

Bird Watching 101

By Michelle Anderson



Christmas Bird Count

Running every year since 1900, Audubon's Christmas Bird Count is a great way for beginners to get involved in the birding community. Between mid-December and early January, thousands of volunteers in North and South America head out to count birds. Using citizen scientists, this program helps researchers learn more about bird populations and how they are impacted by changes to the environment. Don't worry about feeling too inexperienced. Beginners are paired with, and groups are led by, experienced birders. Find out more information at: www.audubon.org/bird/cbc.

Beginning bird watching is just like learning all of the other outdoor activities you do: There's an initial investment in gear — a decent pair of binoculars and a few field guides — and there are new skills to master and new lingo to learn — “Did you see that butter-butt?” There's even the surge of adrenaline you feel, much like when you huck yourself over a 15-foot waterfall, when you finally catch a glimpse of the elusive yellow-billed cuckoo. Okay, maybe it's not quite as intense as going over the waterfall, but it's still a fun way to spend the day. And, whether you are hiking, canoeing or cross-country skiing, you can always fit in some bird watching.

The first time you head out for some bird watching, it can be overwhelming trying to identify exactly what bird you are looking at. The sun is in your eyes. You're trying to manage your binoculars and a field guide, and maybe your kids. By the time you get focused on the bird, you may only get to see it for a few seconds! Make the most of it by starting with some basics:

Size matters. The first thing to note about a bird is its size. Learn the size of some common birds, such as robins, sparrows and crows, to use as comparisons to the bird you are looking at. You can use size to eliminate different groups of birds right away — a yellow-breasted chat is too small to be any of the birds listed above — or to sometimes distinguish a bird within a group — the chat is the largest warbler.

Have you been working out? The next thing you want to notice about the bird is its shape. “A lot of our common birds have distinctive shapes, whether it’s the deeply forked tail of a barn swallow or the long, straight bill of a great blue heron,” says Bill Thompson III, editor of [Bird Watcher’s Digest](#). You can categorize a bird into a group based on body shape. Check out the bird’s bill, tail and legs. Check to see if the bird has a crest — a tuft of feathers on top of its head. “Size and shape are two great places to start,” says Bill, “then it is a methodical process to get to the key field marks of the species.”

My, what lovely eyes you have. Field marks are specific markings used to describe a bird on its bill, head, back, wings, tail and legs. “Almost every bird in North America can be identified if you can note and remember two to three obvious field marks,” says Bill. For example, many birds might have a short seed-crushing bill, but only some of them have a crest. And, only one of them that has that crest is all red. Have you guessed it yet? It’s a Northern cardinal.

Name that tune. “It’s never too early to start learning bird songs and calls,” says Bill. Go out during the summer and learn what your resident birds, such as northern cardinals, Carolina chickadees and American robins, sound like. This will help prepare you for the spectacular cacophony of voices you’ll experience during the following spring migration. Your ears will be better tuned to hearing something that is not any of the songs you know. Then, you can find the bird and get your eyes on it.

Many birdwatchers learn birdsongs using mnemonics. There are already well-known phrases matching the songs and calls of many birds. For example, the call of the barred owl is “Who cooks for you, who cooks for you all?” And, the Eastern towhee sings, “Drink your teeeee.” These phrases are usually included in the description in the guidebook.

Bird brain. A more comprehensive approach to birding is to bird by habitat. Whether you are in a deciduous forest, a wetland or at the shore, most habitats have a predictable set of birds. You can familiarize yourself with the birds you might see prior to going out into the field. Then when you’re in the habitat, it really helps to think like a bird, advises Bill. “If you are a wading bird or a shore bird, you’re going to be down near the edge of the water. If you are a hummingbird, you’re going to zipping around from flower to flower, drinking the nectar.” Putting on your “bird brain” can be a useful exercise when you are trying to make the most of your outing.

*Michelle enjoys finding butter-butts (otherwise known as yellow-rumped warblers) while bird watching, and is still looking for a snowy owl to add to her life list. **

**A life list is a list of all of the species a bird watcher has seen.*

Field Guides and CDs

- Start with a guidebook for your state, then move on to a book for the eastern United States, such as *A Field Guide to the Birds of Eastern and Central North America*, by Roger Tory Peterson.
- For younger birders try *The Young Birder's Guide to Birds of Eastern North America*, which is aimed at 8-12 year-olds. It features about 200 species and has a light-hearted approach. Bill Thompson III wrote the book with his daughter and her elementary school class.