

LIVING

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The joy of birding

On Oct. 16, 1989, a lost broad-billed hummingbird dropped in unexpectedly at a backyard feeder on Buckhorn Lake and all hell broke loose. The news of the bird's arrival went public at about 9:40 a.m. and by noon birders from Toronto had already arrived,



OUR CHANGING SEASONS

Drew Monkman

quivering with the excitement of seeing a species native to the canyons of Arizona and never before recorded in Canada. Hundreds went to look and were still arriving nine days later. How a tiny, drab hummingbird, no longer than a man's finger, could create so much commotion might be hard to understand. Let's just say that it is part and parcel of the world of birding.

By just about any measure — the huge selection of field guides available at local bookstores for example — birds have never been more popular. While hunting has declined in popularity, the old-fashioned act of looking at birds continues to appeal to more and more people.

Over the next few weeks, I will try to provide an overview of how to increase your knowledge and enjoyment of birds. Hopefully, this will appeal to people of all levels of interest.

First of all, let's get the terminology out of the way. The word "birdwatching" has become a rather derogatory term. It conjures up images of eccentrics with names like Chauncey or Harriet, all dressed up in tweeds and tennis shoes, as they frolic in the woods, oohing and awing at comically named species such as titlarks or dippers. The word itself makes you wonder what the big deal could be about "watching" a bird as it sits motionless on a branch.

Birding, on the other hand, refers to dynamic, contagious behaviour which calls upon a capacity for aesthetic delight and combines skills such as quiet stalking, intellectual analysis, totally focused attention and, in its most severe forms, withdrawal from normal life! Birding is all about the thrill of using one's knowledge of season, range, habitat, field marks, song and behaviour to search out birds, find them, and then identify them. In many ways, it's like hunting, the difference being you don't kill them.

There are many factors that explain a passion for birds. Part of the appeal is the satisfaction to be had when you come across a species that you know is different, follow it until you get a good view, make careful observations, note the important characteristics and (hurrah!) identify it. As a beginner, simply being able to distinguish between a grackle and a starling can be a satisfying accomplishment, partly because it eliminates the frustration of never being quite sure what those confusing black birds in the yard might be. At the other end of the birding journey, it might be the gratification of knowing the difference between a fall-plumaged bay-breasted warbler and a black-poll.

A large part of birding is also the esthetic pleasure of seeing exquisite creatures in their natural environment. Often, the most satisfying moments are simply getting a close, relaxed, detailed look at a species you've seen 1,000 times before. For me, this past spring, it was an immaculate male red-winged blackbird, illuminated by perfect early morning light as it stood out sharply against a background of faded yellow cattails. Birdsong, too, is a huge part of the esthetic attraction. How can one not be moved by the chorus of bird song of a May dawn as a dozen or more species pour out their songs?

The esthetic pleasure goes beyond just the birds. Birding reconnects people to the natural world in general as you find yourself pay-



Alec Derghazari and Julia Monkman enjoy some fall birding in the Cavan hills near Omeme. Drew Monkman, special to The Examiner

ing much more attention to all aspects of our flora and fauna. When I go into the woods, I spend as much time looking down as looking up. Sound, too, becomes a huge part of the experience. To listen effectively for bird sounds, you need to also know what aren't bird sounds — the trill of a tree frog, the clucking of a chipmunk, the rhythmic pulsing of a snowy tree-cricket, or maybe just a branch rubbing up against a tree trunk.

When spending time in the outdoors, there is a great deal of satisfaction to be had by simply knowing what is around you, be it plants, birds, stars, insects or whatever. When working outside or going for a walk, one of the things I find most enjoyable is hearing the different bird songs and calls and simply identifying each species in the back of my mind. I usually don't even take the time to look at them. Just knowing that they are there, that all of the voices of a healthy, diverse bird community are present, is satisfaction enough.

To wax philosophical, birds represent freedom and, by extension, they represent life. They also remind us of the passage of time, as their arrivals and departures are mileposts of the changing seasons. On fall evenings, shortly after dark, I often make a point of stopping to listen for the contact calls of migrants in the dark sky above as they wing their way southward. I always feel a wave of nostalgia come over me as I think of the millions of birds pouring out of forests and fields across Ontario, speeding south and marking summer's end. I also think of the huge challenges they will face during migration and on their wintering grounds. I can't help but wonder if their patch of forest in Canada will even still be here in the spring when they return.

Recent research has demonstrated that becoming a birder can even have some very practical benefits, especially for the aging brain. Birding is very much a mental challenge and something that has to be worked at fairly diligently in order to improve one's

skills. Luckily, it's more like playing than working. Be careful, though, because birding can be habit-forming, especially for those who have obsessive tendencies.

I became smitten with birds when I was 11 years old. I remember getting wide-eyed seeing my first evening grosbeaks and black-billed cuckoos. The aesthetic component quickly got mixed in with the urge to collect — the hockey card factor, you might say — as I proudly added new species to my life list. For me, part of it, too, was the basic hunting instinct which is still in our genes. I've always loved the adventure of searching out birds, be it getting up in the middle of the night to be at a birding destination at first light, or braving pre-dawn winter winds in an attempt to hear distant owls.

Like many birders, I also went through my listing phase when all that mattered were the lists of how many birds I could see in a day, a year or in a given locality. For many of us, an initial goal was to have ticked off 300 species within Ontario. This often required driving several hundred kilometers to see a single species such as a rufous hummingbird in Algonquin Park, a varied thrush in Don Mills and a green towhee in Windsor.

However, birding soon became my window on environmental issues. It's interesting how many so-called environmentalists started out as birders. This is because you soon develop a strong sense of all that bird populations stand to lose through threats like habitat destruction and climate change. Birders, maybe more than anyone, are acutely aware of what has already been lost in terms of our natural heritage — common nighthawks gone from downtown Peterborough, purple martins and whip-poor-wills gone from cottage country, and loggerhead shrikes almost completely gone from the entire province.

Like most other learning processes, learning to identify birds is a gradual process and requires repetitive application. The good news, however, is that birds are everywhere, so a simple walk to the store or drive to work

afford opportunities to practise your skills.

It's also safe to say that there are as many types of birders as there are birds. Interest level and ways of enjoying birds exist in an infinite number of varieties. Some people simply like to read about birds or look at attractive pictures in books. Others focus their attention on the backyard feeder, and venturing out into the "field" may be nothing more than taking a few walks around the summer cottage. Great. There's nothing wrong with that. Still others, however, can never get their fill, and will not be happy until they have mastered every species' field marks, behaviour patterns, songs, and even chip notes.

Fall is a great time to get started in birding. There are fewer species to sort out at this time of year and many that are around will come to feeders. Try to place a feeder near a window where you spend a lot of time, so you can observe the birds while doing other things — the dishes for example. Also, make more creative use of your time by keeping a pair of binoculars and maybe an old field guide in the car.

Over the next few weeks, I will be covering a number of different topics related to birding. These will include binoculars and spotting scopes, field guides, the process of bird identification, and where to see birds locally. I will also add lots of practical suggestions. I'm quite excited about this series. It's always gratifying to help others open their eyes to the beauty and allure of birds. A beginner's enthusiasm at seeing a new species for the first time, or simply seeing a common species really well, never fails to rekindle my own passion for birds.

Next week: Bird identification

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