

Let's Go Birding!

By Doug Harr



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An Iowa Audubon Guide to the Basics of Birdwatching

Why watch birds?

What is it about birds that intrigues so many people around the world? In the U.S. alone, recent studies have put the number of birdwatchers (or “birders”, a term now more commonly used) at nearly 100 million participants. That number makes this a top leisure time activity, outranking even golf in popularity. There is little doubt that the huge variety of birds, their rainbow palate of colors, unique physical adaptations to differing environments, and the sheer wonder (maybe even jealousy) of their ability to fly has captured the imagination of people the world over. Even better is the fact that birdwatching can be relaxing and inexpensive, simply by observing birds from your kitchen window. For the more extreme birder, there is very high quality optical equipment and trips to exotic locations worldwide, making the sport as intensive and lavish as each individual wants to make it. So, young, old, rich, or limited income—all can find pleasure in birding.



The basic equipment

It is possible to watch birds with the naked eye, and that often works well for observing the common, relatively tame birds in one's backyard. But without a pair of binoculars, you will be missing much of the beauty and detail of these wonderful wild creatures. Fortunately, optical quality of binoculars has improved dramatically in recent decades. It's now possible to find excellent binoculars to start birding for as little as \$100 to \$300—with optical clarity that might have cost \$1,000 or more several years ago.

Binoculars come in two standard designs, “porro prism” and “roof prism”. Porro prisms are what many people typically picture when thinking of binoculars. They use two offset prisms in each barrel, shortening the length but widening the body, giving them a commonly



recognizable shape. Roof prisms, now the rage among birders, incorporate in-line prisms in each barrel, making them longer but more streamlined. There is little difference in optical quality between porro and roof prisms. Porro prisms tend to be less expensive but often are not as rugged in design. High grade roof prisms may cost several hundred to several thousand dollars, but they are considered “lifetime” purchases because of their water resistance and durability, some brands even with warranties.



The second most important birding equipment item is a good field guide to the birds, and the number of excellent field guides has exploded in recent years. Essential to identify look-alike birds, they are relatively inexpensive, often ranging from \$15 to \$35. Most are published in fairly durable, flexible, soft-cover editions for ease of use in the field. New or updated guide books appear almost yearly now, but some of the most frequently recommended and popular titles are listed here:

- ◆ *The Sibley Guide to Birds*, by David Allen Sibley
- ◆ *National Geographic Birds of North America*, by Jon L. Dunn and Jonathan Alderfer
- ◆ *Birds of North America*, by Kenn Kaufman
- ◆ *The Crossley ID Guide: Eastern Birds*, by Richard Crossley
- ◆ *Peterson Field Guide to the Birds of North America*, by Roger Tory Peterson
- ◆ *National Wildlife Federation Field Guide to the Birds of North America*, by Edward S. Brinkley
- ◆ *A Guide to Field Identification: Birds of North America*, by Robbins, Bruun, Zim & Singer

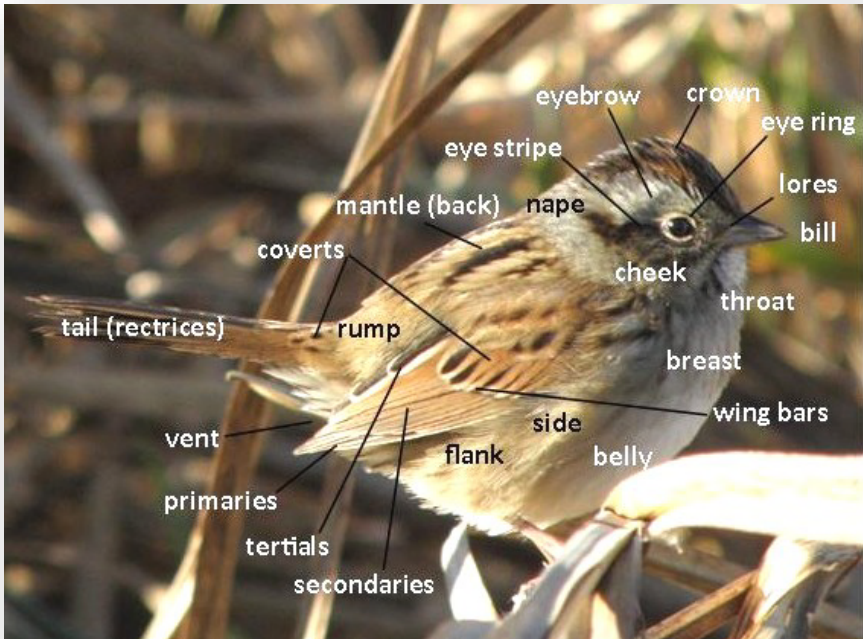
There are also simplified editions of some of these available for young birders. Specifically for Iowa, a recommendation for beginners or casual birders is *Birds of Iowa*, by Stan Tekiela. Any of these guides will get you off to a great start in birding. Finally, bird identification and record-keeping applications are now available for cell phones and other mobile devices. Three excellent and most popular apps include *Merlin*, *eBird*, and the *Audubon Bird Guide*. These, and others, are available free for downloading to mobile devices, in both Apple and Android formats.

