

Full-Contact Birding



**Have you got
what it takes to
watch birds?**

by Matt Flavin
Illustrations by Jeff Tolbert



He was said to be the foremost birder around. His life list included nearly 400 sightings in Montana alone.

"So," he said, a smile crossing his beat-up face, "you want to take up birding. What makes you think you've got what it takes?"

"Let's see," I replied. "I've taken ornithology courses at the University of Montana, I love the outdoors, and I've got 20/20 vision. Is that what you mean?"

"Hell no! I'm talking about high pain threshold, quick reflexes, rapid healing, and indifference to harassment." He also mentioned something he called "tyke-wando." As he brought me coffee, I noticed he had a tremor in one hand and walked with a severe limp.

I told him I didn't know how all that applied to birding.

As he eased himself stiffly into a chair, he said, "You know, most people think of bird watchers as effete trust-funders wandering through meadows in khaki shorts and straw gardening hats. Well that's not the case at all. Your typical

Montana birder is likely to be sturdy as a stump, wearing ripped jeans, chewing tobacco, and likely as not missing a tooth or two in front. And some of the men birders are even rougher looking.

"Birding's definitely a rough physical activity," he continued, "like one of those "extreme" sports they show on ESPN. Take up birding and you'll have to endure the ravages of biting mosquitoes and flies as well as extremes of hot, cold, and wetness.

"Just walking is hazardous to a birder.

That's because you always have to

be looking up instead of at what's underfoot. You're

constantly tripping over

roots, plunging into

muskrat holes, or

stepping off steep

embankments. You

probably noticed my limp. That's from a

busted kneecap I got last year when I

tripped over a hiker

who'd stopped to tie his shoe.

"There's also the knee-driving hazard. I don't know how many rollovers I've suffered

trying to steer with

my knees while lean-

ing out the window

with the binoculars

trying to get a focus

on some bird by the

roadside or on a telephone wire. In the last one, not only did I get a steel pin in the hip, but I lost one of the cushiest jobs I ever had. Damn



"I don't know how many rollovers I've suffered trying to steer with my knees while leaning out the window with the binoculars."

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crybaby senior citizens ratted me out to the nursing home authorities, so they hired somebody else to drive the nature tour bus.”

“Bummer,” I said.

“You mentioned harassment. What kind of harassment?”

“Mostly from irate citizens and police. Some of the best in-town birding’s in the neighborhood parks. A man skulking around in the bushes with binocs sometimes attracts attention, you know what I mean? Somebody turns you in, and before you can say John James Audubon, you find yourself cuffed, face down in the fescue, while some deputy with his heavy shoe on your neck is saying you have the right to remain silent.”

Earlier he’d mentioned something called “tyke-wando.” I asked if that was some sort of exercise for kids.

That struck him as funny, and his cackle disclosed the absence of several front teeth. “Tae kwan do is a style of karate. And I’ve signed up for some lessons myself. A birder knows tae kwan do, he can fight off a dozen attackers at once.”

“Why would a birder need to do that?”

“Let me give you a...*hypothetical*,” he replied.



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“Say you’re having a few at Big Tiny’s Tap in Lewistown one spring night—and let’s say some of the local rowdies ask why you’re decked out in your camo when it isn’t even hunting season.

“Suppose you say you’re there to observe the mating rituals of the sharp-tailed grouse at day-break. Suppose there’s some laughter, an ugly comment or two—well, that’s where some of that tae kwan do really came in—er—*might come* in handy,” he said, fingering an ugly scar that ran down his left cheek. “*Hypothetically*, of course,” he added.

Despite the rigors he described, I was determined to take up bird watching. I told him I had all the necessary gear: binoculars, boots, and bug repellent. Was there anything else I needed? “You forgot the most important thing of all—the manual.”

“Oh, right, you mean the *Field Guide to the Birds of North America* put out by the National Geographic Society.”

“Nah,” he replied, reaching for his cane. “I mean the *First Aid and Safety Handbook* put out by the American Red Cross.” 🐾