

Bird Lore: The Reluctant Birder

- By Joan Sattler SPECIAL TO THE NEWS-ITEM

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Snow geese flock migrates in northcentral Pennsylvania.

- PHOTO COURTESY OF Lauren Shaffer



The Eastern towhee “sings” its name.

- Photo courtesy of Lauren Shaffer

I have been a board member with the Lycoming Audubon Society for well over a decade with my involvement focused on conservation efforts. I was not a birder until my husband caught the “birding bug.”

For years, I wondered why people were so engrossed in birding and now I finally “get it.” I’d like to share the experience of going from a reluctant non-birder to a birding enthusiast with the hope that I can entice you to give it a try.

My husband and I recreated outdoors for decades, but now we are aging, which limits what we can do. He turned to birding as a new activity and fell in love with it. After a few years of birding on his own, he beckoned me to join him and so I did.

I like birds, but liking birds and birding are two very different phenomena. Birding is intentional and it takes focus and concentration.

Little by little, outing by outing, I learned to identify a few birds by name, then I learned some more. And as my “vocabulary” increased, frustration turned to recognition and excitement. Let me explain why:

- Birds are beautiful. They are elegant and brilliantly colored and charming.
- Birds are everywhere. They are in the city, in your backyard, in the woodlot down the street and the marsh a short drive away.
- Birds are musically talented. They have chirps and calls and elaborate songs that are species specific. You can bird by ear as well as by sight.
- Birds are social. They have complex relationships (some mate for life) and some species socialize in mixed flocks. Some even relate to humans.
- Many birds migrate. The “Atlantic Flyway,” which is overhead, is a major north-south thoroughfare. Some flocks are so dense they can be tracked by weather radar.
- Birds provide a lifetime of learning. One question leads to another and another. If you like puzzles, you will love birding.

- Birding is not physically demanding. It is a meandering adventure. You stop, look and listen. You sit awhile to see who flies in.
- Birding can be done in inclement weather. You can drive back roads and find marvelous places to explore. “Car birding” gets you out and about, doing “windshield surveys.”
- Birding requires little equipment. You can use a pair of binoculars and a smart phone. National Audubon offers a free app with photos, natural history and songs.

I took the birding “plunge” because my husband’s enthusiasm was contagious. I wanted to share the joy he was finding.

He was a patient teacher as even recognizing common birds was a stretch for me in the beginning.

Who knew that birds changed color in different light conditions — not me. Who knew that some birds sing their name — towhees say “towhee” for example. Who knew that snow geese fly over our area in massive flocks, their white wings with rich black tips glinting in the sunlight — not me. Who knew that purple martins choose to nest close to occupied buildings — not me.

After an hour in the “early days” of birding, my head felt like it would explode with the overload of information — and that was just in our back yard.

But every outing — even to this day — teaches me something new. Outing after outing increases my knowledge and confidence and my ability to identify birds by sight and sound. Recognizing them becomes like an embrace of an old friend.

The more I learn, the more associations I make and the easier the next learning event becomes. The puzzle pieces take shape.

What is most gratifying is how immersive the experience of birding is. My eyes and ears are on high alert. I am not thinking about the to-do list or my worries. I am a part of something bigger than myself and for me there is a spiritual component that just feels right.

I slip into a positive, peaceful place. I appreciate where I am in that moment. I am not thinking — I am birding — I am experiencing. Many proclaim the health benefits of immersive experiences in nature. We after all, are a part of the natural world despite being surrounded by concrete and computer screens.

Few would deny the awe, inspiration and perspective generated by a beautiful sunset, a mountain or the sea. And birding can bring the same awe. Nature can take your breath away.

“Nature therapy” has been pivotal in many well established programs. Nature deeply touches us, if we let it. For those who love the natural world, birding is a way to be in the wild without traveling to the wilderness.

I won't pretend that the beginning isn't frustrating. But the learning comes quickly, especially if you have a guide. Pretty soon you can predict who you might see based on season and habitat. Almost like magic, you can conjure them up. You still run into birds you can't identify but that happens less and less. And finally it gets to the point where finding that exotic bird is no longer a frustration but a rare treat.

I was reluctant, but my spouse persevered and now we share a lifetime endeavor that we enjoy wherever we roam. And just as important, the time we spend together doing this is quality time.

If you'd like to try birding, both Lycoming Audubon and Seven Mountains Audubon Chapters offer field trips that are free and open to the public. All ages and abilities are welcome and loaner binoculars are available. Advanced birders offer gracious teaching

and are anxious to share their knowledge. Check out our websites for dates and locations.

I understand if you are reluctant, but from personal experience, let me encourage you to give it a try.