



EPISODE 12

Why Winter Birding is a Great Time to go Birding or Get Started

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www.birdingtools.com/12-winter-birding

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: First, I wanted to let you know that I have a free guide to learning all about bird identification. After going through this workbook, you'll know about the five keys to bird identification: size and shape, color and pattern, behavior, habitat and distribution, and sound. When you understand the main components of identifying a bird, you'll begin to feel more confident with your birding and identification skills. This process will not just help you with identifying birds by sight and sound easier, but it will also help deepen your connection with nature. To get this free guide, just visit the podcast show notes at birdingtools.com.

This week on the Birding Tools podcast, I'm going to talk about why I love winter birding, how wintertime is a great time to hone your ID skills, and how to seek out new birds during this time of year.

I want to note, too, or add a caveat that when I'm talking about winter birding I'm not necessarily talking about birding in the tropics or equatorial regions, specifically because birding in the tropics is so different than birding in the higher latitudes in those hemisphere's wintertime. There are a lot of birds that head to the tropics for winter, as well as endemics that hang out year-round. So for our purposes of discussion today I'm referring more to the winter in the higher latitudes. Of course, there is still a winter season in the tropics, but it doesn't look the same as the colder latitudes.

First, let's go over the reasons why winter is a great time of year to go birding.

Well, for one, there are fewer crowds. The exception is birding festival locations, and of course festivals are largely virtual this year. But otherwise other places that you can go in wintertime for being in nature and birding aren't as busy as other times of year, and most of the time people don't want to brave the elements to go out birding or being out in general. If you're OK getting dressed up in your warm clothes and planning ahead of time to have the right gear with you to be comfortable when you're out birding, then the wintertime is a great time to go out.

Just as with any time of year, there are birds to see and enjoy, so it's totally not true that the birding season kind of stops after autumn migration.

So, there's the lack of crowds but there are also other birds you'll see in winter than you would during other times of year. Once birds have landed somewhere for winter, they're in that area after their migration and at other times of year you might not see some of those birds. Even a glance at one of the range maps for a particular species will show their summer, migration, and winter range. Those winter range spots mean there are only a few months out of the year that you could see that bird in those areas, and that's pretty neat. This is that seasonality aspect of bird identification and where you can find and see birds.

I was just up at my local NWR and right now there's a TON of snow geese and other waterfowl I got to see that I wouldn't see at other times of year.

If you're interested in increasing your life list and challenging yourself to see birds you may not have seen before or even whole bird families you haven't gotten to practice with or see as much at other times of year, this is the time to get started.

In the winter, there is also the opportunity to see large groups of birds. Again, I talked about the snow geese, and with many waterbirds they're more colonial so even during the breeding season you'd see them in loosely formed groups anyway, but for other bird species that would tend to be more territorial in nature during the breeding season, you can see them in droves and mixed flocks. And this is indicative of a lot of other species in wintertime, they can let their guard down and don't have to defend their territory, nest, and mate from other birds during breeding season, they can transfer that energy on foraging and roosting locations. In larger mixed flocks, they're better able to find food by communicating where food is but also where predators are.

Of course, hawks and eagles and other predatory bird species don't stop trying to eat in the wintertime. So for those birds that can be targeted, they can band together and avoid predation.

This makes for a great chance when you see a mixed flock to identify the different birds within that flock and test your identification skills. So, when I was just out birding the other day, I saw a whole bunch of blackbirds in one tree and at first glance they all looked like they were red-winged blackbirds. But after looking through the branches and scanning the different birds, I spotted a handful of yellow-headed blackbirds, which are actually quite uncommon where I'm located. That makes it fun and interesting!

It would be remiss of me not to mention some of the challenges that you'll face trying to bird in the wintertime.

