

# Birdwatching

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"Birdwatchers" redirects here. For the movie, see [BirdWatchers \(film\)](#); for the rock band, see [The Birdwatchers](#).

"Birding" redirects here. For the killing of birds, see [hunting](#); for the capture of birds, see [bird trapping](#); for the magazine, see [Birding \(magazine\)](#).



People birdwatching on [Orchid Island](#) in [Indian River County, Florida](#)

**Birdwatching**, or **birding**, is a form of [wildlife observation](#) in which the observation of [birds](#) is a recreational activity. It can be done with the naked eye, through a visual enhancement device like [binoculars](#) and [telescopes](#), or by listening for bird sounds.<sup>[1][2]</sup>

Birdwatching often involves a significant auditory component, as many bird species are more easily detected and identified by ear than by eye. Most birdwatchers pursue this activity for recreational or social reasons, unlike [ornithologists](#), who engage in the study of birds using formal scientific methods.<sup>[1][2]</sup>

## Birding, birdwatching, and twitching



A birdwatching tower in [Hankasalmi](#), Finland

The first recorded use of the term *birdwatcher* was in 1891; *bird* was introduced as a verb in 1918.<sup>[3]</sup> The term *birding* was also used for the practice of *fowling* or hunting with firearms as in [Shakespeare's](#) *The Merry Wives of Windsor* (1602): "She laments sir... her husband goes this morning a-birding."<sup>[4]</sup> The terms *birding* and *birdwatching* are today used by some interchangeably, although some participants prefer *birding*, partly because it includes the [auditory](#) aspects of enjoying birds.

In North America, many birders differentiate themselves from birdwatchers, and the term *birder* is unknown to most lay people. At the most basic level, the distinction is perceived as one of dedication or intensity, though this is a subjective differentiation. Generally, self-described birders perceive themselves to be more versed in minutiae like identification (aural and visual), molt, distribution, migration timing, and habitat usage. Whereas these dedicated *birders* may often travel specifically in search of birds, *birdwatchers* have been described by some enthusiasts as having a more limited scope, perhaps not venturing far from their own yards or local parks to view birds.<sup>[1]</sup> Indeed, in 1969 a *Birding Glossary* appeared in [Birding](#) magazine which gave the following definitions:

**Birder.** The acceptable term used to describe the person who seriously pursues the hobby of birding. May be professional or amateur.

**Birding.** A hobby in which individuals enjoy the challenge of bird study, listing, or other general activities involving bird life.

**Bird-watcher.** A rather ambiguous term used to describe the person who watches birds for any reason at all, and should not be used to refer to the serious birder.

— *Birding, Volume 1, No.2*

*Twitching* is a British term used to mean "the pursuit of a previously located rare bird." In North America it is more often called *chasing*, though the British usage is starting to catch on there, especially among younger birders. The term *twitcher*, sometimes misapplied as a synonym for birder, is reserved for those who travel long distances to see a rare bird that would then be *ticked*, or counted on a list.<sup>[2][5]</sup> The term originated in the 1950s, when it was used for the nervous behaviour of Howard Medhurst, a British birdwatcher. Prior terms for those who chased rarities were *pot-hunter*, *tally-hunter*, or *tick-hunter*. The main goal of twitching is often to accumulate species on one's lists. Some birders engage in competition to accumulate the longest species list. The act of the pursuit itself is referred to as a *twitch* or a *chase*. A rare bird that stays put long enough for people to see it is *twitchable* or *chaseable*.<sup>[2][5]</sup>

Twitching is highly developed in the United Kingdom, the [Netherlands](#), [Denmark](#), [Ireland](#), [Finland](#) and [Sweden](#). The size of these countries makes it possible to travel throughout them quickly and with relative ease. The most popular twitches in the UK have drawn large crowds; for example, a group of approximately 2,500 people travelled to [Kent](#), England, to view a [golden-winged warbler](#) (*Vermivora chrysoptera*), which is native to North America.<sup>[6]</sup> Twitchers have developed [their own vocabulary](#). For example, a twitcher who fails to see a rare bird has *dipped out*; if other twitchers do see the bird, he may feel *gripped off*. *Suppression* is the act of concealing news of a rare bird from other twitchers.<sup>[2]</sup>

