

Grand Valley Audubon Society's Birding Techniques Manual

This manual began February 28, 2010 on a Grand Valley Audubon Society field trip. Thirteen people looked for birds and thought about techniques between 9:00 a.m. and about noon. *Forty bird species were identified, 214 plus snow geese (almost certainly not Ross's geese) being the most spectacular sight according to most attendees.* The tips that came to mind to the attendees were assembled and synthesized, with some editorial liberty taken. Reviewers have added new concepts and improved wording. We don't know how to properly acknowledge credit to all the people originating tips. Thanks to all for each intellectual donation to the GVAS. Please comment on and/or add to these by e-mail to rolambeth@yahoo.com.

Tips for group birding:

1. Outline at the beginning of a trip the route and expected times so everyone in the group knows. This allows individuals to reconnect if separated.
2. Share cell phone numbers with a person in every car in the group. Communicating bird finds, plan changes, and help needs can make a big difference. Walkee-Talkees are fine, yet may not have sufficient range.
3. Designate sky specialists, bush specialists, post-pole-&-wire specialists, foreground specialists, and/or distance specialists and ask them to give extra attention to their specialties as the field trip progresses. This should maximize the coverage of the viewscapes encountered. The vehicle driver can then be the road specialist. Assure the sky specialists that they need not wear out their neck looking up all the time, but to remember to regularly check the sky.



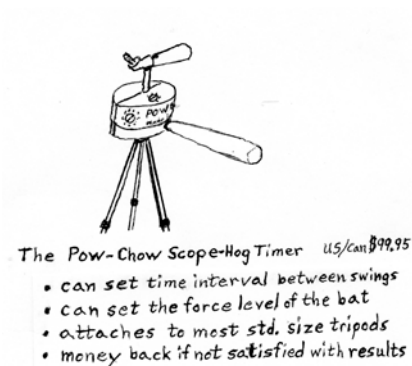
4. Provide frequent breaks in human conversation sufficient to allow birds “a **word** in edgewise”.
5. Hold still some! Feet scrabbling on a gravel road or path make hearing birds difficult. The ethics of birding isn’t always intuitive. See www.aba.org/bigday/ethics.



6. Indicate where a bird is that you are seeing with tricks to help another person see it more quickly. A handy way is by focusing a scope on the bird and saying, “Quick, Look”. If the bird is moving declare which direction it’s moving so the scope can be rotated as needed. Having a straight stick in hand to line the bird up with the eye of the searching person is a good aid. Viewing a tree as a clock and describing where the bird is on the clock face is another trick. Viewing the surround-scape as a clock also helps with straight ahead being 12 o'clock. Note the easily seen and verbally described objects in front of or behind the bird. Start with “Can you see that _____ (conspicuous object)?” The horizon is often a good starting point, especially for raptors. For example one might cry, “Steller’s sea-eagle, one and a half bin fields above the horizon!” (bin = binocular).

7. If (s)pishing is done in a group venture there should be a designated “(s)pisher” or the (s)pishers need to be coordinated so as to not have ad hoc attractant sounds with the group unready to see what may respond. Recorded playbacks need even more direction in a group field trip.

8. Set up at least one scope’s tripod to accommodate the short people. And nobody should hog the scope. A turn at the scope probably should last no more than 20-30 seconds.



9. Make it clear to beginners, especially those hesitant to go birding with others, that “experts” love to share their knowledge. Sharing knowledge is a big bonus to birding.

10. Regard group birding as a team sport with all the considerations that implies, such as: contributing yet letting the leader lead; noticing who might be behind; not assuming as a photographer you always get the prime viewing spot; if you must brag try not to contrast it with the current outing; consider everybody seeing this bird more important than you seeing the next one.

11. Keep the outing time and physical challenge within the fatigue limits of the least strong or avid party member. Judging this is an art and the leader needs to continually observe the group. Half day trips are often the most that a beginner, a family pillar, or the elderly can endure. Strenuous activity needs to be advertised ahead of time.

Tips on preparation:

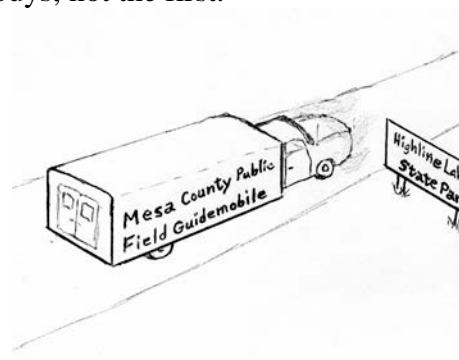
1. Dress in layers and have extra shoes and socks so as to be prepared for temperature changes and accidental steps into water.

