'll lose sight of some birds at first, but you'll get better with practice. Don't then immediately look at the field guide. Look at the bird. Mentally note its size, feather patterns and coloring. Then, you can remember these details when you look it up in the guide. You will learn bird families first. You'll be able to say, "That's a sparrow." Later you'll learn to differentiate between house, white-throated, song, field, chipping, and fox sparrows.

Many birders identify birds by song. You can buy CDs that teach the bird songs, or find song examples on the internet. Some of our bird walks specialize in bird song.

For more on basic birding on the web, see the Audubon Society web site, The Cornell Lab of Ornithology, or the links at the Birding Club of Delaware County.

## Field Guides

If you bird with others, you may not need a field guide at first, as the others can point out which birds are which. When starting, using a simplified field guide is easier. The Tinicum gift shop sells guides and many other useful things. Different birders favor different guides, so you might look through some of them to see which appeal to you or go on one of our walks and see what people are using.

## Insect Repellant

Insect Repellant is part of the equipment in warm weather. Lyme disease is all too common on the Eastern Seaboard. Carried by deer tick, a pinhead sized

tick smaller than the common “dog tick,” this disease can be serious. The web site for the U.S. Centers for Disease Control provides information on prevention and treatment.

## Binoculars

When starting, use anything. You can borrow a pair from the John Heinz front desk by leaving a license or car keys.



In general, buy the best binoculars you can afford. The better ones are sharper across the entire field, have a brighter image, better color, and are less tiring to use. If you wear eye-glasses, you need a pair with a long “eye relief” to use them with your glasses on.

Binoculars have two main numbers. The first is the magnification and the second is the size of the light gathering lens in mm. Thus, a 7x35 magnifies 7 times. A 7x21 magnifies 7 times, but collects less light. Most birders use 7x35 or 8x40 as their main pair. Although a 10x provides a larger image, they’re harder to hold steady, so you may get little benefit from the larger image. For long distance viewing, birders use a “scope” mounted on a tripod.

Binoculars come in two types. The porro prism type has the traditional shape, with the outer lens wider than the inner. The roof prism design has prisms in a straight line. Many birders like the roof prism design because they are lighter, smaller, focus closer, and are more rugged. Others like the porro because they are larger, have a good “heft,” and often a wider field of view. For similar quality, the porro design is less expensive to manufacture.

The New Jersey Audubon Society and the Cornell Lab of Ornithology have ratings of specific binoculars. A decent porro type with good eye relief is about \$150 to \$200. Good roof prisms run \$300 and more, with the top quality costing \$1500 or more.

Different binoculars fit different people. It’s best to try them before you buy them. Many local birders travel to the Cape May Bird Observatory’s store where they can look out the window using different pair. Local camera and sporting goods shops also sell

some model, as do many internet sites. A friendly birder will sometimes let you borrow their pair for a look-see.

## Backyard birds

If you have a yard, you can easily attract a variety of birds and enjoy bird watching right out of your window. You get practice looking at birds, using the binoculars, and possibly even outwitting the squirrels who go after the birdseed.

## Local Birding Groups

Birding in a group is great fun. Not only do you learn more that way, but birders themselves are unique and often colorful individuals, much like the birds they observe. Some of the local organizations include:

- Birding Club of Delaware County (BCDC)
- The Valley Forge Audubon Society
- Wyncote Audubon Society,
- Delaware Valley Ornithological Club (DVOC)
- West Chester (PA) Bird Club
- PA Society for Ornithology

Their web sites list their activities.



## Reading More

*The Sibley Guide to Bird Life and Behavior* is a good start. Many recommend Bernd Heinrich’s *Ravens in Winter* or *The Mind of the Raven*. The Cornell Lab of Ornithology’s *Handbook of Bird Biology* was written for specifically for the birding

enthusiast.

## Volunteer

The John Heinz Refuge needs volunteers for Trail Tamers, leading children’s story time, leading hikes or nature walks, assisting school groups, and helping to staff the store and visitor reception desk. We’d love to have you involved.

***The Cusano Environmental Education Center at the John Heinz National Wildlife Refuge at Tinicum is located at 8601 Lindbergh Boulevard, Philadelphia, PA, 19153, 215-365-3118, <http://heinz.fws.gov>***

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