

Birding Defined

Are you interested in attracting birding-based tourism dollars to your community, business or wildlife site? If you want to attract birders, the first step is learning what the exciting activity of birding is all about. To help you in your quest, we provide the following broad description of birding and the variety of activities birders enjoy. Although the following description of birding is rather lengthy, you can glean bits of information by narrowing your reading to the topics that most interest you from the Table of Contents.

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BIRDING DEFINED

What is Birding? What Activities Do Birders Enjoy? What Products Do They Use?

During the 1990s, birding was the fastest growing outdoor activity in the United States. Numbers of active birders continue to increase today with almost 70 million Americans enjoying birds and birding. People feed birds in their yards and travel down the road and across the country in search of birds; they photograph birds and they appreciate getting in touch with nature through birds, sometimes daily and through all seasons of the year.

Why are so many millions of people interested in birds?

Birds are colorful, abundant and they come in a multitude of varieties, each with interesting behaviors to study. Each species has unique songs and calls and, of course, birds can fly! Who wouldn't want to fly like a bird? Ultimately, birds get us in touch with the natural world, whether we live in an urban landscape or a country haven.

Birds attract us to travel to new locations and many birders even travel from country to country in search of new birds and experiences beyond our borders.

Birding as a Lifestyle - Once a birder, always a birder! There are millions of birders in the world, but I've never met a former birder. Birding is one of those activities that adds a new level of interest and a heightened awareness to your life. It's an activity that seemingly has no bounds; one that you continue to learn about day after day, year after year. And it's an exciting activity! You never know when a new species will appear before you, or what kind of avian encounters you may find in the field or in your own backyard.

Some people dedicate their lives to studying birds and providing safe havens for birds. Birds help to define some people and their focus in life. Most people enjoy birds and birding as a nice escape from the trappings of modern-day life – a way to get in touch with nature, to feel the earth beneath your feet and the wind in your face, while marveling at the beauty and wonders of nature.

Birders collectively spend billions of dollars each year (yes, billions!) in the United States alone, and birding is also very popular among residents of Canada, England, Holland, Germany, Israel and many other nations. We buy equipment such as binoculars, spotting scopes, tripods, field guides and other books, cameras, telephoto lenses, photo film, computer programs, field clothing, footwear, backpacks, camping gear, bicycles, canoes, cross-country skis, snowshoes and much more. We buy feeders and food and landscape our property to attract birds; plus, we travel near and far, and join clubs – all in our quest for birds and to keep in touch with the great outdoors.

Field Birding

Birding afield requires habitat that attracts birds, as well as access to the area – either visually or physically. It also requires some special basic equipment, but beyond these simple requirements, there is an exciting assortment of ways to enjoy birding, one of America's most popular outdoor activities.

Identifying Birds - The most basic object of birding is to identify the birds you see. This requires two basic pieces of equipment – a field guide and good binoculars.

Birding by Ear - Birding by sight is an obvious means of identifying birds, but as birders advance they become more and more attuned to bird songs and calls. Eventually, learning the songs of different species is every bit as interesting as identifying birds by sight. It's tougher to learn all the songs and calls, but it is a rewarding aspect of birding. To learn bird songs, birders listen to pre-recorded audio cassette tapes and CDs, and use computer software, DVDs and VCR tapes that provide both audio and visual information.

Listing - Keeping lists of the different birds observed is a favorite activity of many birders. The most common list that birders compile is a "life list," a tally of all the birds they identify during their lifetime. Lists may also include notes documenting sightings in a number of locations, dates and other field observations. Some birders keep a broad variety of lists, such as trip lists, day lists, state lists, county lists, a yard list, office list, photo list, etc. There is really no limit to the number of lists some people keep, and that can be part of the fun. There are even a number of computer software programs that help you to keep track of your lists of lists.

Rare Bird Alerts - To help facilitate finding birds, especially rare birds or birds rarely found in a given area, birders can check rare bird hotlines and rare sightings on email list serves. Every state has a telephone hotline you can call, and there are other hotlines for specific hotspots, cities or regions within a given state. Likewise, most of these hotlines are replicated on internet web sites, providing an amazing communication network for birders to monitor the ebbs and flows of songbird, raptor and waterfowl migrations, or winter eruptions of birds, such as owls or northern finches.

Some hard-core listers monitor hotlines on a national basis, always ready to drive five hours cross-country to search for a rare bird to add to their life list or jetting cross-country for a glimpse or photo opportunity of a species never seen before within the borders of this country. Every activity has its extremes – birding does too!

