



EPISODE 1

Start Birding with these Five Steps

SEE THE SHOW NOTES AT:

www.birdingtools.com/1-start-birding-with-these-five-steps

INTRO: Hey there, I'm Christa, your host for the Birding Tools podcast.

Each week, I'll delve into the wonderful world of birds for birding beginners and those wanting to get the low-down on what goes into birdwatching and identifying birds.

Let's get started.

CHRISTA ROLLS: This week on the Birding Tools Podcast I'll be getting into the top five things you need to get started with birdwatching.

Now, for those who have already started birdwatching or have been for a while, I'm betting the two most important things you bring with you every time you go out birding are your binoculars and a field guide.

As far as physical items go, I totally agree with you.

I'm going to chat about these two points for a bit for those that who haven't taken the step to get binoculars and a field guide can further understand their importance.

But, stick with me, because I'll be getting into three more things I think are important in your birding endeavors, including printing out a bird list for your

area, recognizing the 5 keys to bird ID, and connecting with your local birding community.

So, the first thing you need to get going with birding are a pair of binoculars that works for YOU.

Having a pair of binoculars is essential for seeing birds, and I personally bring them out when I am just out and about, and certainly I bring them out when I'm planning to go birding.

There's nothing more frustrating than spotting a bird in the distance that you don't recognize or one that's up close and flitting around in the bushes, and you just can't quite see them and you don't have your binoculars to take a look at them.

Ultimately, binoculars help you to see minute details on birds, even when they're barely 20 feet away, or when they're super far away, and they allow you to see them really well to help with ID.

Let's step back just a second because I said, "you want binoculars that work for you." What exactly does this mean?

It means that everybody has eyes that are spaced apart differently or differing abilities to carry binoculars of a certain weight around for hours on end.

Selecting a pair of binoculars that fits the spacing of your eyes well, so you get a perfect, clear circle when you look through the lenses, or that's light enough to be comfortable carrying around while out on a birding excursion, can make your experience trying to find birds using your binoculars much more enjoyable.

Keep in mind there are some points you'll want to consider as you're picking out a pair of binoculars. For those who already have binoculars, these are important for you as well! Our show notes will link to a guide detailing our top ten things to look for when purchasing your binoculars, but for the sake of time I won't go through all of them on here.

First, make sure you understand the magnification numbers associated with your binoculars. I have a pair of Nikon Monarch 8x42 binoculars, and that 8x42 number is what I'm referring to here. That first number, 8, is the magnification of the lenses, meaning a bird will appear 8 times larger through my binoculars than they will with the naked eye. Try to get binoculars that are around 7-power magnification or larger, and know that anything 10-power and above is going to add more shake as you look through the binoculars.

This makes sense, since the higher the magnification, the more you're going to notice even the slightest hand movement. This can get frustrating when you're focusing on a little flitty bird and need to nail down key colors or field markings to get a good identification on that bird.

Again, all the other things I think are important for selecting a pair of binoculars will be downloadable in the show notes on our website, birdingtools.com.

The next most important thing you'll need to start birdwatching is a field guide.

Every region in the world has a field guide, sometimes it's by country or by larger regions depending on where you're looking, but they all list out the birds found in that area, along with the key things you need to look for to ID each bird there.

Now, there are electronic field guides, through apps and computer software tools, and there are physical field guide books. While having a birding app is super helpful for on-the-fly ID, especially the Merlin Bird ID app, which I totally recommend everyone listening to download (it's completely FREE and covers different regions in the world), I still think having a physical field guide is really important. Here's why.

First, disconnecting from your phone every once in a while, especially while outside and birding, is kind of a relief. This is one of the reasons why I love birding so much. If you're constantly looking to your phone to ID a bird, the likelihood of getting distracted with social media or emails really increases. It's really nice to put your phone away and just focus on your book in hand.

Next, Physically having a book in your hand helps a lot with seeing where the bird you're trying to ID lies in the taxonomic order of things, since your guidebook is ordered taxonomically. This is sort of like subliminal learning to reinforce that birds in the sparrow family look like other sparrows and are similar taxonomically, to other families of birds found nearby in that field guide.

