

# Birding 101

## How to get started in bird watching

By Kenn Kaufman

**S**o you've caught the buzz about birding. You know thousands of people have taken up this hobby, or outdoor sport, or whatever it is, and they're having a great time. And now you want to give it a try, but you're not quite sure how to start?

First thing to know is that birders are an incredibly friendly and welcoming bunch, always glad to welcome new people into the fun. If you show up at a birding site and admit that you don't have much experience, you won't be shunned – more likely, you'll have people wanting to share information and show you birds you haven't seen before. There's no secret handshake and no test to pass. Just say you're interested, and the birders will accept you as part of the gang. But here are a few tips to help you get started.

### **QUESTION: Do I need a lot of special gear?**

No, there's hardly anything you really need at the start. When I got into birding as a kid, I had nothing except a burning interest. But things became a lot easier after I got my hands on a field guide and binoculars, and those two items are almost essential – along with some kind of small notebook and pencil, for jotting down notes.

### **QUESTION: What's a field guide?**

A field guide is a special kind of book, designed to help you figure out what kind of bird you're seeing. Usually it's a fairly small book, so you can slip it into a large pocket or day pack to carry along. It won't tell you a lot about each kind of bird – just the basics for telling one kind from another.

### **QUESTION: Couldn't I just go online and look up the birds there?**

Well, you could, but that could turn out to be a slow, frustrating process. How do you look it up if you don't know its name? You could look through thousands of pictures online, and maybe find pictures that matched the bird you saw, but it could take hours. With a field guide, you could look it up on the spot in mere minutes, because these books are designed to get you to the answer quickly. Several good field guides are available, and for \$20 you can save yourself hours of online frustration.

By the way, here's a good tip on choosing a field guide. Go to a store that has a good selection such as a bird observatory, nature center, or wild bird store. Choose a bird you already know well – a cardinal, maybe, or a robin, something like that – and look it up in each of the field guides. Find which book has your favorite treatment of the bird you chose. Chances are, you'll like the way that book illustrates and describes other kinds of birds, too.

### **QUESTION: What about binoculars? Are they really necessary?**

As a kid, I got started bird watching without binoculars, and learned some birds that way; but when I finally saved up money to get binoculars, it made a huge difference. Suddenly I could see all kinds of details I had missed before, and I could tell different birds apart so much more easily. Binoculars with about 7x or 8x magnification are good for general birding. If you can, go someplace where you can try out several different binoculars, to see which ones fit most comfortably in your hands and which ones provide the sharpest, most pleasing image for your eyes.

### **QUESTION: Where should I go to look for birds?**

You can find some birds practically anywhere, including back yards and city streets. To see different kinds of birds, visit more habitats: the birds that like open fields are different from the ones that live in the forest. Areas near water often have more variety of birdlife, and edges between habitats – such as where grassland meets the edge of a forest – can be very good as well. In mountainous regions, different birds will live at different elevations in the foothills and mountains.

### **QUESTION: Is there some kind of birding uniform? Will other birders know I'm a beginner if I don't wear the right stuff?**

No, there's no uniform! Just go for comfort. Sometimes you can get closer to birds if you avoid bright colors and bright whites, but often it makes no difference. If you're going to be wading in swamps or snowdrifts, rubber boots may be necessary; but most of the time, tennis shoes will be fine. When the day starts cool and then warms up, it's helpful to be dressed in layers you can peel off as the temperature rises. Squeaky windbreakers or raincoats can be a pain if you're trying to listen for bird calls. Sunscreen and bug repellent can be useful accessories. But again, comfort is the main goal.

### **QUESTION: Any other advice for getting started?**

As long as you're not harming the birds or their habitat, trespassing on private property or causing problems for other people, there's no "wrong" way to go birding. The best approach is the one that works best for you. Don't get discouraged if you can't recognize every bird you see – just make the most of the ones you do recognize. Birding is something we do for enjoyment, so if you enjoy it, you are already a good birder.