Field Notes - One of the most important practices of birders is to keep good field notes, and while writing in a note pad may be prudent in the field, most people eventually record their field notes on computer, using a personalized program or a commercial software package created just for keeping birding records. Keeping field notes can be as simple or complex as you wish, but getting in the habit of keeping good field notes will make you a better birder, and provide valuable records you can refer to in the future when you want to compare seasonal notes, annual data or check when to expect certain migrants that pass through your area. Pocket PCs and other handheld portable computers provide an opportunity to input notes that can simply be downloaded and updated when you get back to your home computer or laptop.

Censusing, keeping counts of all the different birds you see, adds appreciably to the value and usefulness of information collected in the field, as do descriptive behavioral observations. Birds offer amazing opportunities to study their species-specific behaviors ranging from territorial songs and aerial mating displays to nesting behaviors and other visual and audio activities. Some birders keep extensive descriptive accounts about memorable birding trips or exciting outdoor encounters with wildlife that may even be published in a hobbyist magazine or bird club newsletter.

Photography - Bird photography is one of the most satisfying of all birding endeavors, and many birders have their camera ready for any photo opportunity. Birders photograph to document the birds they see, the behaviors they witness and the landscapes they visit. Photography may be as simple as using a “snap-and-shoot” camera or one that requires an additional assortment of equipment. Standard 35mm equipment may include a camera body and zoom lens, but is likely to also include a telephoto lens, tripod, flash and film, although the newest format in photography – digital – requires no film. Instead, digital images are stored on computer discs or memory cards that are down-loaded to a computer software program in your home computer or a laptop, where you can easily crop, enlarge and enhance the photos you take in the field. How exciting it is that the old dark room has been replaced by a home computer! Birders who prefer the quality of the 35mm format can scan slides and prints to convert them into digital images. Then you can create computer slide shows or Power Point presentations, and file everything away in organized computer files or transfer them to CDs without taking up a lot of storage space. It's a great age we live in!

Videography - Because birds are so active, perform interesting displays and fly – solo or in flocks – many birders enjoy video photography using digital, videotape or 8mm formats. Video provides vivid reproduction of activities witnessed in the field that appeals to many people and recording the sounds of birds during the filming process is doubly satisfying. Birders use their computer to edit their activities and documentaries, then send action-packed video of their latest birding trip to friends and family, or share video streams posted on their personal web site. Fun stuff indeed!

Birding in the Great Outdoors - One of the great things about birding is that you can enjoy birding while participating in many other outdoor activities, such as cycling, hiking, backpacking, camping, kayaking, cross-country skiing, snow-shoeing, auto touring and other recreational options. Birding can be a secondary or primary focus while working out, traveling, canoeing or camping in a favorite location. That's part of the fun of birding – you can enjoy birding activities almost anywhere with an outdoor view, at any time of the day, and even at night.

Individual and Social Birding - Birding can be a personal endeavor – an opportunity to slip away by oneself to a special place where you can breathe the fresh air and listen to the silence of the world, broken only by the beauty of a warbler's song. Or it can be a social activity in which birders share their interests in birds and their passion for the outdoors with family, friends or fellow birders. There are even social opportunities centered around birding: Many birders join a birding club, and participate in organized field trips, birding festivals and guided tours. Sometimes, birding is not just about the birds; it can be an opportunity to share time with special people in your life, or new people who share your interests in birds and the great outdoors.

Birding Clubs - There are literally hundreds of birding clubs across the country (and around the world). Some are very focused on birds and birding; others have a broader agenda, such as Audubon chapters that address a broader range of wildlife and conservation topics. Bird clubs offer regular field trips to participate in, and monthly meetings usually feature a guest speaker and social interactions.

Citizen Science - There can be a fine line between birding observations and true science. When birders keep a census of all the birds they see in a given area at a given time, they have conducted simple science-oriented field work. When they wish to get involved on a higher level, they can participate in citizen-science projects such as Christmas Bird Counts, Breeding Bird Surveys, BirdSource projects and others to make their time in the field even more important.

Conservation - Birding opportunities rely on appropriate tracts of habitats that various birds rely on for food, shelter and nesting. Dedicated birders help to protect, manage and improve critical habitats on local, state, national and even international levels. This can be achieved through personal activities and by voting, lobbying elected officials, contributing funds or inspiring community members to help in such endeavors. In addition to protecting birds and bird habitats, conservation projects can be important to help increase income from birding-based tourism in a community, and can provide an important sense of community value for children and adults alike.

