

LIVING

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Be a better birder

This week, I would like to provide some practical suggestions about becoming a better birder.

Know where to look

Birds turn up everywhere. However, knowing where to focus your attention will help you find more birds than just random scanning of your surroundings. If you are out in the car or simply walking, pay special attention to perching sites such as wires, tree tops, fences, telephone poles, fence posts and roofs. Watch for birds such as gulls or raptors soaring overhead. Always take a close look at

**OUR CHANGING SEASONS**

Drew Monkman

any special habitats you pass by such as lakes, ponds, sewage lagoons and rivers for the presence of waterbirds, plowed fields for killdeers and horned larks, lawns for robins and other ground feeders, marshes for red-winged blackbirds and herons, road edges for sparrows, and beaches for shorebirds.

Remember the identification process

1. Try to note the size and shape of the bird by comparing or contrasting it to benchmark species like the hummingbird, sparrow, robin and crow.

2. Keep in mind important details such as season, habitat, location, and behaviour.

3. Next, focus on field marks, starting with the head area. Take particular note of the size and shape of the bill. Does the eye area, crown or throat have special markings such as stripes or a different colour? Are wing bars present? Do the chest, belly and sides have spots, stripes or special colouration? Is there anything special about the tail or rump?

4. At this point, it's often a good idea to jot down the key features in a notebook or to even make a quick sketch.

5. Consult your field guide, paying special attention to the range maps, relative abundance of the species, habitat and description of behaviour. The guide will also point out the most important field marks and how the bird compares to other similar species.

Be quiet

It's impossible to overstress the importance of being quiet when out birding. This doesn't mean just talking in a low voice but also keeping all unnecessary talking to a minimum. You really do need to focus all of your attention on finding, through sight and sound, the birds. Also, by minimizing noise, you'll get much closer to any bird you do see. Above all, do not yell out when you first spot something exciting. It's just as easy to whisper and, by doing so, the bird will likely stay put for everyone in your group to see — including yourself. Remember, too, not to slam the car door when you get out of the car to look at something.

Avoid sudden movements

Sudden, jerky movements will scare birds away as quickly as loud noises. You need to get in the habit



Karl Egressy, special to The Examiner

Knowing where and when to look for a given bird species, such as this snowy owl, makes finding it much easier.

of moving slowly and deliberately, especially as you get closer to the bird you're stalking. Avoiding rapid movements is also very important when you bring your binoculars up to your eyes.

Know how to use your binoculars

Time and effort can be saved by learning to use your binoculars properly. Be sure you know how to focus them. To do so, look at a distant object such as a street sign with your binoculars. Focus on it with both eyes open. Now, close your right eye and, using only your left eye, adjust the central focus wheel and try to bring the object into even clearer focus. Next, close your left eye and, using the diopter adjustment on the right eyepiece, bring the view through your right eye into sharp focus. Now, with both eyes open, the focus should be crystal clear. If not, try adjusting the diopter again, even with both eyes open. Once the diopter has been set to your eyes, you shouldn't have to move it again. Always remember, too, to hold your binoculars with two hands.

When you see a bird that you want to check out with your binoculars, begin by locking your eyes on the bird. Then, slowly raise your binoculars to your eyes. If you have done this correctly, the bird should be right in the middle of your field of vision. If you find this difficult, try noting some other feature or landmark near the bird. This could be something like a distinctively

shaped branch in the tree where the bird's sitting. Remember where the bird is in relation to this reference point. Then, when you look through the binoculars, the reference point should help you to locate the bird. Don't make the mistake of simply scanning randomly with your binoculars in the general vicinity of the bird in the hope of stumbling upon it.

Be on the lookout for mixed-species flocks

In winter, as well as during the spring and fall migrations, many small songbirds join flocks of mixed species. Unfortunately, these flocks tend to be relatively silent. The only thing you might hear is the odd call note. The keystone species in these flocks is almost always the black-capped chickadee. Listen for its call, begin to pish (explained below), and before long you might find there are another 20 birds silently feeding close by. In winter, these usually include nuthatches, woodpeckers, kinglets, and maybe even a brown creeper. In late August through September, it's quite common to discover that a half dozen species of warblers and vireos are keeping the chickadee company.

Use pishing

Unfortunately, birds are often less than co-operative and really don't want to show themselves. They may be high in the leafy crown of a tree, concealed by cat-tails, or hopping about in a dense stand of conifers. There is a way,

however, to see them well. Regular readers of this column probably know that I am a great fan of "pishing" to draw birds closer. I can't overemphasize how effective pishing can be, especially for small songbirds. Pishing simply involves taking a deep breath and quickly repeating the sound "pssh" as you let the air out in one, drawn-out exhale. Keep your teeth clenched and lips loose. At first, you'll probably have to pish fairly loudly — which may mean you'll have to unclench your teeth — but you can lower the volume once the bird or birds get closer. Continue pishing for at least a couple of minutes to give all of the different species that may be present a chance to make their way toward you. Chickadees and nuthatches are especially receptive to this sound, but other species will almost always show up as well, especially if you are patient. Don't be surprised if you end up with birds practically at arm's reach.

Learn the sounds

I didn't actually really learn the songs and various calls of birds until I was well into my 30s. What a shame, because it was as if an acoustic veil had been lifted on part of the world I didn't know existed before. Instead of just being an undifferentiated jumble, it was as if the sounds around me had become the instantly recognizable voices of friends. In May and June, you will probably hear five or six times as many birds as you will see. With

practice, they can all be identified by song. Recognizing the common bird songs not only provides a great deal of satisfaction, but it also avoids having to do the hard work of actually seeing the birds every time.

Start by learning the songs of the common species that you see and hear around your house. These might include the house sparrow, European starling, mourning dove, northern cardinal, American robin, house finch, song sparrow, chipping sparrow, black-capped chickadee, and common grackle. Listen to recordings of their songs — in the car, for example — and learn the associated mnemonic (memory aid) for the species you're interested in. It won't take any time at all to learn the common species. If you have the Internet, there are two entire articles on bird song on my website. Go to "Columns" and then to May 15 and 22, 2007. Many of the mnemonics are provided there. As for a great CD of bird songs, I recommend the Stokes Field Guide to Bird Songs. It is available at Avant Garden.

Go out with experienced birders

Learning birds entirely on one's own is challenging. At some point, it's important to go birding with more experienced birders. No matter how committed an individual may be, you will probably need someone to correct some basic mistakes that you are bound to make and to give you valuable advice. The Peterborough Field Naturalists have regular birding outings during the year. The most popular of these for beginning birders are the Sunday Morning Bird Walks held each spring and fall. Go to <http://www.peterboroughnature.org/index.html> for more information.

The mental game

In the final analysis, birding is about three things: paying attention, being patient and knowing what to expect. As mentioned earlier, paying attention means looking and listening with complete concentration. Patience can mean standing motionless in a forest for several minutes until the bird you heard sing once finally sings again and lets you know what direction to look in. Finally, knowing what to expect, given the time of year and habitat, is the cornerstone of all nature observation. An awareness that northern shrikes appear in the Kawarthas in late fall and usually frequent old fields with scattered small trees greatly increases the chances of actually seeing them. Experienced birders have a 95-percent idea of what they'll probably see on a given day and where they'll see it.

Next week, I'll provide a list of what species to look for each month in the Kawarthas and where to find them.

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