

The Act of Enjoying Wild Birds

by Brett Amy Thelen, Science Director

December 2021



Male Evening Grosbeaks. photo © Meade Cadot

For more than 20 years, I've paid careful attention to wildlife, both for work and for fun – including monitoring endangered nighthawks, volunteering at owl banding stations, and surveying for loons – but until recently I'd never considered myself a birder. That is to say: I don't keep a life list. I can identify precious few warblers or sparrows to species. I've never traveled specifically to see birds. And, for the most part, the only way I know if a rare bird has shown up in town is if one of my friends who's a "real" birder points it out.

In short, birding had always seemed like something akin to a competitive sport, and I am strictly JV.

Then I saw [a presentation by Freya McGregor of Birdability](#), a new non-profit working to make birding safe and accessible for all, with special focus on people with disabilities. While much of her talk centered on the nuts and bolts of accessibility in the outdoors – trail surface and slope, bathrooms, benches, the importance of never parking in the striped aisle next to a van-accessible parking space – Freya also offered advice on how to make the birding community more welcoming.

In that spirit, she proposed a new definition of birding as, simply, “the act of enjoying wild birds” – whether or not you’re looking or listening, moving or sitting still, whether or not you have binoculars or keep bird lists or possess an in-depth knowledge of species identification.

When I heard Freya’s definition, I thought, “That’s me! I enjoy wild birds.” Maybe it’s you, too.

Identifying Birds

Of course, identifying birds can be helpful for learning more about their lives. It’s far easier, for instance, to find information on “mourning doves” than “those grayish-brown birds that sound like owls but are definitely not owls.”

So, now that you know you’re a birder, how can you learn more about the wild birds you’re enjoying? One helpful tool is **Merlin**, a free bird identification app created by the Cornell Lab of Ornithology. Once you’ve downloaded Merlin to your phone, you’re just a few clicks away from figuring out the identity of any mystery bird. Merlin asks five simple questions – where and when you saw the bird, its approximate size (with silhouettes of well-known species like robins and geese to guide you), its main colors, what it was doing (eating at a feeder, swimming or wading, soaring or flying) – then uses your responses to generate a list of possible species, complete with photos, sounds, and distribution maps for each one.

It’s not foolproof, especially if you only caught a fleeting glimpse of the bird in question, but more often than not, it does the trick. There are also options for identifying a bird by uploading a photo or recording of its call, and for browsing an illustrated list of likely species based on your location and the time of year.

Another incredible free resource is **eBird**, an app and website for recording and sharing bird observations. eBird organizes information based on species checklists, and offers a way to not only keep track of your own sightings, photos, and sound recordings, but to also explore observations submitted by other birders. With options for searching by location, date, species, or all three, you can discover which birds you’re likely to see in January at your favorite local park, or find out where you might have a better chance of spying that long-awaited prize – such as the Snowy Owl that was reported by multiple eBirders at the Keene airport on December 6 (and, sadly, not since.)

All of the data submitted to eBird is also available to scientists, who use it to inform research on everything from population trends to climate change impacts. With more than 720,000 eBirders worldwide and 100 million observations annually, it's a powerful tool that can sometimes seem a little overwhelming – but remember that you can always start small, with the species and places that feel like home.

Winter Birding

Many people find their way to birding through watching birds at feeders, and winter – when “bird feeders” are less likely to turn into “bear feeders” – is the perfect time to give it a try. The Harris Center keeps our feeding station stocked with seed and suet all winter long, and visitors are welcome to watch from our front deck (anytime) or inside the building (during weekday business hours).

If you'd like to set up your own feeders but don't quite know where to start, local conservation biologist Steven Lamonde will be giving a free Zoom talk with [tips for winter bird](#) feeding on Jan. 10 through the Harris Center; you can learn more and register at harriscenter.org. (While you're there, I also highly recommend watching the recording of Steven's recent talk on [winter birds of the Monadnock Region](#), and Freya McGregor's engaging [Birdability lecture](#), both of which can be found on the Harris Center's YouTube channel.)

For many long-time birders, spring and fall are the most exciting seasons, as a diversity of species migrate through our local landscape, sometimes in great numbers. Birds can also be more colorful in spring, when they're sporting their finest breeding-season plumage.

However, winter has its own charms, especially for beginner birders. This time of year, there are far fewer species, so we can really get to know the ones who stick around. Set the mystifying tangle of warbler identification aside, and embrace instead the simple beauty of chickadees and titmice and juncos. Admire the industriousness of woodpeckers and nuthatches, the bravado of jays, the brilliance of cardinals. Follow grouse tracks in the snow. Listen for owls. And, above all, enjoy. 🐾



This article was published in the *Monadnock Ledger-Transcript's* "Backyard Naturalist" column on December 29, 2021.