

Opinion

7 Tips for Watching Birds During the Spring Lockdown

Here are some principles you can apply to any form of nature study.



<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/05/08/opinion/sunday/bird-watching-coronavirus-lockdown.html?smid=em-share>

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Mr. Sibley, a birder and artist, is author of "What It's Like to Be a Bird," from which this is adapted.

May 8, 2020



We find comfort in nature. The psychological benefits are well documented: Spending time with grass and trees and birds, even through a window, makes us feel happier and more relaxed. It's inspiring and reassuring to remember that birds are migrating north right now, as they have for millennia. The earth turns, and birds follow the rhythms of daily and yearly cycles.

One of the most exciting things about bird-watching is that birds are so mobile. They fly around their home territory. They migrate across the globe every spring and fall. You can watch the same tree and see different birds every day and each season. In these days when travel is restricted, when a lot of experiences are not possible, birds bring the experience to you.

You don't have to identify the species, although there is a wealth of information available if you know a bird's name. The most important thing is just to notice birds, slow down and really watch them. I'm writing about bird-watching here, but these same seven principles apply just as well to any form of nature study. Take some time to really look at a tree, and compare it to other trees. Lie down on a lawn and study the plants and insects that you can see.

Here are seven tips to get started:



Notice birds

If you're not already a bird-watcher, you probably don't really notice birds, but they are around us all the time, even in a city. With a little practice you'll be amazed at what you can see. One of the best ways to find birds is just to watch for movement, and then focus on that movement to see what's happening (it's often a bird).

Birds are found in a lot of different habitats, and each species has different preferences, but as a general rule "edges" are the best places to see birds. Scan along the ground at the edge of a lawn or hedgerow or patch of weeds. Scan the shoreline of a pond or stream. Check the highest tips of trees and bushes, fence posts, or overhead wires. At first you'll need to make a conscious effort to "keep an eye out" for birds, but you will quickly learn where and how to look, and noticing birds will become second nature.



Listen

Birds communicate by sound as well as by sight just like we do. They make a lot of noise and their songs and calls all mean something. On the most basic level sounds can help you find birds by revealing their presence and telling you what direction to look. You probably already know some bird sounds, like those of pigeons and chickens. As you gain more experience you'll learn to recognize the raucous calls of jays, the husky "chirping" of house sparrows and many more. Just like seeing, it takes some focus and practice to hear birds, but once you start noticing these sounds you will hear them everywhere.



Look at the bill

Bill, beak, whatever you call it, this is the best thing to focus on when you see an unfamiliar bird. The shape and size of the bill will give you some idea of what that bird eats, and what group it belongs to. And the feather markings around the bill and the eye are always some of the most distinctive on the bird. In most cases, if you can get a good look at the bill and the face it will be possible to identify the species.



Think about what the bird is doing

Birds' lives are dominated by the struggle to survive and to reproduce. They must find food, avoid predators, find a mate and raise young. In between they sleep and preen and sometimes migrate. Everything birds do has a purpose, and in that sense they are always "working." Noticing behavior and wondering "why" is the first step to really understanding. For example, birds generally do not carry anything in their bill except material to build a nest, or food for their young. If you see a bird gathering a beak full of plant fibers you can be sure it is building a nest nearby, and a beak full of insects is destined for the mouths of some hungry babies.



Watch for patterns

Birds are creatures of habit. They follow routines and often follow other birds. If you see a bird fly overhead, stay alert for another bird following the same path. If a bird is gathering nest material or food for its young, for example, it will make multiple trips back and forth to the nest. If you've seen a bird fly away carrying something, there's a very good chance it will come back a few minutes later to gather more. Just wait. Building a nest takes several days, and young birds in the nest are fed for more than a week, so you might be able to come back the next day and watch more. And if you track the bird along the path that it takes, you might even find the nest.

All of the variation in birds also follows patterns. Species that fly long distances tend to have more pointed wings. Species that eat seeds or fruit tend to be more sedate, while species that eat insects are more "jumpy," constantly flitting from one twig to another. Species in the thrush family share a distinctive "liquid" quality to their songs. It's always satisfying to make these connections and understand the broader patterns in nature.



Be curious

Imagine that you see a sparrow in a spot where you've seen sparrows many times before. You could just continue on, and might not remember at the end whether you even saw a sparrow. On the other hand, if you stop to watch, ask a question and pick out some details, you will remember those details, as well as other things that you didn't even focus on. It can be fun and enlightening to come up with one question for the day, and ask it of every bird you see. There is an endless supply of good questions, and taking the time to look at how each bird holds its tail, whether it walks or hops on the ground and what it is eating will lead to lots of interesting discoveries.



Draw, write notes, etc.

One of the best ways to be an active observer is to translate what you are seeing and hearing into drawing or writing. Your first thought might be “I can’t draw, and what could I write?” But this is beside the point. It doesn’t matter what you write or what your drawings look like. The value is in the process, not the product. The reason is simple — these things force you to look at details. Before you can write or draw something about a bird you have to think about your observation deeply enough to convert it into lines or words. And in this case it really is the thought that counts. You don’t have to show your work to anyone. You don’t even have to keep it. Just taking the steps will lead to discoveries.

Ultimately it doesn’t really matter how you watch birds. All you need to do is take a few minutes to watch and wonder.

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A version of this article appears in print on May 10, 2020, Section SR, Page 10 of the New York edition with the headline: Bored These Days? Try Watching Birds. [Order Reprints](#) | [Today’s Paper](#) | [Subscribe](#)