

A Close Look at Bird Watching

HOW TO GET STARTED IN MONTANA'S FASTEST-GROWING OUTDOORS ACTIVITY

by Becky Lomax



“I’ll never hunt or fish with the same eyes.”

Ron Aasheim, a dyed-in-the-wool elk hunter, experienced this optical epiphany one morning last summer along the Blackfoot River. He was out with longtime friend Bob Martinka, a retired Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks wildlife manager and bird-watching expert who lives in Helena. Aasheim, also of Helena, had visited the river many times before as an angler, but this was the first time he spent the day looking into the trees rather than the water. What he discovered was a whole new dimension of wildlife.

“Bob really raised my awareness of things in the outdoors I’d never really noticed before,” Aasheim says.

For instance, Martinka pointed out an American redstart, a black and orange bird Aasheim hadn’t noticed before. “Heck, I didn’t even know there *was* such a bird,” he says.

Aasheim, who heads FWP’s Conservation Education Division, isn’t alone in discovering the joys of bird watching. As people across the country increasingly head outdoors to recreate, birding has become wildly popular. According to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, birding is America’s fastest-growing outdoors activity. And Montana is leading the way, with a participation rate of 44 percent, double the national average and highest of any state. Fortunately for Treasure State birders, Montana has plenty of places to see a wide range of winged wildlife. And thanks to the Internet and a growing number of field guides and birding festivals, find-

ing where and when to go birding across the state has never been easier.

Why watch?

It’s never been so important, either. Ecologists point out that observing wildlife provides clues to the world around us. The survival and health of birds in particular (because they are especially sensitive to environmental changes) can indicate an ecosystem’s well-being. When birds start disappearing, something has gone wrong. Conversely, the reappearance of declining species, such as bald eagles and other fish-eating birds, indicates a decline in pesticide use or other environmental improvements.

Of course, most people don’t watch birds to save the planet but rather to observe their strikingly beautiful colors and diversity of shapes, sizes, behaviors, and plumage.

For dedicated participants, bird watching often takes precedence over vacations, jobs, and even family life. “I was a casual birder for many years, until retirement,” says Martinka. “That’s when the addiction set in.”

Like many participants, Martinka says birding is “an excuse” to get out into the natural world. “It’s just like fishing, hunting, or other activities that provide a reason for being outdoors,” he says. “It’s always fun to walk along a stream or through a forest, but it’s even more so if you’re doing it purposefully, with your senses alert, trying to discover something new or interesting.”

Such sentiments are shared by bird

WATCH AND LEARN Birds such as saw-whet owls take on a new dimension when viewed through binoculars. Field guides and a notebook are other essential bird-watching tools. At right: Audubon Society official Harriet Marble leads a Becoming an OutdoorsWoman birding trip.

watchers of all ages. Kids can look through binoculars as easily as their grandparents can. In fact, bird watching is one of the few outdoors pursuits an entire family can do together.

Kristi DuBois, who coordinates FWP’s Native Species Management Program from her office in Missoula, says she can’t think of an easier outdoors activity.

“You can watch birds almost anytime and anywhere,” says DuBois, who looks for birds while hiking, skiing, boating, and even driving. “The other great thing is that anyone can do it. You don’t have to be an expert or know everything in the field guides. Plus it’s free—no license needed.”

How to spot birds

You don’t even need to leave the house to watch birds.

“Start birding in your own backyard,” says Harriet Marble, a Montana Audubon Society board member and chair of the organization’s Montana Bird Records

Committee, which tracks unusual bird sightings throughout the state.

Marble, of Chester, began birding at home as a child, learning to identify birds using an old field guide. Field guides are still essential tools for birding, she tells beginners. Fortunately for newcomers, several beautifully illustrated bird books have been published in recent years (see sidebar, page 26). Because birds don’t always appear in the wild exactly as they do in pictures, many bird watchers own two or more guides and compare the images.

Though a guide is necessary for positive bird identification, Marble advises birding beginners to resist the temptation to open an identification book the moment they spot a bird.

“At first, just watch the bird for a bit,” she says. “I try to observe as much detail as possible.”

If several birds are flitting about, focus on just one. Carry a small notebook and jot down notes about the bird for help later when referencing the field guide.

