

Birding for Beginners: A Gateway to Nature and Adventure

By Linda Stager

I was standing along Pine Creek at 7:15 a.m.; the light was exquisite, the birds were singing their morning songs, and I was chatting with another photographer.

As both of us visited, two birds flew over and into the trees behind us. Their quick flash of color and movement caught our attention. One was yellow olive in color; the other was bright red with black wings.

My friend turned to me in surprise.

“What was THAT?” And I answered with excitement, “That was a male scarlet tanager chasing a female.

“How do you know that?” he asked.

And I told him my story.

These days, I am a multiple award-winning outdoor writer and photographer. When I was starting my career journey, there was a formative learning process in my education and approach to my subjects that I owe to “birders.” Thank you!

Starting out, I did what I would encourage everyone to do. I found mentors who were willing to teach me what I needed to know.

There was a sense of adventure in the process. Birds don't just pose for you. And those rascally little warblers, in particular, flit constantly from place to place. But oh, what fun it was.

I joined an active Audubon Society Club. Birders know birds. I showed up, introduced myself, and went on field trips with them. They were welcoming, and it really was fun.

It was also funny sometimes as I learned the right way to bird. When I fell in the mud, slid down an embankment, let out a loud “ooooff!”, and scared all the birds away that we were so slowly and silently stalking, they all scowled... Then they helped me up, and we all laughed.

When I set out on my own to find a white-fronted goose and came back empty-handed, they gifted me a birding book to carry with me and to call my own.

And in the end, I learned a lot about birds...and more.

I learned (and wrote) about Rachel Carson and her amazing life work. Her research into pollutants and her book “Silent Spring” became the impetus for the creation of our nation's conservation movement in the 1960's. In fact, the banning of the insecticide DDT saved the endangered Bald Eagle, the symbol of our country. Our daily lives are better today because of her efforts. She taught us that we are all responsible for protecting and appreciating our environment.

I also learned that birding is good for the mind, the body, and well-being. Miles of walking easily added up while I was having fun. Birding also undoubtedly helped foster my deep connection to our natural world and to conservation efforts.

So, how do you start birding? It's easy. Find an Audubon Club in your area and join them. I joined the Lycoming Audubon Society because it was the most active one in my area. But I have also enjoyed events with the Wellsboro-based Tiadaghton Audubon Society and the Seven Mountains Audubon group in Union County. A quick search on the internet will show a list of Audubon groups in your area. Social media has pages for birding groups and PAbirds.org is also a great resource.

Once connected, the group's members will help with the rest. Some groups have a binocular loan program. Use one of the group's binoculars until you decide if you want to invest in your own. Some photographers bring their cameras along for close-up views. A camera with a 600mm lens is a good investment. A good group can help you become an ethical bird watcher.

Members will also help you with bird identification. Soon, you will be able to identify birds by sight and perhaps by sound. Many folks enjoy a phone app called "Merlin Bird ID," a free app offered by the Cornell University Lab of Ornithology that lets you listen to live sounds.

And along the way, it's good to practice. Grab a birding field guide, study some websites, and go looking for subjects. A good location can be as close as a nearby bird feeder or your local park or trail. There are birding "hotspots" in every community.

One of the nicest things about birding is that anyone can do it. Younger or older, physically strong or not, anyone can enjoy the sights and sounds of birdwatching. It's an all-season hobby. It can even be an urban adventure.

Once a birder, you'll even be able to impress someone when they see a flash of color and say, "What was that!?" You can tell them.

Photos by the Author:

1. Male scarlet tanager
2. Bald eagle feeding its eaglet
3. Lycoming Audubon Society celebrating Earth Day

