



EPISODE 17

How to Find Birds in the Field: Tips & Tricks

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www.birdingtools.com/17-finding-birds

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 new, free audio mini-series course detailing the basics of getting started with birding. Over five days with audio straight to your inbox, you'll learn how to select and use a pair of binoculars, get acquainted with the setup of your bird field guide, download your local area's bird checklist, learn the five keys to bird identification, and get insights on how to connect with the birding community. No matter if you're just starting out or you want to freshen up on any of these topics, this series is for you. To get this free audio course, just visit the podcast show notes at birdingtools.com or visit the birdingtools.com homepage.

Also, over the next couple of months, the podcast will be released every other week instead of every week as I prepare for exciting things to share with and for you! I'll be sharing more information about my free workshops on using bird

silhouettes to identify birds on Friday, February 12, so if you'd like to stay updated on how to get in on that workshop, you can follow me on Instagram or Facebook at the handle @birdingtools, or send me a message directly at hello@birdingtools.com. And, I'm creating a course about how to identify birds by sight and sound, the details of which I'll be releasing on Saturday, February 29th! Ok, let's jump into the episode.

This week on the Birding Tools podcast I'm diving into how to find birds while you're out in the field, whether that's by sight or sound. Note, too, that I said "finding" birds, not identifying them. When you're just starting out with birding, this is really useful to know, and even if you're a more seasoned birder, it's beneficial to step back and look at where, when, and why birds are found where they are.

We so often say that birding is as simple as stepping out of the front door and just getting out there, which is true! Birds are everywhere, and it doesn't matter where you are or where you live, there are birds around to enjoy. They might not always make a ton of noise, or there just aren't a huge number or variety of them in some places, but they're still there somewhere.

But this also carries the implication that knowing where and how to find birds is obvious, and something I learned from Birdability coordinator Freya McGregor is to eliminate the word "obvious," as that implies something is experienced or understood by everyone in the same way.

I recall when I first started birding that I didn't actually know where to look or where to start searching. It wasn't as easy as just stepping outside and automatically knowing where all the birds were. I did know that I had birds consistently coming to my backyard bird feeder, and I knew I could reliably watch the feeder and see birds like Northern Cardinals, Blue Jays, Carolina Chickadees, and American Goldfinches show up without fail. Once I left my backyard, though, I felt overwhelmed by all the possible places birds could be. Where should I start? How do I know where or when to search?

As far as finding more birdy spots, I always like to refer to eBird's hotspot map to see where others have been successful in finding either good numbers of birds or certain species of birds. For birders with accessibility considerations, to additionally include those with strollers, I recommend visiting the Birdability Map for some wonderful, accessible birding sites, which you can find at their website at birdability.org and clicking the link to the Birdability Map at the top of the page. I'll be linking to these sites in the podcast show notes at birdingtools.com, too, for your convenience.

Let's dive into some really critical considerations to help answer these questions.

And first, here, I ask you to become a naturalist, or a student of natural history. By definition, this is the study of observing animals and not just watching or listening for their behaviors, but understanding their behaviors and why they do what they do.

Evaluate potential perches, look up into the sky for birds soaring or flying overhead, note whether a spot looks to be ideal for food or shelter for certain birds, and whether the conditions outside and around you are ideal for certain birds to actually be active and out and about. So let's explore this some more.

The first consideration is the time of day. Generally, birds are most active in the morning and evening hours, and are less active in the midday, particularly when the weather is hot. There's never a bad time to go birding, necessarily, but know that if you head out in search of birds around noon that they may just not be moving around or singing as much, thus a little more challenging to find.

There are a couple of reasons, and theories, about why birds are most active in the morning and evening, one being that after resting through the night, birds are eager to fill up on food once the sun comes out, particularly since daylight also means certain insects come out and become more active. There are other theories, too, about the weather conditions being ideal at these times of day for sound – and therefore territorial bird song – to travel the furthest.

Plus, particularly in wintertime and for birds that roost together year-round, morning and evening times are when birds move from their roost location, or where they sleep, to their foraging location, or where they spend most of the day eating, so you can really see some wonderful spectacles if you're up to getting out really early in the morning or waiting until sunset.

We also can't forget about our nocturnal bird friends, including owls, which are really active at dawn and dusk, and into the night hours. Keeping this in mind, sometimes time of day may be dependent on which bird species you're hoping to see.

Another consideration to take into account when looking for birds is the weather. Birds are least active when the weather turns foul, especially if rain turns into more than a drizzle or if the wind is really blowing around tree branches, shrubs, or other habitat structures.

There are a couple of reasons for this. First, the amount of energy that is expended trying to move around in or sing over strong winds, for example, would be pretty exhaustive.