One big difficulty of birding in wintertime is that things are a lot quieter overall, and while birds are still making some chips and calls, they're not usually singing or being especially boisterous. Granted, there are some birds that sing plenty in the winter, I mean I have a White-crowned Sparrow that's been hanging out by

my feeder singing nearly every day but these sparrows are also particularly talkative. Keep in mind that singing is an adaptation that male birds use (mostly) to indicate territoriality to find mates and defend their territory.

They're not trying to find mates and defend their territory in the winter, so they really aren't singing as much. It's definitely harder to ID birds if you're trying to ID them by sound and it's hard to find them if you're using their sounds as a way of finding out where they're located.

Usually it would be easier to find birds by first hearing the sound and seeking out the bird from there. They tend to be in the underbrush, in trees, in bushes, flying overhead, so they aren't necessarily always right out in the open for you to just easily spot and see, and rather you hear their sounds to indicate where they're located, and even if you don't know the sound, you can head toward it and get your binoculars on it from there. In fact, most of the time you won't see them first. Sometimes they're chipping and making calls but usually they aren't making as much noise as other times of year.

Other than birds that are in mixed flocks or waterbirds, there are some places where birds are more dispersed and are a lot quieter, unless maybe by a feeder, but the forest and prairies, for example, are super quiet in wintertime, and it doesn't mean they aren't there, but likely they are hunkering down and focusing on foraging, and they're also likely more dispersed and generally not as common. But that also means it's pretty fun when you do get to spot and see them.

Also, when you're out birding in winter, they won't just be more scarce or quiet, but also their plumage changes. As far as the keys to bird ID goes, when you recognize size and shape and incorporate that into your bird identification routine, that's going to be one of the critical things to keep in mind and learn in winter because size and shape doesn't change as the seasons change. But their colors do change at various times of year, from molting or when a bird is a juvenile or first year birds, and for winter plumage that birds develop outside the breeding season.

If you're used to seeing the distinct markings on different birds, winter can make that really challenging. With birds like shorebirds especially, where it's already kind of a struggle to ID them in breeding season, incorporating winter plumage into that makes it especially a struggle. So when you're birding and identifying birds in the wintertime, keep that in mind, too, that color can be a little more challenging and somewhat deceiving.

So when you are thinking about birding in winter these are just some of the things to keep in mind.

Now, to find places to bird in the wintertime, you need to think about habitats that have resources for birds.

For finding birds in winter, look to your local wildlife refuge and even your backyard! Bird feeders in winter are a great time to get to know birds in your area because birds are looking for food anyway. It's sort of a trick question because how do you find the best place to go birding in the winter. It kind of depends what you want out of your birding experience. Do you want to see flocks of birds all in one place? Do you want to be more in solitude and find some singularly interesting birds? As birds are overwintering somewhere, backyards are great places because you're providing food when things might be more scarce and providing even water for those that might need it. Here in California it hasn't really rained in weeks and it's December, so things are still dry even though the wetlands have been flooded again.

One of the best places to see birds in winter is to go to places that have wetlands or marshes because those are going to be the places that have ample amounts of food and shelter resources for overwintering birds. These are also the habitats where you'll see tons of waterbirds and shorebirds.

Shorelines are also great places to see birds in wintertime, and coming up soon I'll be releasing an episode about watching, identifying, and counting shorebirds in the wintertime so stay tuned for that. But shorebirds flock together in droves to shores in winter and make for a totally different viewing and counting experience than during the breeding season.

And here's a tip: if you go onto the ebird hotspot map you can see what areas are around you to get a sense of the kinds of birds that people are seeing. Even reach out to your local birding group or Audubon society about the best places to go birding.

And I've talked about this in our episode about connecting with other birders, but think about looking up Birding Pal. Even if you've lived in an area for a long time, and especially if you're just getting started with birding, and you aren't sure of the best places to go birding or want to find other new places or hidden treasures, this is a great options. A membership to Birding Pal is only \$10 a year, and by the way I don't get anything for talking about them. And you can go out with someone who knows the best places to go birding. You'll be able to see in the Pal's bio what their qualifications are and what their speciality is. Not every "pal" is going to have the skills you may be looking for, but there are a lot on there, so there's definitely someone on there that would be a good resource.

