Eagle-Eye Tours



Get to know guide Yousif Attia

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Yousif Attia works for Birds Canada, a national not-for-profit organization, dedicated to the conservation of wild birds. He has also been guiding birding tours with Eagle-Eye Tours since 2016. He has guided our High Arctic & NWT, Canadian Rockies, Birds and Dinosaurs, British Columbia Shorebirds, Saskatchewan Whooping Cranes, Newfoundland, Point Pelee, Belize & Tikal, and Cuba. We asked Yousif a few questions about how he got started in birding and thought it would be fun to share them with you.

Do you remember when you became interested in birds?

I've been a birder for as long as I can remember and interested in birds and nature since I was really young. There is actually a memory that my parents remind me of where I was debating the identification of a duck versus a goose in a field guide when I was like 4 years old, so I've always been interested in the identification part of birding.

Was there anyone in your life who acted as a birding "mentor"?

Growing up in Calgary, Alberta I had several mentors but most notable was the late Gus Yaki. He was an all around naturalist and birder who really encouraged me to get more involved in the birding community, to lead outings and participate in citizen science. I think that really shaped where my career went with birding after that.

In what way is birding part of your career?

Essentially, I tried to experience birds in every way I could. While at university, I took field jobs during the summers, banding birds, doing migration monitoring, and assisting with other studies across North America. I wanted to spend as much time as I could learning about birds, and field work was a great way of doing that. I found my way to Birds Canada, which is a national non-profit organisation dedicated to the conservation of wild birds. I currently coordinate volunteer citizen

science projects, namely the Christmas Bird Count (CBC) and eBird Canada, and I also work on content development and public outreach. I would say birding has really become my life. There isn't a day that goes by when I don't think and talk about birds or look at a bird. Birding has influenced me in a lot of different ways. I think the biggest thing that birding has done is given me a heightened awareness of the world. You're just more tapped into things like the calendar, weather and geography. Birding really gives you a reason to be more aware of seasons of the year and you learn more about different places in the world because of the birds that are there.

How has birding enriched your life?

Birding enriches my life in so many ways. It's become my therapy. If I need a birding fix, it's so easy to get one, all you have to do is walk outside and just listen to some birds anytime of the year, anywhere in the world. There are going to be birds as soon as you step out of your door. It's rejuvenating, it's relaxing, it's super entertaining. Watching birds interact with each other, with other species, and their environment brings me great joy. There's always something going on and even in the most common species you'll learn something new or you'll observe a new behaviour. There's so much enrichment in birding and once you get into it, you will ask yourself what did you ever do with your time before you were a birder?

Can you think of a memorable bird encounter?

One of the most memorable bird encounters I had was during a pelagic birding trip off the coast of Tofino on Vancouver Island. We went out on a boat well offshore and it started a little bit rough but once we got to where the sea-shelf drops, the swells sort of calmed down. All of a sudden we found a huge flock of Black-footed Albatrosses. It was completely glass calm on the water now and the albatrosses were within arms reach, completely unconcerned with our presence. You could hear their little whistles and grunts, and these are sounds that you don't usually hear on the open ocean. Typically the water is quite rough out there, and they are constantly flying around, but this time they were very calm and just chilled out on the water. That experience really opened my eyes to the wonders of pelagic birding and it is something that I want to do a lot more of.

What are you currently interested in or fascinated by?

Currently, and for a long time, I have been really interested in bird migration. It's something that we have relatively poor understanding of and it's an extraordinary phenomenon. The fact that birds, more specifically a songbird like a warbler that’s only a few inches long, can travel from Canada to South America and then back to the same place with no GPS is just completely mind boggling. Every time I think about bird migration I'm impressed by what they can do.

If there is any bird you could see, which one would you pick?

If I could pick any bird to see, and this would include extinct ones, I would definitely want to see a Great Auk. A bird, an alcid, closely related to our Razorbill, but the size of a penguin! And to think that Great Auks were found along the east coast of North America not that long ago. It is just such a shame that we've lost that bird. So if I could see any bird, I think I'd want to see a Great Auk.

Do you keep a life list of your bird sightings? Or do you have a “bird-bucket-list”?

I do keep a life list. The nice thing about eBird is it keeps track of your life list for you, so if you're just a diligent birder and record everything on eBird, you've got your life list right there.

If you could go birding anywhere, where would you go?

If I could go birding anywhere, I think top on my list would be Papua New Guinea. For obvious reasons, I'd love to see some birds-of-paradise. Second would be Madagascar, not only for the birds but also for the Prosimians and other unique creatures that are there. I think those would be my top two places that I would drop everything to visit.

Do you have a favourite country to bird in?

I really enjoy birding at home here in Canada, getting to know the birds that are local. Canada is a huge country so travelling anywhere across the country you're going to see different birds and depending on the time of year you'll see many different species. I also really enjoy the Caribbean islands. I've been to a few of them and they're not high in species diversity necessarily, but they're high in endemism and knowing that you're seeing species that are found nowhere else in the world is a cool experience. Cuba for example has the smallest bird in the world, the Bee Hummingbird, and I'm lucky enough to get to lead a tour there. Just knowing that you're looking at a bird that is actually the smallest bird in the world out of all 10,000+ species, that's something to write home about!

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

If I was to give advice to someone getting into birding, I think I have two pieces of advice to share. One, find somebody who is more experienced than you who is willing to go birding with you. You could read about birding and look through field guides all day but there’s no substitute for practising outside. And doing so with somebody who can share their experience will get you there faster. Secondly, invest in the best pair of optics or binoculars that you can. Most binoculars or scopes will get the job done, but you’ll want to do it more if you're really enjoying the view that you're getting of birds. So I would say buy in the best pair of binoculars that you can afford and you won't regret it.

What do you enjoy about guiding birding tours?

I have a lot of fun leading tours and I find it a very rewarding experience. I enjoy taking people to places where they may not otherwise have gotten to on their own or helping them find birds that are tricky to track down. Anytime you're with somebody who's reacting to something for the first time, it doesn't matter how many times I've seen it, it feels like the first time again for me. For birders and naturalists, there’s no better feeling than that of experiencing something new.

What are you passionate about currently?

My passion is spending time in nature, but even more than that, and especially recently, it’s finding ways to help people connect to nature. I worry that too many of us have lost an appreciation of the natural world. If there's anything I can do to help spark an interest or show someone the value of nature, that gives me a lot of satisfaction. Not to mention the world would be a better place!

If you were a superhero, what would your power be?

If I were a superhero I would be a time traveller, and I’d travel back in time to see a Great Auk. Then, I’d go see dinosaurs.