



Secular Week of Action: Birding amidst COVID-19

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Hello Humanist Community,

As we celebrate and observe a secular week of action when much of the world is under a stay-at-home order, it's helpful to take a moment to step back and appreciate the little moments of wonder available just outside our doors and windows. With the right birdfeeder, you can sit back and watch dozens of bird species pay you a visit.

Here is an introduction to birding! Birding is about appreciating bird species. It is an awesome hobby for all ages because (1) it helps citizen science and conservation, (2) it makes you more aware of your surroundings, (3) it lets you appreciate the evolution of raptors, and (4) it's a whole lot of fun!

Ideally, to get started you'll have the following on hand:

- **Binoculars, but if you don't own a pair of binoculars there's still plenty you can identify with your naked eye**
- **A smartphone (there are two free apps I highly encourage you to download)**

Step 1: Learn to recognize birds near you

Download the amazing [Merlin Bird ID app](#). It is a free, premium bird guide app provided by the Cornell Lab of Ornithology.

Once you open this app up for the first time, open the Bird Packs section in the menu and download a regional pack(s) for where you live.

Next, focus on these two areas of the app:

Guided Bird ID. If you see a bird and want to know what it might be, hit the big green "Start Bird ID" button on the front page to be guided through five questions that will result in a list of most likely bird species; from there, just pick the one you saw. You're learning birds already!

Explore Birds. This is where you can go to study bird names and photos. Hit "Explore Birds" from the front page (at the bottom) to be taken to a list of all the birds you have downloaded and tap the filter button in the upper-right. Tap Likely Birds at the top and set your location, keep the date on "Today". In the Sort option, select Family - Most Likely. Hit Done at the bottom. Now what you have is a list of bird families, and within each family the bird species are sorted by likelihood you'll see that species. The descriptions will point out common field marks to pay attention to and help differentiate similar species. If you live by water, try studying some of the common waterfowl families. If you live near woods, perhaps scroll down to some of the woodsy families like Sparrows or Woodpeckers and study the likely ones there. The bird families are sorted in order of taxonomy, an order with which most birders are familiar. Generally, waterfowl are in the front, soaring birds like Hawks are near the middle and small songbirds are near the end. Try to learn a few of the common birds' songs and calls as well.

Step 2: Gear Up

Binoculars are a birder's best friend. This is the only item needed by a beginner birder. If you don't already have some, try borrowing from a friend or buy a beginner pair:

<http://www.audubon.org/news/category-get-game>

The binoculars in this list come with features great for birding such as waterproofing and fog-proofing. You can often find the same models at lower prices by doing some searching. A quality pair of binoculars can be a lifelong investment and can be used for many more activities than birding like sports events, ballet, and stargazing.

Once you get your hands on some binoculars, familiarize yourself with your binoculars. In the middle there should be a large Focusing Wheel, turn it to focus the binoculars on your subject. Near one of the two eye-cups there's something called a Diopter Ring, turn this to adjust the difference in focus between the two barrels (if one of your eyes is better than the other). To adjust the Diopter Ring, pick an object to focus on and compare the view between your eyes' corresponding barrels.

Practice with your binoculars. Birders do two main things with binoculars: spotting and tracking. Practice spotting by picking a far-away object and finding it with your binoculars. Eventually you will be able to find an object with a single raise of the binoculars, without even adjusting your gaze. Skill in tracking will come in time, this is when you follow a moving object; you can try practicing with cars or planes.

Safety note: be very careful not to look into the sun!

Step 3: eBird

Modern birders use a data collection platform called eBird, developed by the Cornell Lab of Ornithology. With this platform, birders are able to submit sightings from their birding adventures, automatically keeping a record of every species they've ever seen (their "life list") as well as where and when they have birded. eBird is a birder's second-best friend after binoculars. Data submitted to eBird is used by conservation researchers and is openly available to the public; it is one of the most successful citizen science platforms in the world.

The beginner birder can use the eBird app to:

Find Local Birding Hotspots. Under the Explore Data tab, select Explore Hotspots and navigate to where you live. You will be able to find popular local birding hotspots this way. Visit one of these places to find a greater variety of bird species (high biodiversity).

Track Progress Using Checklists. Download the eBird Mobile app to submit checklists to eBird. This is a great way to both track your own progress and give back via citizen science. As you go along your journey, you can mark encounters with bird species using this app. Log in to eBird using a web browser to view all your checklists and other progress stats. The app will walk you through checklist submission, but generally eBird checklists will consist of:

- Location or hotspot you surveyed

- List of species and a count of the number of each species encountered

- Date, time and duration spent birding

- Distance traveled (also options for stationary checklists or incidental sightings)

Conclusion

Birding is a truly fun, engaging, and impactful hobby. It will help you discover places you never knew existed and give you a great appreciation of the wildlife that live there. As you progress as a birder, find friends to share your discoveries with, or mentors to help hone your skills. Using eBird you will be able to see your ranking among local, regional, or national birders.

We'd love to see which birds you find. Share your photos on social media with the American Humanist Association to join our #HumanistBirdingSquad!

Resources

Cornell Lab of Ornithology: <http://www.birds.cornell.edu>

eBird: <http://ebird.org>

eBird Mobile Apps (Merlin Bird ID and eBird Mobile):

<http://help.ebird.org/customer/portal/articles/1848031-ebird-mobile-apps-overview>

Guide to North American Birds (you can filter by region)

https://www.audubon.org/bird-guide?field_bird_family_tid=All&field_bird_region_tid=All

Rare Bird Alerts: <https://ebird.org/ebird/alerts>

National Audubon Society: <http://http://www.audubon.org/>

Binocular Buying Guide: <http://www.audubon.org/gear/binocular-guide>

Local Chapters: <http://www.audubon.org/about/audubon-near-you>

Subreddit: <https://www.reddit.com/r/birding/>

Identification Help: <https://www.reddit.com/r/whatsthisbird/>

Some tips for new birders:

- Birds are most active in the morning, just after sunrise. If you want to see as many bird species as possible, go out nice and early.
- When you get binoculars, be sure to adjust the diopter. The diopter is a ring around the right barrel which focuses just the right side, allowing you to fine-tune your binoculars to any difference between your two eyes. If you do not do this, you will often end up with an uncomfortable view through your binoculars and a headache!
- Playing audio from the reference apps to attract birds often works very well but is very disruptive to the birds (especially during mating season). Playing calls and songs can also lead to misidentifications from any other birders in the vicinity. Because of these reasons, please avoid playing bird calls too loud out in the field. It is frowned upon by much of the birding community.