Begin at the beak (or the bill, for waterfowl), observing the shape, length, thickness, and color. Work down the bird, checking the wing shape and size, then tail length and shape. Look for patterns or field marks such as eye patches or rings, dots, lines, and stripes. Check for wing bars and flashes of undercolor that show when a bird flutters. If more than one species appears, compare sizes. Only after you’ve amassed these details, says Marble, should you open your field guide.

Most bird books catalog



Which Binoculars?

Birds won't let you get close enough for a good look, so birders need binoculars. But with various models ranging in price from \$50 to \$1,600, which pair should you buy?

Recently, I went looking to purchase a pair of binoculars, and here's what I learned:



Those numbers: Binoculars are described with two numbers, such as 7X32. The first denotes magnification. The second is the

size, in millimeters, of the objective lens (the one closest to the bird). This tells you how much light the lens can gather, which is important when birding at dawn and dusk. The bigger the objective lens number, the more light it gathers.

For magnification, I'd go with 7X or 8X, but no higher. The image in binocs I tested above 8X wiggled too much. For field of vision, go with something between 32 and 42. Anything less, such as found in pocket binoculars, doesn't let in enough light and creates a narrow field of view. Binocs with too great a field of vision, such as 50, are often too heavy to carry. I eventually decided on 8X42.

Porro prism versus roof prism:

The old-fashioned porro prism binoculars are wider at the front than the back. Roof prisms are the "two tube" models. Both work equally well, but many people like the slimness and lighter weight of the more costly roof prism binoculars.



Weight: I took the advice of one on-line expert who said he preferred those that weighed less than 24 ounces.

Price: I'd love to own top-of-the-line German binoculars, but I can't afford them. Yet spending \$100 on a cheap model wouldn't provide me what I need. Fortunately, many models of waterproof binoculars with clear, sharp optics range in price from \$200 to \$350.



To find the pair right for you, type "best binoculars" into a search engine and look at the dozens of on-line reviews and comparisons. One that's especially worth reading was produced by the folks at the Cornell University Lab of Ornithology: <http://birds.cornell.edu/publications/livingbird/spring99/binos.html>

—Tom Dickson

bird species from the oldest to the youngest along the evolutionary scale: Loons and grebes cover the first few pages, and songbirds pile up at the back. For easy comparison, the guides cluster birds in similar groupings and families.

To start identifying a bird, begin the process of elimination. A bird swimming in a lake, for instance, is probably not a woodpecker, and shorebirds rarely appear in mountain forests.

From there, simply look for birds in the guide that generally match your observations, until you get it narrowed down to one species.

Another clue, says Marble, is to check distribution maps, included in most field guides. As an example, she notes, "We're not likely to see cardinals in Montana." Read habitat descriptions carefully. You won't see high-altitude species such as willow ptarmigans in your low-elevation backyard.

To aid in identification, listen to birds. "Start with what you hear in your yard," Marble says. "I like to watch the bird actually sing."

Substituting words for notes helps with memory. *Chickadee-dee-dee-dee* is the call of the black-capped chickadee. The most common of the American robin's songs is *stop—stop—stop*. And if you hear, *quick, three beers*, then an olive-sided flycatcher is likely nearby. Commercial birdsong tapes and CDs can help you make the audio connection more quickly.

Another way to learn bird identification is to find an expert and ask to tag along. Meet experienced birders by hooking up with an Audubon Society chapter, most of which sponsor field trips open to beginners. Some years, FWP offers a Becoming an Outdoors-Woman birding class. The Glacier Institute, Yellowstone Association Institute, Raptor View Research Institute, and The Nature Conservancy of Montana also sponsor birding trips. Or ask at your local bird food store for the names of friendly, expert birders in your neighborhood.

When to watch

You can spot birds any time of year, but they are most abundant during spring and fall migrations. Many birding festivals cele-

Becky Lomax is a freelance writer in Whitefish.

brate these predictable flights. In May, check out the Bitterroot Birding Festival at Lee Metcalf National Wildlife Refuge, the Yellowstone Valley Audubon Society's Birding Classic, and International Migratory Bird Day at the National Bison Range. Each June, Glendive observes the return of turkey vultures at Makoshika State Park during Buzzard Days, and the Montana Audubon Society sponsors several bird festivals. In early October, the Bridger Raptor Festival held north of Bozeman celebrates one of North America's largest golden eagle migrations.

