



[Download the entire PDF.](#)

Bird Watching Basics

An Introduction for Beginning Birders

If you are familiar with the basics, jump ahead to read about "The Equipment" and "Identifying Birds."

Written by Jim Cox

2010 revisions by Mark and Selena Kiser

Design by Marrell Cooper

Illustrated by Clark Frasier

No one knows the sights and sounds of nature quite like a bird watcher. By taking a half-second look at a small darting assemblage of brown, yellow and white feathers and adding a call note that sounds something like "chip," a "birder" can tell you, not only was that one of 42 different types of warblers, but it specifically was a Yellow-rumped Warbler.

You too can learn to do this, but it takes practice. To distinguish among the 900+ species of birds found in the U.S., birders must quickly process a great deal of information on color patterns, call notes and even the shapes of bills. They have to know what to key in on when they see a strange bird, noting its overall shape, how it moves through a bush or tree, and the shape of its wings. Such sensory work-outs help to develop great visual and hearing acuity among birders. In fact, birders are generally much more observant than the average person.

To the beginning birder, however, trying to identify even common species can be extremely frustrating, and many people give up before they ever actually begin. A small gray bird flashes up to the top of a bush. Quick, grab your binoculars! Start flipping through your field guide. Take another look at the bird. Flip back a page or two... suddenly the bird is gone, but there is a different one lower in the bush. All that page riffling and binocular lifting begins anew. This pamphlet is intended to help you get beyond this frustrating early stage. It's a crash course in the basics of bird watching, often called "birding" nowadays by experienced watchers. Study this pamphlet carefully and you'll be well on your way to greater enjoyment of the world around you since birding focuses on some of the most spectacular creatures on earth. Birds are highly visual creatures - just like people - and some species don breathtaking combinations of yellows, blues, reds, blacks and greens to make themselves more obvious. They also come in a wide variety of shapes and forms, which adds considerably to the pleasures of bird watching.

Birding will also make you more familiar with the natural beauty of Florida and perhaps will lead you to appreciate how quickly that beauty is being lost. Florida has the fifth greatest number of different bird species of any state in the nation, but the continued existence of many of these species is threatened by the estimated 1,000 new residents that move to Florida each week. Many birds simply do not tolerate the urban

landscapes created by these new human residents. Thirty-four species and subspecies are officially listed as being in trouble in Florida, and four species have become extinct - never to be seen again. Birding also coaxes you into new country and enables you to take in all the fresh air and impressive scenery that you can hold. Most important, though, is the fact that birding is simply too much fun to be missed.

The type of information presented here is second nature to an experienced birder, but it can take many months of hard toil for the beginning bird watcher to grasp these concepts and techniques. Even with the information spelled out here, you still have to supply a good bit of patience and sweat to become one of the truly tuned-in nature watchers. We have tried to strip away some of the mystique of birding and expose the bare essentials, but practice and patience are just as important to birding as they are to sports, music and other recreational activities. You can't expect to record 150 different species on your first outing (though this will be possible later on) or to identify all those confusing birds. You'll have to work at it.

Credits:

Bird Watching Basics is provided courtesy of the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission.

[Visit Florida Birding and Wildlife Trail \(GFBWT\) website.](#)