Checklists are perhaps the third most important item in

the birder's equipment arsenal. Checklists are available for the entire continent, regions, states, counties, parks, wildlife refuges and almost every place imaginable that offers decent birding. They can help narrow (or expand) possibilities of bird identification at any particular location and assist in keeping records of what you've seen. These are often free or might cost less than \$1, depending on how elaborate they may be. You can download and print a free Iowa checklist online from the Iowa Ornithologists' Union at <http://iowabirds.org/Birds/Iowa.aspx>

Getting started with bird identification

Let's get started with bird identification (ID) by first becoming familiar with the "topography" of a bird—that is, the outer body parts you can observe and that are described in most field guides, all to help with ID. On the following sparrow photo are noted *most* of the body parts you'll need to know to help identify a species. Near the introduction at the front of most field guides can be found much more detailed terminology.



- **Size.** This often can be hard to estimate at a distance. Try to compare the unknown bird you're observing to a common species you may already know, such as House Sparrow, American Robin, American Crow, or Bald Eagle.
- **Colors and patterns.** Major colors are certainly important, but be sure to note any minor color patches and locations of colored streaks, stripes or spots, wing bars, etc. These details help narrow the focus from several to just a few possibilities.
- **Field marks.** These are physical attributes and markings that should be observed carefully during a bird's activities. Included are things like the shape and length of body, wings, bill and tail, plus things like tail bands, rump patches, eyebrow lines, wing bars, eye rings, head crests, and other characteristics that may help distinguish each species.
- **Behavior.** Noting how a bird acts, walks, hops, flies, hovers, perches, moves its tail, or feeds can be extremely important in determining the ID. For example, sparrows hop, while grackles walk. Woodpeckers usually move up tree trunks, while nuthatches often move headfirst down the trunk, both searching for insects or larvae. Palm Warblers and Eastern Phoebe bob their tails.
- **Habitat.** An important aspect of ID often overlooked by new birders is where the bird was seen. Was it in a forest, a semi-open parkland, a grassland, an agricultural crop field, a desert, along a shoreline, on an open lake or the ocean? Was it wading, swimming or diving in water? Was its nest high in a tree branch, in a hollow tree trunk, in a shrub, on the ground, even in a hole in the ground or stream bank? All birds tend to prefer certain types of habitats and nesting sites, so properly noting the habitat can be critical to identification.
- **Songs and calls.** Many birds make two kinds of vocalizations. Songs are usually rhythmic series of notes produced in a recognizable, repeated, and sometimes quite musical pattern. They are normally sung by males to attract a mate or to proclaim a territory as off-limits to other males of the same species. Calls tend to be brief sounds of one or two notes, used outside the breeding season or as an alarm sound at any time of year. With practice, birders will learn to recognize many songs and calls, associating them with a bird they've come to also know on sight. Once proficient in bird ID by sound, it is often not necessary to actually observe the species to positively identify it. Recordings of bird songs and calls are now available online, and in downloadable formats for storing on a mobile phone, tablet, or other digital device. These tools help make the learning of bird songs relatively simple.

