

Why birdwatching has become the hot new hobby for seniors

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Diana Gibbs, who is new to birdwatching, during an outing in Toronto on Feb. 28.

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Spring migration, winding down to retirement and the pandemic made a birder out of Diana Gibbs.

In May, 2020, the Toronto resident went with a birdwatching friend to the park on the Leslie Street Spit on Lake Ontario. Ms. Gibbs, now 66, was beginning to retire from her career fundraising for human rights and social justice organizations.

“The woods were just alive with sound,” Ms. Gibbs says. “It was really quite striking ... a memory that stayed with me.”

Ms. Gibbs joined the legions of Canadians who have discovered the joys of birdwatching, a flexible and addictive hobby that’s growing in popularity during the pandemic.

Birds Canada reports that the online bird checklist platform, eBird Canada, saw a 30 per cent jump in people submitting data between 2019 and 2020, says Jody Allair, the organization’s director of community engagement. The number jumped another 14 per cent to 31,961 users in 2021, he says.

Project FeederWatch, a joint program between Birds Canada and Cornell University tracking winter birds at backyard feeders, also showed a 46 per cent jump last year, Mr. Allair says.

For Ms. Gibbs, birdwatching was a reason to get outside and safely socialize throughout the pandemic. The hobby brought her comfort that “our human world is not the whole world.”



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She joined birding and naturalist organizations and has become more interested in what's happening in her own backyard, where she has recorded 25 different bird species.

Birders can do their hobby in backyards, local parks, conservation areas – and many join birding tours to exotic locations around the world.

In Canada, the spring migration, which begins in February and March with waterfowl species and continues through May, when colourful songbirds such as warblers arrive, is a highlight of the birdwatching season.

Lynne Freeman, president of the Ontario Field Ornithologists (OFO), says there are plenty of locations to spot birds at different times through the season. Waterfowl coming north can be seen anywhere in the Great Lakes area in early spring, Ms. Freeman says.

In late March, tundra swans migrate through the London-to-Chatham, Ont. area. Beamer Conservation Area on the Niagara Escarpment is a good spot for hawks in April and early May. And the songbirds peak around Mother's Day in southern Ontario.

Ms. Freeman says the OFO started about 20 years ago with more science-focused participants but has since broadened its outreach and includes members at all levels of birding.

Some birders like the competitive aspect of adding to a life list of bird species spotted, and some, including Ms. Freeman, like to watch bird behaviour.

Beginner birders don't need to spend a lot to start the hobby. Experts recommend a good set of binoculars and a good field guide. There are apps such as Merlin which make identifying birds, both by appearance and song, much easier. Many birders combine their hobby with photography.

Surrey, B.C., resident John Gordon came to birding initially through the camera lens. The 68-year-old former newspaper photographer says he had photographed a rufous hummingbird at the Reifel Bird Sanctuary in Delta B.C. about a year before he retired in 2011.

“I got home, put it on the computer and I was absolutely stunned by the colours and details of this hummingbird I’d caught in midair,” he says. “There was a moment I thought, ‘This is something I would like to pursue.’”

Mr. Gordon says he’s a social guy and has met hundreds of people and made some good friends through birdwatching. He belongs to clubs including the British Columbia Field Ornithologists, conservation groups and leads nature walks.

While he began birding with a camera, he now enjoys going into the forest to listen to the birds.

“It’s rather like classical music ... it’s an amazing, uplifting, almost spiritual experience for me.”

There’s also a conservation element to the hobby that appeals to many retirees, Mr. Allair says.

Birds Canada has several citizen scientist activities, including Christmas bird counts and eBird, that provide data for researchers to track bird population trends. Retirees can also combine their passion for birding with travel.

Mr. Allaire is also a tour guide for Eagle-Eye Tours, which offers birdwatching excursions around the world. He led tours this year in his home province of Alberta and up to Cambridge Bay in Nunavut. Arctic tours are incredibly popular this year, he says.

For long-time birder and traveller Richard Skevington, 78, of Hickson, Ont., being retired is a big advantage to pursue both hobbies. He and his wife Sharron like to plan their trips during the off-season and mid-week to avoid big crowds.

Going to Point Pelee National Park in southwestern Ontario, one of the most popular places for birdwatching in Canada, is easier mid-week than on the crowded weekends, he adds. During spring migration, Mr. Skevington says he can see 30 species in a day at Point Pelee.

The hobby has also been a family activity for the Skevingtons and their entomologist son Jeffrey.

“A few years ago, my son and my grandson and a friend and I went on what we call the chicken run. It was a trip out to Colorado in April to see Greater Prairie Chicken, Lesser Prairie Chicken, Sharp Tailed Grouse ...” says Mr. Skevington. “We saw all the birds we wanted to see. We drove out and back and it was a great time.”

Top spots across Canada to see the annual spring migration



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Jody Allair, director of community engagement for Birds Canada, has watched birds across Canada. Here are his recommendations for some outstanding places across the country to see the annual spring migration of birds:

- The Fraser River Delta, B.C. – “It is truly a world class place [for waterfowl and songbirds] and one that is under threat of development,” Mr. Allair says.

- Frank Lake, Alta. – This Prairie pothole wetland area east of High River is great for amateur and professional photographers for the more conspicuous migratory birds.
- Point Pelee, Long Point, Rondeau and Pelee Island on Lake Erie in Ontario – “These places on the north shore of Lake Erie are all incredible,” Mr. Allair adds, with Point Pelee attracting the largest number of enthusiastic birders.
- Tadoussac, Que. – There is an incredible bird migration phenomenon being recorded at this bird observatory site on the north shore of the St. Lawrence River east of Quebec City, he says.
- Grand Manan Island, N.B. – It’s a great place to enjoy migration in the spring and fall and there are whales, too, Mr. Allair says.