

## Why take a guided birding tour?

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Travelling and exploring new, unfamiliar ground can be both exciting and challenging. These days, with so much digital information at our fingertips it is more tempting than ever to embark on a self-planned, self-guided vacation. As a nature guide working for Eagle-Eye Tours, I share this joy of travel and exploration, and can certainly appreciate the freedom to roam on one's own. I often venture out solo or with friends on birdwatching trips, but in my working life I also guide professionally. Therefore, I have learned a few things about these different travel styles I'd like to share here. The question: What are the benefits of joining a guided birding or nature tour? The answer, of course, depends upon the individual, but the objective of this post is to explain generally some of the benefits of signing up for a guided trip: For some veteran travellers, it is purely economics: The costs of renting a car and accessing birding sites in some foreign countries just doesn't compute. Instead, pooling with other like-minded enthusiasts makes the most sense from a financial standpoint. It's not much different than riding the bus, except the bus is a comfy van that stops whenever a bird pops up! Thus, being able to relax on a shared commute allows guests to enjoy the scenery to the fullest and take their minds off decision-making, gas prices, tolls and other distractions.



*Birding group in Costa Rica*

Grouping has other advantages. Solo travellers or even couples may choose to join a tour because they enjoy the camaraderie of a larger group. Meeting new friends with shared interests and

passions is an integral part of most group tours. Others like to team up in a group to be more environmentally conscious while travelling. Eagle-Eye Tours goes the extra mile in that regard, [offsetting 100% of a tour's carbon footprint](#) while (in my opinion) maintaining competitive pricing. I am quite impressed with their effort to keep the environmental impact of their tours at a minimum. Many guests appreciate this aspect of the business so it's worth mentioning. Overall, whether economy factors in or not, the practicalities of finding one's own transport, food and accommodation often tip the scales toward choosing a guided trip. Many guests tell me, "It's worth the extra cost just for someone else to deal with the headaches!" I appreciate as the guide, I am the someone else they're referring to, but in reality most everything is managed ahead of time from the main office. When booking a guided tour you have the expertise of a full logistics team working behind the scenes. Incidentally, some of these tour arrangements are made over a year in advance. These days it seems that premier locations and accommodations require well-in-advance reservations, especially those that are critical to being in the right place at the right time for certain species (e.g., puma watching in [Patagonia](#) or quetzal viewing in Costa Rica). Eagle-Eye Tours has this covered in advance, with a good network of long-standing local providers who can inform about on-the-ground logistics. I wish I had some of this information on a recent personal trip, when I detoured for nine hours around a landslide in front of a birding lodge that everyone but myself seemed to know about! Now, to birding and wildlife-viewing specifically. For keeners accustomed to unguided adventures, finding birds and wildlife on your own, in new areas, presents the main challenge. I must admit, this can be enticing but I do anticipate missing a few target birds. One was the Schalow's Turaco, which I'll probably never see unless I happen to return to the specific part of Africa in which it lives—a long way to go for one enigmatic bird I wasn't keyed into at the time!



*Birding tour in Costa Rica © Cam Gillies*

Birding trips sadly don't last forever, and you can only do so much with your time. In my case, extensive free time is a commodity I vaguely remember from my early twenties. We all have our perceived issues... Regardless of this, savvy birders know that locating and observing birds in a timely fashion requires detailed knowledge of species' songs and calls, not to mention habitat, seasonality and range. For this, having a local guide is critical. On all tours, Eagle-Eye Tours finds the best leader to suit the destination, and that often means finding local help. Some examples of



these fine local personalities include Héctor, who coordinates eBird for Mexico, Ernesto, who is arguably the top guide in Costa Rica, and Mahese, whose family has guided in Trinidad for generations. These are not just random people but rather some of the best in the business, and they know where to find the best coffee shops and hidden archaeological ruins, too!



*Watching Guanacos © Steve Ogle*

On a tour consisting of up to eight guests, Eagle-Eye Tours employs a single leader, while for groups of more than eight, a second guide is added. Groups do not exceed twelve guests. In my opinion, this is an important policy that provides for a more intimate experience, while maintaining a balanced guide-to-client ratio. This means there is always a guide nearby to help identify or explain something. That's another perk of being with a group: there are more eyes on the forest or to the skies to spot birds and mammals. Once, while waiting in the van at a park headquarters, someone in the back spotted a puma sleeping behind a bush only ten metres away, while the trusty guide (myself) was up front negotiating the park entry fees! Guides are generally friendly and patient or we don't last long in this business. We know how to negotiate with these park guards and we understand group dynamics to facilitate people having a fun time. We compile the trip lists daily and share eBird records. By necessity, we are clear communicators and we love our jobs. You can get to know us better [here](#) before your tour begins, and since this may not be clear in my bio, I'll take a moment to explain one of the reasons why I choose to guide: aside from the fact that the tour destinations are very exciting, I've also met many wonderful people while on the job. We usually find time for some good laughs in the van, share some once-in-a-lifetime experiences in unique settings, and in many cases become lifelong friends. I hope to see you on the next trip!