Many birdwatchers maintain a [life list](#), that is, a list of all of the species they have seen in their life, usually with details about the sighting such as date and location. The [American Birding Association](#) has specific rules about how a bird species may be documented and recorded in such a list if it is submitted to the ABA; however, the criteria for the personal recording of these lists are very subjective. Some birdwatchers "count" species they have identified audibly, while others only record species that they have identified visually. Some also maintain a *country list*, *state list*, *county list*, *yard list*, *year list*, or any combination of these.

## The history of birdwatching

The early interest in observing birds for their aesthetic rather than utilitarian (mainly food) value is traced to the late 18th century in the works of [Gilbert White](#), [Thomas Bewick](#), [George Montagu](#) and [John Clare](#).<sup>[7]</sup> The study of birds and natural history in general became increasingly prevalent in

Britain during the [Victorian Era](#), often associated with [collection](#), eggs and later skins being the artifacts of interest. Wealthy collectors made use of their contacts in the [colonies](#) to obtain specimens from around the world. It was only in the late 19th century that the call for bird protection began leading to the rising popularity of observations on living birds. The [Audubon Society](#) was started to protect birds from the growing trade in feathers in the United States while the [Royal Society for the Protection of Birds](#) began in Britain.<sup>[8]</sup>

The term "birdwatching" appeared for the first time as the title of a book "Bird Watching" by [Edmund Selous](#) in 1901.<sup>[9]</sup> In North America, the identification of birds, once thought possible only by shooting was made possible by the emergence of optics and field identification guides. The earliest field guide in the US was *Birds through an Opera Glass* (1889) by [Florence Bailey](#).<sup>[10]</sup>

Birding in North America was focused in the early and mid-20th century in the eastern seaboard region, and was influenced by the works of [Ludlow Griscom](#) and later [Roger Tory Peterson](#). *Bird Neighbors* (1897) by [Neltje Blanchan](#) was an early birding book which sold over 250,000 copies.<sup>[11]</sup> It was illustrated with color photographs of stuffed birds.<sup>[12]</sup>

The organization and networking of those interested in birds began through organizations like the Audubon Society that was against the killing of birds and the [American Ornithologists' Union](#) (AOU). The rising popularity of the car increased the mobility of birdwatchers and this made new locations accessible to those interested in birds.<sup>[13]</sup> Networks of birdwatchers in the UK began to form in the late 1930s under the [British Trust for Ornithology](#) (BTO). The BTO saw the potential to produce scientific results through the networks, unlike the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB) which like the Audubon Society originated from the bird protection movement.<sup>[14]</sup>

Like the AOU in North America, the BOU had a focus mainly in collection based taxonomy. The BOU changed focus to ecology and behaviour only in the 1940s.<sup>[15]</sup> The BTO movement towards 'organized birdwatching', was opposed by the RSPB which claimed that the 'scientification' of the pastime was 'undesirable'. This stand was to change only in 1936 when the RSPB was taken over by [Tom Harrisson](#) and others. Harrisson was instrumental in the organization of pioneering surveys of the great crested grebe.<sup>[16]</sup>

Increased mobility of birdwatchers ensured that books like *Where to Watch Birds* by [John Gooders](#) became best-sellers.<sup>[17]</sup> By the 1960s air-travel became feasible and long distance holiday destinations opened up with the result that by 1965, Britain's first birding tour company, *Ornitholidays* was started by Lawrence Holloway.<sup>[18]</sup> Travelling far away also led to problems in name usage, British birds like "wheatear", "heron" and "swallow" needed adjectives to differentiate them in places where there were several related species.<sup>[19]</sup> The falling cost of air-travel made flying to remote birding destinations a possibility for a large number of people towards the 1980s. The need for global guides to birds became more relevant and one of the biggest projects that began was the [Handbook of the Birds of the World](#) which started in the 1990s with Josep del Hoyo a country doctor in Catalonia, Jordi Sargatal and ornithologist Andy Elliott.<sup>[20]</sup>

