

BIRDING BASICS

Birding—finding and recognizing different kinds of birds in the wild—is among the most rewarding pursuits in the world. It can be mentally challenging and physically strenuous, or it can be relaxing and casual. At any level, it gets us away from stressful and trivial parts of modern life, putting us back in touch with the real world of nature.

Birding is something that we do for enjoyment, so if you enjoy it, you are already a good birder. If you enjoy it a lot, you're a great birder. But by sharpening your skills, you still may increase your enjoyment.



Where to look: Even a city street will have a few birds, but you'll see more in natural habitats. Most birds are choosy about habitat. A species that is common in a marsh may never show up in a woodlot a mile away; others live mainly in fields, or deserts, or on the shore. By visiting more different habitats, you'll see more different species. But it doesn't require wilderness travel: even cities like Los Angeles, Chicago, Toronto, and New York have great birding spots close to downtown. And if you don't even want to travel across town, any backyard or park will have birds worth watching.

When to look: Most birds are most active early in the morning. Many that are elusive later in the day may be conspicuous at dawn, coming out in the open, singing and calling. A lesser peak of activity often occurs in the evening. But with patience, you can find plenty of birds even at noon.

Waterbirds that live in the open are less affected by time of day than songbirds; hawks and other soaring birds may be most active during the warmer hours of midday. Also, the rule about good birding at dawn becomes less important in winter, when activity may stay about the same all day. So you don't have to be a morning person to enjoy birds.

Birdlife changes with the seasons, so if you go out at different times of year, you'll see different species. Spring and fall migration seasons can be especially rewarding: billions of little birds are on the move, many going long distances, and they may stop over anywhere. Even a tiny park might be visited by birds on their way from South America to northern Canada.

On the search: A brisk hike is a great way to exercise and see a few birds, but you may see more if you slow down. The ideal way is to be relaxed but alert, pausing occasionally next to patches of good habitat.

Some birds sit blatantly in the open, but a lot of them don't; instead, they move about in tall grass or dense trees. Birders learn to watch for movements among the foliage and wait for the birds to show themselves.

Birds are very aware of sounds, so birders should be, too. Listening is one of the best ways to find birds. Even if you don't recognize them by sound, you can still locate them by listening keenly for songs at a distance or soft callnotes in the foliage nearby. So birders have two powerful reasons for staying quiet outdoors: so they can hear the birds, and so they don't scare them away.