Martinka says that if he had to pick one month for watching birds, it would be June, when most of Montana's several hundred nesting species are mating. Male songbirds in particular display colors and sing operatic trills while courting.

The best time of day to spot birds is at dawn, says Marble. That's when they sing to establish territory and forage for food after a long night of roosting. Dusk is good too, she adds, because birds usually feed before nightfall. If you hope to find owls, however, night is usually the time to be out listening and looking.

Where to watch

Birding in your backyard will soon make you an expert—on birds in your backyard. That's not a bad place to start, but observing more of Montana's 416 species requires some travel.

"The key is to change habitats—lakes, forests, prairies—and keep going different places," says Marble.

Montana has abundant and diverse ecosystems, each containing birds unique to those habitats. National parks, wildlife refuges, wildlife management areas, and state parks teem with bird life. Many public wildlife areas publish bird lists to aid with identification.

To increase the odds of seeing even greater bird diversity, go to where two habitats meet, such as where a grassland becomes aspen grove or where a fen intersects with conifer forest.

Almost without exception, the best place to see birds is near water, including streams, rivers, ponds, lakes, marshes, bogs, and sloughs. Roughly 90 percent of Montana's bird species use riparian and



BIRDING CAPITAL, USA Renowned for its abundant hunters and anglers, Montana also has the nation's highest birding participation rate. The 44 percent of Montana adults who watch birds for recreation is double the national average. Among the 416 bird species seen in Big Sky Country (clockwise from above right): mountain bluebird, white-faced ibis, harlequin duck, varied thrush, burrowing owl, and black-backed three-toed woodpecker.



wetland habitats for breeding and nesting. Streams and rivers are especially attractive to birds in Montana's dry eastern half, says Martinka, who frequently looks for birds along prairie waterways.

Many people love to follow official routes and trails, and birders are no exception. That's why FWP teamed up with 30 other state and federal agencies and dozens of communities and private conservation groups to establish the Montana Birding and Nature Trail. FWP's DuBois, a member of the steering committee developing the trail, says that over the next few years the project aims to identify, map, and sign hundreds of miles of roads and hiking trails linking Montana's top birding locations. Already portions of the trail have been established in the Blackfoot and Clearwater drainages, the Bitterroot Valley, and the

Helena and Gallatin valleys. You can find maps of these birding trails on-line at montanabirdingtrail.org/about.htm.

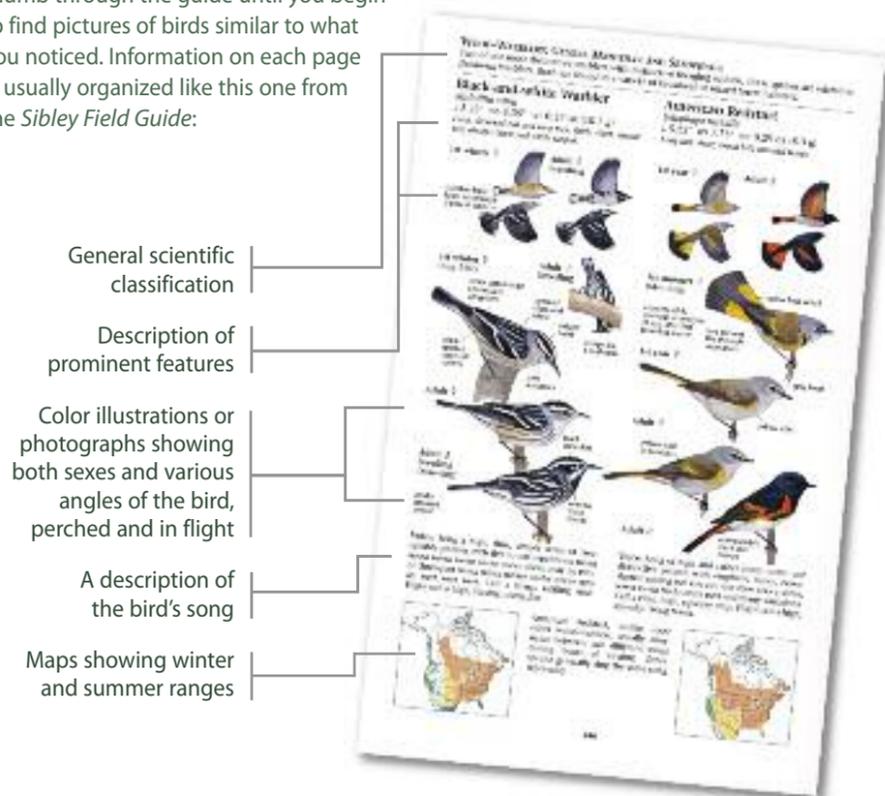
Trails, festivals, and field trips are fun ways to see birds and socialize with like-minded birders, but they aren't essential to the sport. All it really takes to watch birds is a pair of binoculars, a pocket notebook, and a field guide. Pull up a chair and watch out the back window. It won't be long before you see that those "identical-looking" little brown birds are actually many different species. And once that happens, you might well become like elk hunter Ron Aasheim and never look at the outdoors with the same eyes again. 🐾

