



How to get started in birdwatching

[Link: How to get started in birdwatching](#)

Birdwatching can be a relaxing activity, but it can also be an exciting way to explore the world around you. It will get you outside in the fresh air and is good for your physical, mental and emotional health. It can be an activity you do on your own or it can be a social activity with other birders. It also doesn't require a lot to get started - just step outside and start paying attention to the sights and sounds around you. **Birding** is something you can do almost anywhere. And there is almost always another bird to identify or song to learn, so you are unlikely to get bored. In fact, many birders enjoy travelling to new locations and adding birds to their life list. But how do you get started with this hobby?

Purchase good birding binoculars

To get started in birdwatching, you'll need a decent pair of binoculars. The best way to find the right pair for you is by asking around and getting recommendations from birding friends, or visit your local bird store for some hands-on testing. While you don't need to break the bank purchasing binoculars, it is worthwhile to get a good pair. We would recommend spending at least a few hundred dollars. They will make birding a lot more enjoyable and easier, and they are likely to last you for many years of enjoyment. Good binoculars will provide superior image quality. We suggest starting with something in the 8x42 range. They will give you 8x the magnification, but also enough light so that you can clearly see the bird even in low light conditions. Avoid really compact ones (e.g. 8 x 24) and really high magnification (e.g. 12x). The law of diminishing returns applies so you'll see a big jump in quality from \$500 to \$1000, but less of an improvement from \$1000 to \$1500. If price is no object, then there are some fantastic binoculars out there geared towards birders.



[Bird guide, Ernesto](#), with binoculars © Cam Gillies

Get a field guide

A field guide is an important tool for birdwatchers and will be your go-to resource for identifying birds in the wild. A good field guide will include detailed descriptions of each species' plumage patterns, habitat preferences and behavior traits. Field guides are often region specific, so make sure you get a field guide that covers where you will be birding. We prefer illustrated guides to guides that use photos because the illustrator can show aspects that may be hard to capture in a photo.

Download a birding app

As an alternative to the standard paper field guides, you can download a bird identification app onto your smartphone. There are several good ones out there that can help you identify birds by sight, call and song. They are really easy to use, so don't be afraid to give it a go. We have summarized some of our [favorite bird identification apps here](#). The ability of Merlin and other apps to identify birds that are calling as you hear them is truly remarkable and a vast improvement over the old days of listening to tapes or CDs to try to identify songs. For now Merlin is strong in North America, and is improving for other regions as the software gets better at identifying more and more species. Also, you might as well start recording your life list. At first, you might not think this is necessary, but soon enough you are likely going to want a record of what you've seen. The eBird app is a great resource for this. eBird is a worldwide database of bird sightings submitted by citizen scientists like you! Sign up, download the app, and start recording a checklist. It will record where you went and for how long and you just record what birds you saw and how many individuals of each species.

What to look for

It is important to know what to look for when birdwatching. Many of the bird identification apps will help guide you through this process. The key things to look at are to notice the size and shape of the bird, next look at the colour pattern. Then take note of its behaviour and habitat. Together these things should help narrow down the bird you are looking at. For starters, determine the

approximate size of the bird. You can often do this in comparison with other birds. For example, is it smaller than a crow, but bigger than a sparrow? You can also take note if it is plump or sleek, long or short legs, what is the shape of the bill? Second, what is the overall main colour of the bird? Does it have any spots or wing bars? Or any other bits of colour on its body, such as an eye-ring? Third, what is the habitat? Some birds are quite particular to their habitat, so you will only find them in open grasslands, while others might be in mature deciduous forest. Finally, what is its behaviour. Is it sulking down low or up high in the tree top? Does it bob its head or tail? Noticing these things often helps narrow down the species. This might sound difficult at first, but with practice you will start noticing these things with ease.



Red-breasted Nuthatch © Paul Prior As Seen on our [Manitoba Owls Birding Tour](#)

Connect with other birders

Once you've decided to take the plunge and get started in birdwatching, the best thing you can do is connect with other people who are already interested in birds. This will help motivate you to get out there and will provide an opportunity to learn from them. There is likely someone in your community that would be happy to mentor you. If there isn't a local birding group in your community, try joining online forums or groups like where people post photos of birds they've seen and ask questions about identification.



Birders in the Columbia Wetlands at Wings Over the Rockies Bird Festival © Pat Morrow | [Birds & Conservation in BC's Columbia Valley](#)

Practice, practice, practice!

The more time you spend looking at birds, the easier it will be to identify them. You will begin to recognize the shapes of their bodies and how they move in the air or on the ground. You'll start noticing subtle differences between similar species that may not be obvious at first glance. It also helps to become a morning person. Like they say, "the early bird gets the worm", well this is true in birding too, as birds are most active during the morning hours, before the day heats up. Most importantly, just get out there and have fun. Birding can be a very rewarding hobby.



A Semipalmated Plover pulls a worm from the beach sand in the late evening sunlight with the ocean in the background. | [New Brunswick & Grand Manan Tour](#)