Of course, there's also the CBC and GBBC, and other counts you can do in the wintertime to get involved in your local birding community AND get engaged and involved with birding in winter.

There are really special aspects of birding in wintertime that you just don't get at other times of the year that makes it so fun.

I'll post up images from different locations where I've gone birding in the wintertime in the show notes at birdingtools.com so you can get a sense of the incredible birds and spectacles you can see in the winter.

Bottom line it's totally not the case that you can't bird in wintertime. You can still connect with and get involved with birding groups in winter. And, if anything, it's actually the best time to hone your birding skills and get more versed at understanding the birds around you and how to ID birds and your birding technique because it's less overwhelming. When you're birding in springtime and there are a million birds singing outside, it can be a lot to start learning birds around that time. It doesn't mean it isn't fun, but if it's wintertime and you're wondering if you should wait to start birding, I say start now. If you can

start to hone in on those skills earlier when it's less bird crazy, you'll be setting yourself up for success before the spring comes. That's another reason winter birding is great because you can get a head start at a more relaxed pace than at other times of year.

And remember that even though birds are going to be quiet in wintertime, look for movement because unless you're in a place where the leaves don't drop or in an evergreen forest, at other times of year, you'd be listening for bird sounds and bird songs because those are what you'd be cluing into usually. But guess what, if you're in an area where the leaves drop off trees and bushes, use your senses looking and listening for movement to find where they are.

It will be a lot easier to look for movement when all the leaves have dropped. So this is something to consider that you'll be looking at something different than you would at other times of the year. So in winter, you're honing in on skills that you wouldn't necessarily use as much at other times of the year, and you're relying on them even more. This really allows you to enhance your skills in a different way which is really valuable.

For example, the Sac NWR during other times of year when the marshes aren't flooded, there are different birds found there and there might not be as many birds. Whereas in wintertime when the marshes are flooded, there are more ample resources, food and shelter, and that's where the birds are going to be flocking to. You've got tons of waterfowl and shorebirds flocking together, tons of blackbird mixed flocks, tons of peridae family mixed flocks and more. And think about your birding goals, and think about where you're going to bird and whether you want to see a TON of birds at one time, which is a really special and cool experience. If you go somewhere where there are a bunch of snow geese, cranes, or other waterfowl, they tend to forage and roost in two separate locations, and they'll do something called a flyoff. This is where all the birds will get together in one place during the day to forage and right at sunset they'll all take off right at once which is such a spectacle. The same thing also happens at sunrise from their roosting location when the birds all takeoff to go to various foraging locations. Really this only happens in the wintertime.

Oh and for winter birding, too, birds like starlings will do something called murmuration where they all flock together in these incredible displays that look like art – that only happens in wintertime. Truly there are some wonderful things you can see and experience birding in winter that you just can't at other times of the year.

So to recap:

- You'll get fewer crowds in winter and you'll see birds and other birding spectacles that you wouldn't at other times of year
- While birding in winter can be a challenge because birds are more quiet, more dispersed, and more cryptic in their colors, it's also totally worth getting outside and exploring at a different time of year.
- Winter is the best time to really hone your birding and ID skills to prepare for the springtime.
- And think of birding in your backyard at your feeders, heading to marshes, shorelines, or other areas with good resources for wintering birds.

So there you have it!

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 content I've mentioned in the show, and the show notes, visit our website at birdingtools.com.

Next week, I'll be joined by Gary Slater, avian ecologist and Founder of Ecostudies Institute. We'll take diving even further into winter birding by talking about the Puget Sound Shorebird Count and other winter birding events!

If you enjoyed this episode and want to get updates on the latest Birding Tools has to offer, subscribe to the podcast wherever you're listening now.

See you next time.