As always in nature, there are exceptions to this, particularly if the weather is just windy. Birds of prey, including hawks, vultures, kites, and eagles, like to take advantage of updrafts of wind called thermals to ride the air without hardly ever having to flap their wings. Not only can they use the air to their advantage by staying in flight while saving energy, but they also get the height they need to look down below for food.

I'll tell you, too, that during migration sometimes few things can stop birds when they're on their great journey. One autumn a few years ago I was in Falsterbo, Sweden, which is an incredible spot to see hundreds of thousands of birds migrate from the north over the Baltic Sea. But its location along the peninsula right on the coast makes it a super windy spot. So, I recall seeing a flock of maybe 20 Bearded Reedlings all fly up in a group out of the marsh reeds only to get blown back ten feet and dive back into the safety of the reeds. They did

this maybe a dozen times before they heave-hoed together and launched into the air heading south over the water.

When it's rainy out, too, it takes a lot of energy to work against the added water in the air, so energetically, it makes sense for them to (usually) perch or land somewhere and wait it out. Rainy weather also means that insect food sources hunker down, too.

This weather component is just another thing to keep in mind as you venture out to look or listen for birds, and will help you anticipate how easily you might hear or see them.

I'll add here, too, that during bird surveys, these are the things we log to indicate a level of bird activity, particular cloud cover and wind levels. If the wind blows at a 5 or higher on the Beaufort Scale, which is classified as a fresh breeze, where small trees in leaf sway and waters begin to have small waves on them, then the conditions are considered unideal for actually conducting the survey. The same principle, then, applies for actually seeing or hearing birds outside of a survey, too.

Ok, now, as far as where to find birds, there are two things to consider.

One, where is the food?

And two, where is their shelter, or other habitat?

To answer both of these questions, it depends largely on the species, as different species eat different things and use different kinds of habitats.

And again, we're talking about optimizing our chances of seeing birds, so while you can see birds really anywhere, this should help narrow that generalization down a bit.

If you're looking for shorebirds, you'll find them foraging along shorelines on a coastal area, a marsh, a lake, or any other wet habitat or water body. In these same kinds of habitats, you'll find myriad other species using the marsh

grasses or reeds, and water-loving trees to their advantage, such as Red-winged Blackbirds and Marsh Wrens.

In a more urban landscape, city parks or areas with more bushes and trees are great places to look for birds, as these areas provide great shelter for those birds.

A little while back, I asked the question on my social media pages some of the most seemingly strange places birders have seen some good birds, and a lot of people said parking lots! It might not seem like the first place you'd think of to see birds, but a handful of birds have adapted to living around places where food is pretty much always available, such as near trash cans.

Even seeking out sunny patches on a cloudy or partly-cloudy day will often yield some birds that are also looking for insects congregating in those warm, dry patches of sunlight.

Going where the food is is something I learned about when I was birding in Thailand. Our guide told us that the majority of birds and other wildlife can be found in the massive fruiting fig trees, where they all gather for something like a buffet to get the tasty fruits off the tree. Within an hour timeframe, we saw three species of hornbill alone eating together there as well as a dozen other kinds of birds. Just in that one tree! Even in dense rainforest, we knew where the birds would be, and other wildlife, because that's where they knew to come for food.

So, now that we've explored some of the facets that affect your chances of seeing and hearing birds as well as how you can figure out where birds are, let's move into the two ways we can actually find where birds are: by sight and by sound.

When you're looking for birds, look for movement!

It's possible on a windy day that rustling leaves or grass or branches can make you look twice and have you thinking you're seeing a bird flitting about. But, the

wonderful thing about tuning into this is that you're tuning into what's moving around you.

You're also watching for other kinds of movement, if it's not a windy day, did a branch move? Maybe something put enough weight on the branch or other substrate for it to move. Did something fall out of a tree, like a nut? These could be caused by mammals, like squirrels or chipmunks, so that's something to keep in mind, but depending on the bird, they might also be interested in getting the nuts or seeds out of trees. But birds can also drop things they're trying to eat.

Do you see marks where there is a lot of bird feces on a branch, rock, the side of a building, or on the ground? This is also known as whitewash, which is caused when a bird or group of birds are in one place for an extended period of time, or keep coming back to the same place multiple times.

The idea here is that you're looking beyond the bird, and evaluating the surround environment, or paying attention to the things we see or hear in the larger environment to then key in on where birds or other wildlife might be. A moving branch can sometimes be easier to spot or notice than a bird, so by pairing the two together, and understanding that a bird might be interacting with its environment and thereby creating movement around it, you're going to be looking smarter instead of harder.

I also recommend once you find certain birds to look around that birds. Often, particularly outside of the breeding season, birds move in flocks together, and where you find one bird or a few birds, it's possible that others are also going to be nearby, whether that's for sharing information about where food is or where predators are. One of these pairings I love seeing every time is almost every time I spot a Western Bluebird, or a flock of bluebirds, there's almost always a Yellow-rumped Warbler with them. Both species eat insects in similar habitats, so it makes sense that they'd be found nearby. They might not be right next to each other all the time, but in the vicinity is a pretty good bet.

