

# Are You a Birder?

By Bruce Buckle

Though I didn't always think so, it doesn't take much to be a birder. We come in all shapes and sizes. The eight-year-old who lives next door to me is a birder, just like the 78-year-old Lycoming Auduboner who lives in the next block. Their knowledge and skill levels might be vastly different, but both have an interest in learning about birds and their behaviors, and both enjoy the sights and sounds of the avian world. If you've got that, consider yourself a birder.

Once you start birding it's hard to stop. You'll see and hear birds everywhere. In no time at all the song of a Cardinal in your backyard will become familiar. You'll recognize the difference between the male and female American Goldfinch, and you'll start filling your bird feeder with thistle for these beautiful seed eaters. Hang a suet cake, or strap one to a tree to attract Downy Woodpeckers. One day you might notice a slightly larger woodpecker that looks like a Downy, but its beak is longer. It's a Hairy Woodpecker! And if you are lucky your suet might attract a Brown Creeper. Other easily identifiable birds that come to feeders filled with black oil sunflower seed are the Tufted Titmouse and White-Breasted Nuthatch, and of course the iconic Black-Capped Chickadee. The Chickadee calls its own name, and when I play its vocalizations at Lycoming Audubon programs for children invariably a youngster blurts out, "I know that bird!"

To expand your birding experience go for a walk. If you frequent the River Walk in Williamsport, watch for the arrival of a small, diving duck with a white patch on its large head. That's the male Bufflehead, a migratory species that spends the summer breeding season in Canada, but winters in our area and throughout much of the southern United States. Invariably on the River Walk, with binoculars hanging around my neck, passersby want to know if I've seen a Bald Eagle. And since there are multiple and easily seen nests along the river, that's a very reasonable question. But there are other birds of prey to see as well. I've watched Peregrine Falcons fly from their nest site on the Market Street Bridge. I've seen an Osprey take a fish out of the water just below the dam. These experiences don't happen every day, but as your birding becomes more intentional, you'll find yourself seeking out birding hotspots to visit, where you'll be rewarded with new and sometimes rare birding experiences.

One of my favorite hotspots in Lycoming County, where I live, is Rider Park. Mostly I bird the fields and edges while checking Bluebird nest boxes, and it's not difficult at all to see and hear 20-30 different species in a couple of hours. One morning I did walk up one of the forested trails and was rewarded by hearing and seeing a Black-throated Blue Warbler. It's not an uncommon bird, but it's still striking to see, especially for someone whose knowledge of warblers leaves much to be desired.

As my birding skills grow, I've come to recognize that birding by ear can be as enjoyable as seeing a colorful Scarlet Tanager through binoculars, especially since their preference for the treetops strains the neck muscles. A good birding friend of mine describes the song of a Wood Thrush as "God's music," and I can't disagree. Though I don't see them often, somehow it's nice to know from their vocalizations that there are Great Crested

Flycatchers hanging around. Learning to distinguish the songs of mimics like the Brown Thrasher and Mockingbird can be challenging, but also rewarding. One of the great tools to help you learn bird calls and songs is Merlin, a free app for your smartphone developed by the Cornell Lab of Ornithology.

Though I still have much to learn about birds, their behaviors, and their habitats, I owe a huge debt to my friends in the Lycoming Audubon Society for their welcoming attitude and willingness to share their knowledge and experiences with me over the past several years. I've learned so much! So, with the fall migration season just around the corner, I encourage you to reach out to your local Audubon chapter, and join them for a bird walk. You won't be disappointed in the new friendships you are sure to form, and in the knowledge and skills you most certainly will acquire. Happy birding, birders!

Photo Credits:

- 1) Bruce Buckle
- 2) Mick Thompson
- 3) Lorraine Minns/Audubon Photography Award

