



Get to know guide Jody Allair

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Jody is an avid birder and naturalist who enjoys sharing his enthusiasm for the natural world. He is the Director of Community Engagement at Birds Canada where he is the co-editor of BirdWatch Canada Magazine, producer of the Warblers Podcast and a coordinator of eBird Canada. Jody has been guiding tours with us since 2008. He has guided [High Arctic & Northwest Territories](#), [Belize & Tikal](#), [Trinidad & Tobago](#), [Southern Ecuador](#), [Central Mexico](#), [Hawaii](#), [New Zealand](#), [Newfoundland](#), [New Brunswick](#), [Canadian Rockies](#), and his specialty—[Alberta Birds & Dinosaurs](#) in his local stomping grounds. We are so happy to have Jody as part of our Eagle-Eye Tours team. We asked Jody some questions about his interest in birds and we wanted to share them with you, so you can learn a little bit more about him and his birding passion.

When did you become interested in birds?

I became interested in birds at a pretty young age. I had an outdoorsy family, so I was always fishing and camping with my parents. I really got into waterfowl because we spent so much time on lakes and then it sort of sprung from there. My sparkbird moment happened early. I was going to my friend's place to play hockey and on the way I saw a small orange and blue raptor sitting on a wire and at the time I had no idea what it was. When we got to my friend's house, his mom just happened to have a copy of the Peterson Field Guide to Birds on the counter, and I remember grabbing it, flipping it open, and I found it - American Kestrel. It was like a switch went off in my head—there's this whole world of really cool things out there that I've never noticed before! It sort of just snowballed from there. When I was growing up there weren't many other teenage birders, so I was really lucky to have lots of great mentors and people that would help me along the way. The list is almost too big to mention, but there were a lot of folks that helped me and encouraged me when I was a teenager and I found the whole community really welcoming when I was young, which made a huge difference for me.

What's your favourite bird family?

It's pretty tricky to nail down a group of birds that I love the most. It's so tough because I can list reasons why Raptors are so fantastic, and how I love Wood-Warblers—especially when I was a kid, I loved warbler migration. But if I had to choose right now...I'd have to admit that I'm a bit obsessed with seabirds! I love the tubenoses—Petrels, Shearwaters, and Albatross. I think that group of birds is so fascinating and so mysterious. There's so much we don't know about them and you really have to put the effort into to see them.

What's the best bird you have ever seen?

Hmm, that is such a loaded question. I think a lot of my birder friends would have a challenge to come up with an answer for that, because sometimes the answer is 'the bird I've seen most recently' or 'I just love all birds'. Birding is just so much fun. I've been pretty lucky and privileged to have gotten to see some incredible birds in my time. Off the top of my head, getting to see my first ever Kiwi (a Little Spotted Kiwi) in New Zealand up close was really an incredible experience or getting to see my first Penguin (Little Blue Penguin) was really memorable. But one of the memories that is super vivid for me was a bird I really wanted to see growing up in central Ontario— Golden Eagle. I remember it like it was yesterday. It was at Thunder Cape Bird Observatory on the north shore of Lake Superior, I was inside making tea and my friends were outside and started yelling my name. I think I took the door off the hinges of the field station running outside, I ran to the scope and there was this beautiful juvenile Golden Eagle with all the nice white patches, it was just incredible!

What are some of the favourite countries you have birded?

I could easily say something nice about every country I've travelled to in terms of birds. I love birding in Hawaii and New Zealand, these are incredible places that make up for a lack of species with some high quality birds and landscapes. The bird migration spectacle in southern Israel is absolutely outstanding and I would love to go back and do some more birding there. But you know, it's hard to beat the tropics! I have definitely enjoyed birding in places like Ecuador, Trinidad and Tobago, Belize and Guatemala. They're all very different and that's why I tell people, birding in Ecuador is a very different experience than birding in Hawaii, in terms of numbers of birds and types of birding, and one is not better than the other. They both provide excellent experiences in very different ways.

Where would you like to go birding next?

If I could go birding anywhere right now, it would be Antarctica. I'd really like to visit the southern oceans and see all those incredible seabirds. This would be followed very closely by Africa. I'm really keen to see some of those amazing African birds and mammals, hopefully both will happen in my lifetime.

How has birding enriched your life?

I really can't imagine not having birds as a central focus of my life. Ever since I was a kid I've been obsessed with birding and natural history. I've been really lucky that I've managed to have a career where I get to work with, conserve, and show people birds! Family is really important to me as well, but birding is still something I try to do everyday. And like family, birds are there for you in tough times and they're always there to inspire you.

What is the craziest thing you have done to see a bird?

I have to say there have been some pretty funny moments of trying to get good looks at birds! I

remember one time when I was living at Long Point, there was a Black-tailed Gull reported about 40 minutes away and we only had another hour of daylight left, and it was crazy windy, with a massive storm system moving through. A whole bunch of us jumped in the car and headed to Port Burwell. It's a really great bird which you don't expect to see on the Great Lakes. Everything that could go wrong went wrong trying to get there, not the least of which was that power lines were being knocked down. We got to one road, and with all the power lines down, the sides of the road were on fire, all the grass was burning and we couldn't drive through. So we had to backtrack around the fire to get to the spot, but because we needed to do a huge detour, it got dark and we never got to see it. I still haven't seen a Black-tailed Gull, but that's okay, I'll catch up with one eventually!

What advice would you give to someone just starting in birding?

My advice would be don't let a lack of knowledge or experience prevent you from going out and enjoying birds. Just get out there and spend some time watching them. I would recommend connecting with a local group like a local naturalist or birding club. They are always very welcoming to new people and even if you don't have any skills, they would love to have you and to help you learn. There are lots of great programs out there, Birds Canada has great resources to help people get into birding. You don't even need binoculars, yes at some point you should get some, but maybe start with a field guide from a library, download the free Merlin Bird ID app and get connected to your community. Don't wait until you feel like you know enough before going out and experiencing birds, just go and experience them and enjoy the journey.

What do you enjoy about guiding birding tours?

I just love birding with people. I certainly appreciate birding on my own and I do a lot of that, but guiding a group of people is really enjoyable to me because I love the community, I love the camaraderie, I love being with a bunch of people with a singular mission of trying to see cool birds in cool places. That, to me, doesn't get old. It's such a fun thing, especially when we're taking groups of people to places they've never been before, whether it's Cambridge Bay in the High Arctic or whether it's here in the badlands of southern Alberta. Showing people a new bird like their first Mountain Bluebird and experiencing their enthusiasm is just the best experience.

What is your birding style?

My birding style is actually a real mix, I quite enjoy birding my local patch, here in southern Alberta. I go out every single day birding, trying to see all the wintering birds, the spring migrants, the residents, the fall migrants and I particularly enjoy seeing the seasons change through birds. To me that's a very satisfying way to bird. I also enjoy doing Birdathons to raise money for conservation, pushing the limits of how many birds I can see in a short period of time while raising money with Birds Canada for a good cause. I think that birding has a role to play in conservation and certainly through guiding with Eagle-Eye Tours there's another great opportunity to do that and give back to local conservation efforts. I like to see unusual birds - who doesn't like to see something you don't get to see often? But I also love showing people their first cardinal or their first bluebird. I try to make as much time as possible to share my love of birds with other people, to me that's what is



really important.