Professional Careers - Today, there are many ways to pursue a career with a focus on wild birds, ranging from a field ornithologist to a nature center instructor, refuge manager, tour guide, wildlife artist, photographer, writer, ornithology professor, research biologist and more.

Travel - Birders spend billions of dollars traveling to exciting destinations each year. Some even travel beyond our borders to new countries, and even to new continents. Birders may be hiking across the Arctic tundra on one trip, and rafting down a tropical rainforest-lined stream the next. Birding inspires travel, whether down the road or around the world.

Guided Tours - When they travel beyond their usual birding range, especially beyond American borders, most people have greater success finding birds and identifying the birds they see by employing the services of a guide – even for just a day or two. Land-based tours often are arranged as roving tours in which birders visit a number of locations during the tour, traveling cross-county and staying at a number of lodges, hotels or other facilities along the way. These trips usually provide the best opportunities to study birds in a number of habitats, and birding experiences will bloom along the way.

Some birders prefer staying at a lodge where they can stay in one room or cabin for the duration of their visit. A birding-based lodge will have regular tours planned to nearby sites and, usually, the area surrounding the lodge is filled with exciting species to observe and photograph.

Some smaller specialized cruise ship companies offer another option to vagabond birders, providing escorted service to distant locations such as the South Pacific, Caribbean, Aleutian Islands, Antarctica, etc. Cruises usually emphasize island-hopping itineraries, but some make periodic stops along the coast. Cruises provide the excitement of stopping at remote destinations while offering a high degree of comfort along the way, all with the aid of experienced guides who lead birding hikes. Cruise guides also typically give informal lectures and slide shows on the ship while cruising at sea.

Birding Drives and Birding Trails - The newest developments in birding-based tourism are birding drives and birding trails. The term "birding trail" is something of a misnomer, as these projects are actually auto tours routed along established roads rather than "trails" as we usually think of them. Birding drives, however, tend to provide great birding opportunities as you drive through a rural area from refuge to wildlife area, while birding trails tend to link destinations with less regard for the journey between sites. Birding Drives direct you through prime birding habitat; Birding Trails lead you from birding site to site. Birding Drives and birding trails have been and are being established across America on local, regional and even state-wide levels.

Most birding drives and trails are based on a map or series of maps that direct you along a select route. They usually also provide basic information for birders and other nature enthusiasts about where to go and how to get there, along with a tourism-based infrastructure that interested people can follow, visiting one birding site after another in succession. Birding sites usually are public lands such as wildlife refuges, state parks, wildlife management areas, waterfowl production areas and others.

Birding drives and trails provide an increase in birding-based tourism benefits to local businesses along the routes, with communities providing essential services such as motels, B&Bs, restaurants, service stations, grocery stores and sporting goods stores, along with recreational options such as hiking and biking trails, camping facilities and canoe rentals.

In addition to a map or series of maps, a good birding drive or trail provides information about the birds that can be seen - in season - as well as information about outstanding birding sites along the routes.

Birding Festivals - Since the early 1990s, when only a handful of birding festivals were established, the number of birding festivals has increased by hundreds. The participation in each birding festival is different, ranging from 50 to 2,000, depending on the venue.

Birding festivals bring attention to birds and the habitats they depend on in an area; they promote the community, refuge or organization that sponsors them; and they provide participants with the opportunity to join in field trips and learn about birds at instructional seminars and workshops. Some festivals have keynote speakers, some have a banquet event and some have expos, in which equipment manufacturers, publishers, birding businesses and tour companies staff booths for festival-goers and the public to visit. In short, birding festivals offer a diversity of activities and a great way to share your interest in birds.

Conservation Events - The International Migratory Bird Day is a widely popular conservation event held each year during the second Saturday of May. Events include field trips, refuge and nature center open houses, school projects and other formal and informal activities across North America to bring awareness to the 340 species of birds that migrate north from wintering areas in the neotropics of Mexico, Central America, the Caribbean and South America to return each spring to their nesting ranges in the United States and Canada.

Traditionally, birders, bird clubs and Audubon chapters sponsor Big Days to raise money for their conservation interests. These are simply days selected when a group tries to find as many different kinds of birds during a single day (and night if they wish), which brings attention to the diversity of birds in the area, along with the conservation goals of a variety of organizations.