Where to go birding

Iowa has a marvelous diversity of places and habitats suitable for birding. New birders may want to try identifying what's in their own neighborhoods first, becoming familiar with common species and employing the ID tips previously described. Next, try some local parks with a mix of open space, trees and ponds or other small water features. Birds here will be a little more diverse in species and make for a good second step in birding.

Iowa's lakes and rivers provide habitat for shorebirds, wading birds, waterfowl, eagles, and species that inhabit trees and other vegetation around the edges of water bodies. Wetlands are excellent places to improve birding skills. Waterbirds there often are easily observed in the open and are less likely to fly away, because the water offers them a sense of relative security.

Crop fields offer a few opportunities to view open country birds, but pastures and prairies or other grasslands are much more productive. Everything from hawks and crows to sparrows and meadowlarks, plus many more species, prefer these open lands.

Woodlands and forests harbor perhaps the largest and most colorful variety of birds but can also be the most difficult habitat for observations, because of a thick forest canopy and underbrush. Here, a knowledge of songs and calls can be very beneficial, not only in actually identifying a species, but even in tracking it through the woodlands to get close enough for observation.

Great Iowa places to seek birds include our large reservoirs, natural lakes, Mississippi River, Loess Hills, state forests, national wildlife refuges, plus numerous state and county wildlife areas and parks. Birding trails are a development also increasing across Iowa. If you're new to the pastime, check with a local birding club or Audubon Society chapter. These groups offer frequent field trips and welcome new birders.

When to go birding

Spring (late March-early June) is the best time of the year for birding because many birds are in the most colorful breeding plumage, and in full song to seek mates or protect territories. Many migrants that pass through the U.S. are seen only in spring and fall.

Summer is good, too, but most birds become quiet after nests are established to avoid attracting predators. Autumn again brings a variety of migrants and is quite worthwhile for birding, although many species have molted into more drab plumage and are unlikely to be singing. Winter in Iowa reveals a relatively small variety of permanent resident birds, but a few also spend the winter here after leaving arctic breeding grounds. With most winter trees leafless, it can be considerably easier to observe resident woodpeckers, owls, finches, and several other



overwintering species.



Northern Shoveler (pair)—Spring
Fox Sparrow—Autumn

Yellow Warbler (male)—Summer
White-breasted Nuthatch—Winter

Birding etiquette

All sports have rules to follow, and birding is no different. It is important that these rules be carefully respected, to result in little or no disturbance to birds. Please observe the following:

- Remember that to find birds, you may actually be encroaching on their nesting territories, so tread lightly and keep a respectful distance. Be especially careful in those nesting areas. Your interference causes stress and could result in the loss of eggs or young.

- Silence is golden! Birds' sharp senses alert them to your presence usually before you see them. Walk quietly and speak softly when in a group. This also allows you to better hear their songs or calls.
- Unless you have permission, do not enter private lands. Not only might you anger a landowner, but you're illegally trespassing. If you do have permission to use private land, be sure to thank the owner.
- If you are in a group and new to birding, don't be shy about asking questions or requesting others to share their sightings and tips. Just keep your voice low while actually seeking birds.
- Do not feed or attempt to attract birds out in the wild. Keep the use of electronic calls or song playing devices to a bare minimum, especially during the breeding and nesting season.
- Respect the environment. Keep groups of birders to a size that limits impact on habitat. Don't litter while birding and avoid trampling thick habitat, as that might lead predators to find and raid nests. Stay on trails as much as possible.

Selected sources for more information

- ◇ Iowa Ornithologists Union: <http://www.iowabirds.org>
- ◇ Iowa Young Birders: <http://www.iowayoungbirders.org>
- ◇ Cornell Lab of Ornithology: <http://www.allaboutbirds.org/news/>
- ◇ National Audubon Society: <http://www.audubon.org/birding>

This guide is produced by Iowa Audubon, an independent statewide federation of Iowa's National Audubon Society chapters and also independent organizations such as the Iowa City Bird Club and Des Moines Audubon group. Visit our website at:



<http://www.iowaaudubon.org>