2. Avoid wearing white and brightly colored (red) outerwear; consider and avoid clothing that may rustle/interfere with hearing birds. White may be the color of choice if pursuing ptarmigan in the winter. Another exception may be yellow. Geoff Geupel of Point Reyes Bird Observatory suggests that predators don't come in yellow and this bright color worn may actually be calming and allow a closer approach.

3. Birds seem to be alerted by human faces. Try camouflaging the face, perhaps with a head net, which inhibits vision, but aids a close approach.

4. Study the field guide for the species that you expect to see **before you go after the birds**. It'll be a lot more fun when you find them. For species that you choose to seek, notice what the field guide indicates about the species' habitats.

5. No bird field guide (book, iPhone app) is so complete that another field guide can't improve upon it. A minimum to consider is one that uses photos and another that uses paintings. Beginners should use field guides with **more than one** species per page. One should be able to see the text and range map for the species without turning a page. The beautiful photographic field guides with just one species per page should be the second or third bird field guide one buys; not the first.



6. Binoculars are not necessary, but make observations much more enjoyable. Don't give children "kid's" or "starter" binoculars. Age 8 is approximately the age kids can learn to handle binoculars. True beginners binoculars will likely cost over \$50, have powers in the 6 to 8 range, have a field of view close to 300 feet in a thousand yards (5.7 degrees), and be light enough to not have the strap cut into the person's neck after an hour of carrying it (<1.5 lbs).

7. Birding is also an auditory venture. Pick a species you plan to search for. Play its recorded songs and/or calls. Put into words a description of the sounds, so as to be able to remember it. Go out to see if hearing it helps you to quickly find it. A starting point can be <http://www.mbr-pwrc.usgs.gov/bbs/> and click on Bird Information.



Tips on data recording:

1. Consider **not** consulting the field guide while you are looking at an identification challenge, but instead draw, label and describe what you are seeing. Very often you will discover that you were keying in on the wrong part of the bird, so a very detailed description is often needed to prevent the important feature from being missed. Even then, when you return to the field guide, you may see that the important feature was ignored, but lessons will be learned.



2. Learn to use the four-letter code for bird species so you can quickly jot down observations. Look at these examples, American Robin=AmRo, American Black Duck=ABDu, Red-winged Blackbird=RWB1, Canyon Wren=CanW and Carolina Wren=CarW. Standard practice is to make all code letters upper case, but for field notes it will be easier later to recall the species if lower case is used as shown. Although

unnecessary you may want to be consistent with bird banding conventional codes. The following website provides these codes.

<http://www.pwrc.usgs.gov/bbl/manual/aspeclst.htm>

3. Record numbers of individual birds seen using the dot tally, $\cdot = 1$, $:$ = 2, $:: = 3$, $::: = 4$, and by connecting dots to draw a box indicate up to 8 and inside the box with 2 diagonal lines indicate 9 and 10. This saves space over other methods such as the familiar 4 vertical bars and a diagonal slash through them equaling 5.

4. Record where you've been and how you got there, so you and others can return to the sites. Adding GPS coordinates helps in describing locations.

5. Ask other birders how they record their observations. "Listers" will enjoy telling how they do it.

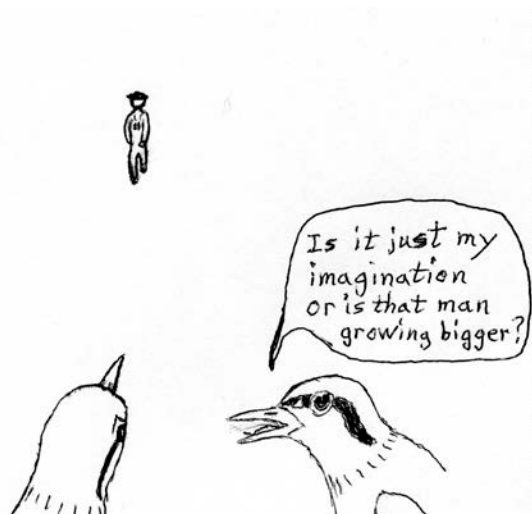
Tips on bird identification:

1. Scan your field guide and get to know the bird groups, e.g., ducks, doves, woodpeckers, flycatchers, swallows, warblers, sparrows, etc. That way you can more quickly describe a bird you see and find it when you return to your field guide.
2. Describe the bird species you can't identify by using birds species that you know. Compare and contrast them with the species in question.
3. Size is a diagnostic feature, although often tricky to determine. A distinct size difference in birds that otherwise look alike is more apt to indicate a difference in species than a difference in age, e.g., Ross's geese are not baby snow geese.
4. Know that many, if not most, birds can be identified only by their silhouettes. They can at least be identified to their group of relatives, e.g., dark ducks and dark geese are not indistinguishable, flycatcher shapes don't look like warbler shapes. Bill design and proportion to head, wing design, head crests, neck length, tail length, and posture are some shape-making factors. Movement patterns/behavior are often diagnostic.
5. Realize that even the experts have to call some observations unidentifiable.

