

<https://www.wsj.com/articles/birding-in-the-digital-age-a-primer-1440616642>

The Wall Street Journal

Birding in the Digital Age: A Primer

The best binoculars, field guides and apps for budding birders—and why a Bluetooth speaker is a birder’s best friend

By Roxanne Palmer

Aug. 26, 2015 3:17 p.m. ET

SUMMER MAY be on the wane, but it’s still a great time to go birding. Although many species migrate south for the winter, this journey happens in waves, not en masse. In New York City’s Central Park, for example, you can take in the warbler migration in late summer to early fall, followed by various sparrows and finches winging their way south in autumn. And many species tough out the cold in winter: Blue Jays, owls, nuthatches and hawks, among others.

Birding requires little gear—and buying great binoculars no longer requires tapping your nest egg. “The midrange and less expensive models are so much better than they used to be,” said Cornell University conservation scientist Ken Rosenberg.

Here, a field guide to the gear you’ll need to spot everything from sandpipers to swallows.

Binoculars

First thing you need to know when buying binoculars is that they come in different sizes: You’ll see numbers like “10x42” or “8x36.”

The first number indicates the binocular’s magnification level. The second is size: the diameter, in millimeters, of the larger lenses (known as the

objective lenses). Larger lenses let in more light, resulting in a brighter image.

Nikon Monarch, \$380 for 8x30 model, nikonsportoptics.com

So you want the most magnification and largest lenses, right? It's not that simple. Increasing the magnification may reveal more detail, but it also narrows your field of view, which makes it more difficult to track birds on the move. And big lenses add bulk and weight.

Most birders go for a magnification of 6 to 10, and an objective size of 30 to 42 mm. For Robert DeCandido, who leads birding walks in Central Park when he's not studying migrating birds of prey in Nepal, the sweet spot for beginners is something around 8x32 (not all models come in that exact size). "With 8x32s, I'll be walking around all day, and I won't feel them around my neck," he said.

Mr. DeCandido recommends that new birders start with the **Nikon Monarch** (\$380 for 8x30 model, nikonsportoptics.com), because they're waterproof, which is handy if you're birding near a marsh or from a kayak, and they provide a clear image across the entire field of view (lesser models will blur at the edges).

Another economical pick: **Celestron's Nature DX** (\$120 for 8x32, celestron.com). Jessie Barry, a staffer at the Cornell University Lab of Ornithology, said that its light weight makes this model especially good for children.

While the average pair of binoculars will give you a good view of a Black-crowned Night Heron from 50 feet away, when you look through high-end optics, small details, like the heron's glaring red eye, pop vividly to life. Mr. DeCandido favors the **Swarovski Optik EL 8x32 Swarovision** (\$1,979, swarovskioptik.com), while the **Leica Ultravid HD** (\$1,949 for 8x32 model, us.leica-camera.com) earned top marks from staffers at the National Audubon Society and Cornell's ornithology lab.

Choosing which high-end model to buy is largely an aesthetic question. Lens makers impart slightly different tints to their glass, which is often the key factor in deciding between a Swarovski or a Leica. "Some people respond better to slightly cooler tints, some to slightly warmer ones," said

Mr. DeCandido. If you're going to invest four figures in a pair of binoculars, try before buying.

Field Guides

Printed field guides may be old-fashioned, but National Audubon Society program director John Rowden brings one of the Society's along when he goes birding with beginners. "If we're looking for Indigo Bunting, it's easier to show them a picture than to describe it."

From top: Sibley Field Guide, New Stokes Field Guide to Birds, Peterson Field Guide, Crossley ID Guide Photo: F. Martin Ramin/The Wall Street Journal

Ms. Barry of the Cornell University Lab of Ornithology recommends the **Sibley Field Guide** series; its precise paintings, by artist and author David Sibley, capture the essence of each species, said Ms. Barry. The **Peterson Field Guide** is another popular illustrated line that is notable because it highlights unique features of each bird that will help you distinguish it from similar-looking species.

If you prefer photos to illustrations, consider the **Kaufman Field Guide** series. Its photos are digitally enhanced to bring out unique characteristics, like the slightly different wing patterns of the Hutton's Vireo and Ruby-crowned Kinglet.

And then there are titles that are more comprehensive but a bit too heavy for the field. The **New Stokes Field Guide to Birds** series has multiple images for each species, while the photos in the **Crossley ID Guide** series are taken at varying distances, emphasizing recognition of shape and size over minute details.

Apps

Even birding has entered the digital era. Cornell's ornithology lab has created an amazing app for beginners: **Merlin Bird ID** (*free for Android and iOS, allaboutbirds.org*). By asking five multiple-choice questions (e.g., What size was the bird? What were the main colors?), the app can help you identify which species you've seen.

Merlin Bird ID has about 400 birds in its database, but if you're looking for something more comprehensive, there's **iBird Pro** (\$15 for iOS, \$10 for Android). It has both photos and illustrations of some 900 species, as well as a similar interactive feature. Fans of David Sibley's print field guide can get it in app form: The **Sibley eGuide to the Birds of North America** (\$20 for iOS and Android) has photos and illustrations of over 800 birds.

All of the apps above include recordings of each species' song and alarm calls—which can come in handy with the help of a small Bluetooth speaker. Should birds prove elusive when you're on the trail, Mr. DeCandido suggested using the speaker to play an alarm call at a decent volume. Birds will “pop up to see what the hell is going on,” he said. And it doesn't matter which species' song you play. On a recent walk, Mr. DeCandido played a warbler's cry, piquing the interest of northern cardinals, crows and an American redstart.