For more information on bird watching and conservation, contact Montana Audubon at (406) 443-3949 or www.mtaudubon.org.

Field Guides

Several excellent field guides have been published in recent years, making it easier than ever to identify bird species. Some of the best are the *National Geographic's Field Guide to Birds of North America*, *The Sibley Field Guide to Birds of Western North America*, and a newly updated version of the old standby, *Peterson Field Guides: A Field Guide to Western Birds*.

Using a field guide is easy. Once you've watched a bird and noted its various characteristics, thumb through the guide until you begin to find pictures of birds similar to what you noticed. Information on each page is usually organized like this one from the *Sibley Field Guide*:



The Big Picture

Watching birds is fun, but monitoring birds to determine bird survival and productivity can be hard work.

BY BECKY LOMAX

Eight times each summer, well before sunrise, Graham Taylor sets up "mist" collection nets at a study site on the FWP Beartooth Wildlife Management Area and another near Ulm. Each of the dozen 37-foot-long superfine-gauge nets (hence the name "mist") is held aloft by two 8-foot-high aluminum poles. The nets are designed and placed to capture breeding neotropical migrants such as warblers.

Taylor, an ardent bird watcher and the FWP regional wildlife manager at Great Falls, has been setting nets and banding birds at these same sites each summer for the past 14 years.

His work is part of a long-running bird monitoring project being conducted across North America. Called the Monitoring Avian Productivity and Survivorship (MAPS) Program, the project is a cooperative effort involving public agencies, private organizations, and volunteers across North America. It began in 1989, when biologists became concerned about reports of declines in the number of warblers and other neotropical species that spend winters in Central America and summers in the United States and Canada. Of the hundreds of MAPS monitoring stations set up across the continent, 12 are in Montana.

After identifying, aging, weighing, measuring, banding, and then releasing captured birds, Taylor submits his data to the California-based Institute for Bird Populations, which coordinates the MAPS Program. The information helps the institute assess and monitor species population trends and survival rates. That, in turn, helps guide bird and habitat management across the continent.

The banding work is done under close regulation by the federal U.S. Geological Survey Bird Banding Laboratory in Maryland. The USGS is responsible for protecting and managing most migratory bird species.

One of the most common birds Taylor captures is the yellow warbler. "I've banded hundreds since 1992," he says. Because he often captures the same birds year after year, Taylor has found that yellow warblers live on average only two years and rarely reach age six.

In addition to information on survival rates, the monitoring provides clues to bird productivity. The nets are set one day out of every ten, from May 31 to August 10. As the warblers are preparing to leave for tropical climes in late summer, the proportion of adult to young-of-the-year birds indicates the productivity of a species.

Taylor says his involvement in the project reflects FWP's interest in nongame bird management.

"It's extra work," he says, "but I hope I'm inspiring other people to do more for these birds."

Read more about the project at www.birdpop.org.

A yellow warbler, mist-netted.



BECKY LOMAX



DONALD MUMFORDS.COM



USFWS