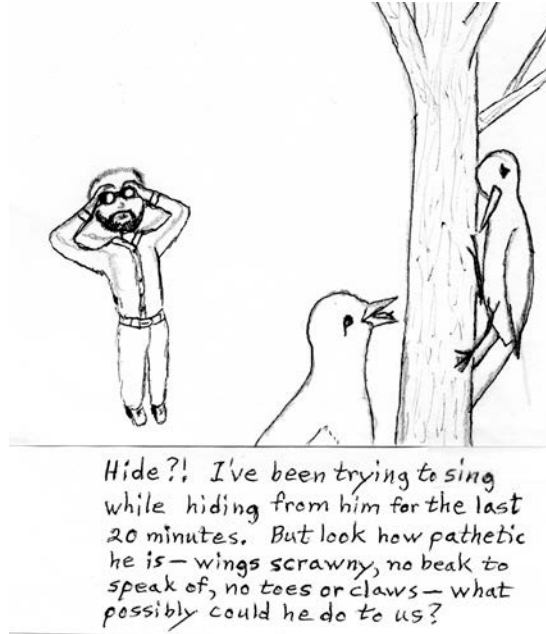


Tips on finding birds:

1. To maximize the number of species that you find, maximize the number of habitat varieties you visit.
2. When birding from an automobile, be prepared to stop and search for birds at spots where you see even a single negligible-looking bird, since other birds (individuals & species) are more likely to be found there than at random stops.
3. Expect to deviate from a planned route if developing information suggests that there is better birding off-itinerary.
4. When entering an area, try to get an overview of the likely habitats and birds present. This will increase your efficiency in covering the area and identifying the birds there.
5. Even if you can't identify species by sound you can and must key in on bird sounds to know where to look or which direction to continue the pursuit.
6. As you move through the habitat try to determine the most effective distance ahead to focus for detecting birds before (or as) they first react to you.
7. Sometimes it is possible to predict where a bird or a flock is going. Getting out ahead of it or them and waiting for it or them to pass can be quite rewarding.
8. As a rule the bigger the bird the greater will be the flushing distance between you and it. Use compassion for the bird. Unless it's a "lifer" bird, you may need to only go close enough to identify the species.
9. A single person is likely to flush a bird as soon as or sooner than a "herd" of people.
10. As a rule a bee-line toward a bird will allow a closer approach. Birds don't think like people. Actually, an oblique approach is more visually striking. Birds tend to flush when they accumulate too much visual stimulation.



11. Just because a bird flies away doesn't necessarily mean that you've lost it. You may have a very good chance of re-finding it if you try. Some woodland songbirds after being pursued awhile seem to "decide" that the human is not a very capable threat and they allow a closer approach.



12. While surveying a group of birds try to identify every individual bird as to species rather than assume that all are of the same species that can quickly be identified in the first few moments.

13. Notice and learn the birds that often go in mixed species flocks, such as winter "black" birds, winter and migrant small songbirds, and migrant shorebirds.

14. When surveying a group of birds remain long enough to detect birds coming into view from behind screening vegetation and land features.

15. Birds present at one moment may attract other birds that will arrive some time after you do. By lingering you may witness a rare event.

16. When trying to attract birds with sounds such as "pishing" or "spishing" position yourself in shade. Stand where obstructions such as dense foliage won't block your views, but instead ample bare limbs are available as perches for the birds that come close. Patience is a virtue because sometimes it takes 5 minutes before any or all the bird species will show themselves. The effective range of bird calling is usually less than 100 feet, raptors being an exception. **Ethics point: avoid calling birds in popular birding spots, especially if there are others around birding independently of you or your party. Birds quickly become bored by the noises birders make unless there are nestlings or fledglings nearby. A birder can often detect the difference between a bird merely excited by the pishing and a bird anxious about its young.**

17. Incorporate variety in your calling repertoire with such sounds as squeaking (kissing the air, hand, side of binoculars) and small owl toots. [Observe regulations and ethics guidelines on use of recorded bird sounds \(“playbacks”\)](#).

18. An automobile makes an effective blind. Birds can be approached more closely by people in an automobile than walking. A parked car, especially if not seen approaching by the bird, is ignored, even with bobbing human heads visible through the windows. A bicycle approach, while not as well as a car’s, is tolerated more than a pedestrian approach.