You can also look for birds that tend to cause a bit of a ruckus, like hawks or other raptors. If you find one of them, it possible you'll also be able to look for other smaller birds responding to their presence as a threat and chasing them or dive bombing them to get the perceived threat or predator out of their immediate area. They'll also make alarm calls and chipping calls together that can key you in to where they are.

So, that brings me to finding birds by following sounds.

Birds make all sorts of sounds, including songs, calls, and aural noises. You don't have to identify these sounds just yet, or know which species the sounds are coming from, but picking out bird-like sounds can be a good starting place. Playing around with the audio recordings on resources such as the Macaulay Library or Xeno Canto can be a lot of fun, or pull up your bird ID phone app of choice and take a listen to the various noises that birds in your area make.

Birds also make other noises aside from calls and songs that you can listen out for, and some of these are specific to certain species or bird families. For example, we can hear the drumming of a woodpecker on wood, or the sound of wing beats on bigger birds.

Going back to cluing into the surrounding environment, too, listen for leaves or grass rustling, splashing water, or things being dropped from trees, for example. Determine where those noises in the environment are coming from and it might just lead you to a bird.

By the way if you're interested in learning more about tips for birding by ear using mnemonics tricks, listen to episode 9 of the Birding Tools podcast, which I'll link to in the podcast show notes for you to easily reference at birdingtools.com.

It depends on the kind of environment you're attuned to where you live, but I have a challenge for you. Go outside and open your ears to any and every noise. Listen and identify every sound that you hear, and I mean beyond just birds or other wildlife. This will get you thinking about the noises around you and where they're coming from. The point of this isn't to identify individual

birds, again, but it's to differentiate the sounds in your environment from what could be birds, and to get your mind thinking about how to locate birds based on where their sounds are coming from.

So, the next time you're outside or on a walk or even birding, stop and stand in one place for a few minutes. In that time, point (either in your mind or physically) to every noise you hear and identify that noise. Was it a car driving by? Was it a train in the distance? Did you hear the leaves rustling or grass rustling around you? Are two tree limbs rubbing together? Are frogs singing somewhere? Maybe there is a singing or chipping bird nearby that you recognize as being bird-like.

Once you've done this with surrounding environment sounds, try the same technique again but focus more on bird-like sounds to differentiate them from those other sounds. And think about where those sounds might be coming from.

Try this technique out – even if you're a seasoned birder but you're working on IDing birds by sound, this can be a really useful technique to get you thinking about what you're hearing, where. Again, you're not trying to identify the species here, just recognize bird sounds or the noises they make in their environment.

Take note, too, that some sounds carry much further than others. Just today I was in a field with Western Meadowlarks and their song carries incredibly far, especially in an open prairie. In contrast, the song of something like a Western Bluebird doesn't carry as far.

This also gets you looking at the different octaves at which you can hear things. There are sounds that are so frequently in our environment that we just tune them out and see them as background noise. If there are birds in your area that are really common, this can happen with those birds, too, where you don't consciously realize they're there because you've tucked that noise in the back of your mind and you aren't registering what species it is or where it's coming from.

It's easy to say oh just listen for bird sounds and head in that direction or look that way, but once you train your mind to recognize what those sounds are and where they're coming from, in the moments that birds are making noise, you'll become more attuned to finding where birds are by getting to know them a little better.

Ok, so to recap, today we talked about some tips for finding birds in the field.

-Gather information about the environment around you, including the weather conditions and the time of day, both of which can determine whether certain bird species will be more or less active.

-Next, go where the food and shelter, or habitat substrates, are located to find birds. This might be more or less species dependent, as various species depend on different kinds of foods and habitats, but it's something to keep in mind.

-For finding birds by sight, look for movement of actual birds, but also keep a lookout for movement in the surrounding environment, such as branches, leaves, or water. And don't forget to look up!

-For finding birds by sound, try out the exercise I mentioned by learning to determine where sounds, then bird sounds, are coming from outside. Don't just listen for songs, but also the calls of birds and their aural noises, like drumming or wing beats or whistles.

Hopefully these points have helped you in your current birding journey or will help you in the future when you work more on heading out to find 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. You can follow Birding Tools on Instagram and Facebook with the handle @BirdingTools, and in case you didn't already know, I send out weekly emails detailing the content discussed



on the podcast along with some helpful, actionable tips and information. To get on my email list simply visit the website or email me at hello@birdingtools.com.

On the next episode of the Birding Tools podcast, I'm excited to have Christopher Joe, owner and founder of Connecting with Birds and Nature Tours, on to talk about what goes into running birding tours, what you can expect as a visitor, and even how you might start one of your own. You won't want to miss this episode, so be sure to tune in next time.

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.