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Bird-watching can begin in backyard

Sheila Buff

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Getting started in bird-watching is easy. All you have to do is take your interest in the natural world and step outside. Birds are everywhere, including your own backyard. Once you start looking for birds, you'll start seeing them.

One of the best things about birding is it doesn't require a lot of expensive or hard-to-use equipment. All you really need is a field guide and a pair of binoculars. Field guides are available in any bookstore for less than \$20, and chances are you already have the binoculars. If you don't, good binoculars for birding beginners, such as those from Bushnell, can be purchased for less than \$200. Let's take a closer look at these two essential birding tools.

Field guides

Back in 1933, the great bird artist Roger Tory Peterson published his revolutionary book, "A Field Guide to the Birds," illustrated with his own paintings. Peterson's genius lay in his brilliant system of identifying the birds by their field marks. Each description and painting in his book highlights the few significantly characteristic features of a bird that identify it as that species and no other. The red breast of a robin, for instance, is a field mark that distinguishes it from any other bird.

Today the Peterson system of field marks is used by virtually all field guides — compact, illustrated books that help identify birds. Field guides are usually organized by family, such as ducks or hummingbirds. Within each family, the individual bird species are described and illustrated. The field guide also gives you an idea of the bird's range, or where in the country it is usually found.

Some birds, such as Canada geese, are found almost everywhere at least some of the year, while others, such as the roadrunner, are found only in the deserts of the Southwest. Knowing a bird's range helps you eliminate some of your wilder guesses about what it might be.

Any bookstore will have a good selection of field guides. Some are illustrated with photos, others with paintings. While almost all are organized taxonomically (by bird family), some take slightly different approaches.

Many new birders stick with Peterson's classic, "A Field Guide to the Birds," which was updated in 2008 with enhanced artwork. Another good option for new birders is the "National Geographic Field Guide to the Birds of North America." This guide has excellent illustrations and text, along with a lot of white space on the page for making notes. Field guides featuring the work of famed bird artist David Sibley are also available. These are another good option for beginners, though their bulk and organization make them less useful when you're actually birding outdoors.

Whichever field guide you choose, go with the most recent edition. Older editions found in your attic or at a yard sale will be out of date, especially when it comes to the range maps.

Once you've decided on your field guide, take some time to leaf through it. Get to know how the book is organized and get a feel for the order of the bird families. In birding, once you can put a bird into its overall family (gulls, for instance), you have a much better chance of figuring out what species it is.

Look up the birds you already know well — blue jays, for example — to get a sense of how they fit into the larger bird world and how the guide describes them.

Binoculars

More than a century ago, the most important piece of equipment for a birder was a shotgun. Because it's almost impossible to get close enough to most small birds to identify them easily, you shot the bird and then figured out what it was. The invention of binoculars in the early part of the 20th century made this part of birding obsolete — and opened the world of birds.

Binoculars for birders are in the 7 x 25 to 10 x 42 range. What do these numbers mean? The first number is the magnification. In 7 x 25 binoculars, the 7 means the binoculars magnify the image seven times. A bird that is 70 feet away will appear to be only 10 feet away through the binoculars.

The second number is the diameter of the lens, also known as the objective, in millimeters. The bigger the objective, the more light the binoculars gather and the more detail you can see in the image. On the other hand, the bigger the objective, the bigger and heavier the binoculars. The smaller the objective, the lighter the binoculars will be, but the tradeoff is loss of detail and brightness.

New birders are often frustrated by their binoculars — they have trouble getting the birds into view. The secret is to always keep your eyes on the bird while bringing your binoculars smoothly up to your eyes. Avoid the natural tendency to look down on the binoculars as you raise them. Practice on birds at a birdfeeder, ducks on a pond, or pigeons in a park until this comes easily.

ID birds

When you're out birding, look for the most obvious field marks on the birds you see. Color is the easiest to see, and it's a big help for identifying the bird.

In fact, bird names such as American goldfinch or white-throated sparrow tell you what colors to look for. Other field marks to note are the bird's size, where it is (on the ground, floating on a pond, soaring in the air) and anything you can spot about the head, especially the bill. For beginners, this is all a lot to remember, but with practice, you'll gradually learn to spot the field marks.

A great way to jump-start your learning curve is to go on a bird walk with an experienced birder. In our area, there are many great opportunities to do this, usually at little or no cost. Many parks and other public places, such as Clermont State Historic Site in Germantown, offer regular bird walks led by a naturalist. You can also go out with the enthusiastic members of local birding groups, such as the Ralph T. Waterman Bird Club. You'll learn a lot, but most importantly, you'll have fun in the natural world.

Additional Facts

Birding events

During Dutchess County Watershed Awareness Month in July, the Ralph T. Waterman Bird Club will offer bird walks in the watershed. Most walks last two to three hours and are easy to moderate. For more information, visit www.watermanbirdclub.org.

Thompson Pond

Date: 8 a.m. July 24.

Where: Pine Plains.

Watershed: Wappinger Creek.