Finally, and reinforcing the point I just mentioned, it's really rewarding to figure out what birds are in your area and as you progress in your birding skills, to look through the guide and work through the process of determining a positive ID.

Ok, now I'm going to get into the three other things I think are important to get started in birding.

They aren't exactly physical products, and while I think having a field notebook and a good birding hat, for example, are useful for being outside and birdwatching, that's not the direction I'm going here.

I think every birder should keep a checklist of birds found in their area, or wherever they want to learn birds. For those new to birding, this can also be a great way to add to your life list, which is a list of the birds you've seen in your lifetime.

Starting with the birds in your area, whether it's your backyard or local park or wildlife refuge, and keeping a list of those birds to check off helps to reduce the overwhelm about where to start when you're learning birds. Your area likely has hundreds of birds that pass through every year, and that's a lot to take in for anyone, including new birders.

Depending on where you are located, it should be fairly easy to find a local list with the birds in your area. Checking out the local bird organizations, chapters or societies, such as the local chapter of your Audubon Society or Ornithological Society, is a great place to start.

One of my favorite places to go find bird lists is eBird's hotspot map. All you have to do is zoom in to your particular locality and find a specific location that

has a pinpoint where people have already entered their bird observations. And they have printable checklists that you can go in and print out for yourself.

Ultimately, having a bird list is a great place to start with what birds to identify and look for.

Now, after you've got the essentials to start birding, you'll need to understand the basics to actually identify birds. It's totally cool if you're not interested in IDing birds, but if you want to know what you're looking at when you go birding, listen up.

There are five keys to bird identification, and you'll use these five keys differently depending on your experience level and the circumstances under which you spot a bird. These five keys to bird ID are size and shape, color and pattern, behavioral characteristics, habitat and distribution, and sounds that the bird makes.

If you take a look in your field guide and flip to any bird in there, you'll see each of these five keys listed out. Figuring out how to use these five keys to your advantage when you're identifying birds makes a world of difference when you're trying to get a positive identification.

For example, for size and shape, it's important to recognize that different groups and families of birds are sized and shaped differently. Sparrows are smaller than robins, which are smaller than crows, which are smaller than herons, etc. These different families of birds have overall sizes that we are aware of and know, but they also have distinct shapes about them. You wouldn't look at a heron, for example, and think it's a sparrow. They're sized and shaped totally differently.

We've actually got another guide we've linked to in our show notes to help out those interested in hearing more about the five keys to identify birds.

And finally, the last of the five things I think birders need to get going with their birding endeavors and skills is to connect with their birding community. I totally understand right now it's hard to connect with people in person, however, there

are some wonderful social media groups and weekly newsletters put out by organizations like Bird Watcher's Digest and the Cornell Lab of Ornithology and the Audubon Society that really help us feel like we're connecting with other birders. Even this season a lot of birding festivals are starting to move to virtual festivals. Just take a look at your local ornithological society and I almost guarantee your state, province, or region, if they typically host a birding festival, will have some sort of virtual festival this season.

Once we're better able to be with each other in person again, local bird chapters and organizations often host weekly or monthly bird walks to connect with others in the community.

And, we've also got our Birding Tools facebook page, where we'll post content to engage people in discussions about birds. Soon, we'll be doing Question and Answer segments on our page as well as opportunities to have your bird photography or artwork shared on the page. These are other great ways to connect with people who are just interested in birds and want to talk about birds, too.

It's SO wonderful to feel like you've got a sense of community, and there are few things more fun than sharing in a common hobby and having so much fun together with it. Let's work together to lift each other up and encourage each other to do the things that bring them joy, including birdwatching.

And there you have it, the five things I think every birder needs to get started with birdwatching and identifying birds.

Thanks so much for tuning in to the Birding Tools Podcast and I hope this material was helpful to you.

To access information about the downloadable guides I mentioned in the show, and the show notes, visit our website at birdingtools.com.

Next week, I'll be diving even more into the ten things you should keep in mind when selecting a pair of binoculars. There might be a couple of things I mention that you wouldn't have thought of before.



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See you next time.