Backyard Birding

Backyard birding is an extension of field birding, hence these birders require the basic equipment of binoculars, field guide, camera, etc., but backyard birding is also oriented to attract birds – by offering food, water, cover and housing in your yard. More than 50 million Americans feed birds, usually at home, but also at school, at community businesses, and at local parks.

Bird Feeding - The key to feeding birds is knowing what food to offer to attract certain birds. Simply stated, birders offer the preferred foods of the birds they want to attract their yard. Conversely, if you want to omit some birds from your feeding station, don't offer the foods they eat.

When we think about feeding birds, most people think about offering seeds, although nectar attracts hummingbirds and orioles; corn and peanuts attract jays, quail and pheasants; fruit attracts orioles, tanagers and grosbeaks; meal worms attract warblers and bluebirds; and suet attracts woodpeckers, nuthatches, chickadees and others.

There is even something of an art to offering the right seeds to attract certain birds. Thistle seed attracts finches, crossbills, chickadees, nuthatches, juncos and others; black-oil sunflowers attract cardinals, grosbeaks and a multitude of other species; but limiting seed feeding to these seeds will discourage unwanted birds such as introduced House Sparrows, Rock Pigeons and European Starlings. One of the keys to seed feeding success is to avoid typical grocery store seed mixes, which have a high ratio of cheap filler seeds that introduced species prefer.

Feeders - The feeders you use will also help or deter certain birds – and squirrels if you wish. A tube feeder for thistle seeds will provide excellent perches for smaller birds, while keeping larger birds such as blackbirds, grackles and jays from perching and competing with or excluding smaller birds. A specialized hummingbird feeder is used to offer sugar-water nectar for hummingbirds, and while orioles will feed from a hummingbird nectar feeder, there are now specialized oriole feeders available complete with larger perches. Suet is best dispensed in a suet cage that birds can readily hang on, while the old reliable platform and hopper feeders are standards for dispensing sunflower seeds.

Experienced birders know that you should not limit your feeding operations to winter months. Feeding birds is an all-season endeavor, but the foods offered will depend on the season of the year and the kinds of birds in your area during that season. Feeding during migration is especially exciting, and spring or fall may be the only times certain birds stop in a given area. Summer feeding is interesting too, although many birds switch from eating seeds and suet to feeding on insects during late spring and summer. But if fruit, berries and meal worms are added to the menu, birders are duly rewarded with different species visiting their feeding station.

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Watering - A great catch-all means of attracting birds with little muss or fuss is to simply offer fresh water in a simple dish. All birds are attracted to water, both for drinking and bathing, and many birds that tend not visit feeding stations – such as robins, mockingbirds, vireos and warblers – will lavish in the opportunity to drink or bathe in a water dish, birdbath, fountain or another water feature.

To ensure that birds find the source of water, birders may add a dripper or mister that add the sound of water, a sound that many migrating songbirds gravitate to when they might otherwise miss a standard water source. In addition, a mister sprays a fine mist into the air, making an irresistible lure for hummingbirds, warblers, chickadees, swallows and other birds that bathe in the mist. A small fountain or another artistic feature can be added to a yard or business property.

Water features come in a variety of forms to add natural or artistic elements to landscaping, such as a pond, waterfall, stream, fountain or a combination of these features. Just imagine this great addition to any yard: A rocky ledge with a small waterfall fueling a plant-lined stream that flows a few feet into a small pond - and it's a fine way to attract birds. Or consider a small fountain in a corner of your yard that bubbles and gurgles a flow of water over a simulated Renaissance sculpture as it flows into a basin below where birds can utilize the water. Water features can be a fun part of your home or office landscaping, or they can be the centerpiece for the area.

Even during cold weather, when temperatures dip below freezing, some birders add a small heater to their bird bath or water feature to keep open water available. This requires a heat-tempered dish or a ceramic or cement bowl, along with additional attention to electricity-related precautions to ensure safety for you, your family, neighborhood children and birds.

Landscaping - Landscaping for birds is a great way to combine two of America's most popular outdoor activities – birding and gardening. An open yard of mowed grass attracts few birds, unless it is bordered by an area of trees, shrubs and flowers; so to attract birds to their yards many birders landscape with the aim to provide shelter, food (flower nectar, berries, fruits, nuts, insects), water, nesting habitat and nest sites. Using native plants, shrubs and trees is a great way of providing “backyard habitat” for birds.