19. Walking trails is typically more productive than stalking off-trail. The birder makes less noise and has a better viewing space. Also many birds become habituated to humans where they encounter lots of them. However, off-trail birding will likely be necessary to find certain birds, if site rules or ethics allow it.

20. While intuitive, it must be repeated that modulated talking, muffled sounds, and slow motion rather than boisterous chatter, sharp noises and quick movements work better for birding.

21. Birds are sensitive to humans changing directions and speeds.

22. Birds are sensitive to relative heights and are more at ease if they are much higher than the birder.

23. Mornings are best for observing most diurnal (daytime) species, but not necessarily the earlier the better. Birds, like people, have their dawn singers and late-morning movers. Cool weather likely favors late rising. Evenings tend to be less active than mornings and more active than mid-day. But remember that birding can be fun anytime day or night.

24. Tides influence shorebird activity. Thermals and wind speed influence soaring birds. Wind direction affects migrants. Be sensitive to environmental cues. Remember that birding can be fun any season of the year.

Miscellaneous Tips:

1. Recognize that, like Pete Dunn (celebrated birder) says, reading about birding techniques will not make you a great birder. Reading about and discussing birds AND doing lots of birding can make you a great birder.

2. Go birding sometimes alone (so that you practice identifying the birds yourself) and sometimes with others (so that you learn from them).

3. Join your local bird society, local Audubon group or similar organization, and go on their field trips.

4. Websites, bookstores and other specialty stores, such as Wild Birds Unlimited, offer a wealth of information on getting starting and assisting the advanced birder.

5. Birds have proven to be among the most effective means of gaining an educated environmental sense, a sense of how nature works. If you and yours can recognize many species, you and yours probably have an advanced appreciation of ecological principles.

Tips on Ethics (a pledge):

1. Of course, I'll obey highway and property rights laws – that's beyond ethics, and violating them is known to give birders a bad name.



2. Moderate my disturbance of birds. My need to get close enough or persist long enough to identify birds should be factored in with the needs of the birds, the habitats, and/or other people.

3. Control my movements and noise. Even when the birds aren't bothered, car door slammers, foot shufflers and incessant talkers prevent me and others from hearing birds.

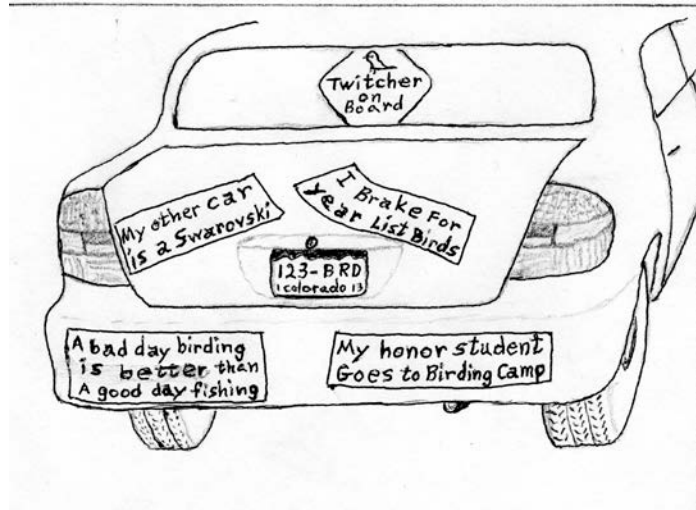
4. I should avoid the appearance of being a “peeping Tom” by not pointing my binoculars at people or their homes.



5. Keep my feeders, nest structures, baths and other artificial wildlife attracting devices free of hazards (entanglements, cats, fecal buildup).

6. Avoid muddy roads (ruts make for bad feelings). Leave plenty of room for vehicles to pass when I park. Leave gates as I find them and that goes for most other things.

7. Kindly assume responsibility. I should protect the birds, their habitats, and the sport of birding by my word, example and votes. And, it will go best if done amiably and generously.



Additional Help:

Alderfer, Jonathan and Jon Dunn. 2007. National Geographic Birding Essentials: all the tools, techniques, and tips you need to begin and become a better birder. 224 pp. List price \$15.95

Dunne, Pete. 2003. Pete Dunne on Bird Watching: the how-to, where-to, and when-to of birding. Boston: Houghton-Mifflin Harcourt. 352 pp. List price \$12.00

Guttman, Burton. 2008. Finding Your Wings: a workbook for beginning bird watchers. Peterson Field Guide Series. New York City: Houghton Mifflin. List price \$14.95

Sibley, David. 2002. Sibley's Birding Basics. New York: Random House. 168 pp. List price \$15.95

White, Lisa ed. 2007. Good Birders Don't Wear White: 50 tips from North America's top birders. Boston & New York City: Houghton-Mifflin. 268 pp. List price \$9.95