Birders soon find that providing a landscaped habitat for birds also provides a pleasing habitat for themselves, their family and neighbors. Next they may initiate landscaping for birds at work and at school, enlisting the assistance of interested co-workers or students and their parents. Ultimately, the more micro-habitats we have in urban and rural areas, the greater the benefit to birds, especially the migrating neotropical songbirds that have had so much of their natural habitat destroyed or degraded. Bet you never thought of landscaping your yard as a *bona fide* conservation project.

Cavity Nest Sites - Nest boxes, also known as bird houses, provide artificial cavities for cavity-nesting birds to augment natural and woodpecker-excavated cavities. With 88 different cavity-nesting species in North America, ranging from House Wrens to Barred Owls, birders provide the right size of nest box for the birds they want to attract. And the right size is most relevant to the size of the entrance hole in the nest box. The idea is to provide the smallest possible nest box entry hole to allow the intended birds in, while keeping predators and introduced competitors out.

Some people become so enthralled that they set up extensive nest box trails. They install nest boxes along fence lines, on woodland edges and along wetland borders; they keep accurate records of the birds that use each nest box, including nesting success, numbers of eggs, number of nestlings, dates of fledging and other data.

Birding at Home

In addition to observing and photographing birds out the windows of home, there are a few activities birders enjoy from the comfort of an easy chair or at their home computer that will help them to improve their birding skills and increase their knowledge and appreciation of birds.

Birder's Library - There are literally hundreds of books published about birds, and many more are produced especially for birders. Beginners may be satisfied with a field guide and a couple other reference books, but many birders collect books to compile a personal library that may include an assortment of field guides, both for North America and for countries on other continents. Other favorite book topics include state and national “where to go” birding guides, expansive descriptions of members of the many bird families, and how to attract birds with foods, water and nest boxes. Another segment of many birders' libraries includes birding magazines and other nature and photography magazines.

Computer Activities - A number of birding activities can be computerized, such as keeping track of your varied lists of birds ranging from day lists to a life list. A number of specialized programs are available to help you file your field notes, and there are also some good computer programs that help you with visual and audio identification of birds.

Many impressive web sites are available on the internet where people can learn more about birds, birding and conservation efforts, along with an almost endless number of web pages that provide a wealth of itemized information. There are even some “virtual” birding sites and internet tours of national and international birding hotspots.

Email-based computer list serves offer opportunities to monitor rare bird reports and interact with other birders. Monitoring list serves is a great way to find out about rare bird sightings and to monitor seasonal sightings, plus there are usually a few notices posted that inform readers about local birding events and club activities.

When it comes down to it, a computer can be a workshop or art studio where you can write stories about your field experiences, and use computer programs to draw or “paint,” and more. Computers also provide us with amazing opportunities to use photo lab programs and photo filing options. Photography activities include scanning, enlarging, cropping, composing, enhancing and printing bird photos, as well as preparing digital slide shows and PowerPoint presentations. It’s also fun to share your photos via email correspondence. What does the future hold for computerized birding? It’s exciting to imagine!

Bird Art - Many people, even non-birders, enjoy adding artwork that features birds to decorate their homes and offices. Bird art is represented in many mediums from realistic to abstract, and may include personal drawings or paintings, collector paintings, art prints, photographs, sculptures, wood or stone carvings, etchings, ceramics, collector plates and more. Art is truly in the eye of the beholder, but everyone appreciates the colors and lively actions of birds depicted in art.

Birding – A Lifetime Experience

Once a birder, always a birder! There are millions of birders in America, but I’ve never met a former birder. Birding is one of those activities that adds a new level of interest and a heightened level of awareness to your life. It’s an activity that seemingly has no bounds; one that you continue to learn about day after day, year after year.

Some people dedicate their lives to studying birds or providing safe havens for birds. Birds help to define these people and their focus in life. Most people enjoy birds and birding as a nice escape from the trappings of modern-day life – a way to get in touch with nature, to feel the earth beneath your feet and the wind in your face, while marveling at the beauty and wonders of nature.

There are few better feelings than the quiet sense of euphoria you can feel when surrounded by the natural world. Enjoy birds, revel in the many ways we enjoy birding, and embrace the efforts to protect and improve the world around us for wildlife and people as one.

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North Dakota
L E G E N D A R Y

The logo for North Dakota features the words "North Dakota" in a large, bold, black script font. Below this, the word "LEGENDARY" is written in a smaller, black, all-caps, sans-serif font, with wide letter spacing.