Initially, birdwatching was a hobby practiced in developed countries such as the United States of America and the United Kingdom. Nevertheless, since the second half of the 20th century an increasing number of people in developing countries have engaged in this activity. Transnational birding has played an important role in this, as citizens from developing countries that engage in birdwatching usually develop this pastime due to influence of foreign cultures that already practise birding.<sup>[21]</sup>

## Economic and environmental impact

In the 20th century most of the birding activity in North America was done on the east coast. The publication of Roger Tory Peterson's field guide in 1934 led to the initial increase in birding. Binoculars became more easily available after World War II, which made this easier. The practice of travelling long distances to see rare bird species was aided by the rising popularity of cars.<sup>[22]</sup>

About 4% of North Americans were interested in birding in the 1970s and in the mid-1980s at least 11% were found to watch birds at least 20 days of the year. An estimate of 61 million birders was made in the late 1980s. The income level of birders has been found to be well above average.<sup>[23]</sup>

The 2000 publication of "The Sibley Guide to Birds" sold 500,000 copies by 2002.<sup>[24]</sup> but it was found that the number of birdwatchers rose but there appeared to be a drop in birdwatching in the backyard.<sup>[25]</sup>

According to a U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service study, birdwatchers contributed \$36 billion to the US economy 2006, and one fifth (20%) of all Americans are identified as birdwatchers.<sup>[26]</sup>

North American birders were estimated to have spent as much as US\$32 billion in 2001.<sup>[25]</sup> The spending is on the rise around the world. Kuşçenneti National Park (KNP) at Lake Manyas, a [Ramsar site](#) in Turkey was estimated to attract birders who spent as much as US\$103,320,074 annually.<sup>[27]</sup> Guided bird tours have become a major business with at least 127 companies offering tours worldwide. An average trip to a less-developed country costs \$4000 per person and includes about 12 participants for each of 150 trips a year. It has been suggested that this economic potential needs to be tapped for conservation.<sup>[28]</sup>

One of the expectations of [ecotourism](#) is that the travels of birdwatchers to a place will contribute to the improvement of the local economy which and in turn ensure that the environment is valued and protected. Numerous positive and negative impacts of birdwatching have been identified. Impacts include disturbance to birds, the environment, local cultures and the economy. Methods to reduce negative impact and improve the value to conservation are the subject of research.<sup>[29]</sup>

## Activities



Birdwatchers at J.N. "Ding" Darling National Wildlife Refuge, [Sanibel, Florida](#)

Many birdwatchers occupy themselves with observing local species (birding in their "local patch"<sup>[30]</sup>), but may also make specific trips to observe birds in other locales. The most active times of the year for birding in [temperate](#) zones are during the spring or fall [migrations](#) when the greatest variety of birds may be seen. On these occasions, large numbers of birds travel north or south to wintering or nesting locations. Early mornings are typically better as the birds are more active and vocal making them easier to spot.

Certain locations such as the local patch of forest, wetland and coast may be favoured according to the location and season. [Seawatching](#) is a type of birdwatching where observers based at a coastal

watch point, such as a headland, watch birds flying over the sea. This is one form of [pelagic](#) birding, by which pelagic bird species are viewed. Another way birdwatchers view pelagic species is from seagoing vessels.

Weather plays an important role in the occurrence of rare birds. In Britain, suitable wind conditions may lead to [drift migration](#), and an influx of birds from the east. In North America, birds caught in the tail-end of a hurricane may be blown inland.<sup>[31]</sup>



The [Strait of Messina](#), [Sicily](#), a classic [migration](#) bottleneck, seen from the [Peloritani](#) mountains

## Monitoring

Birdwatchers may take part in censuses of bird populations and migratory patterns which are sometimes specific to individual species. These birdwatchers may also count all birds in a given area, as in the [Christmas Bird Count](#) or follow carefully designed study protocols. This kind of [citizen science](#) can assist in identifying environmental threats to the well-being of birds or, conversely, in assessing outcomes of environmental management initiatives intended to ensure the survival of at-risk species or encourage the breeding of species for aesthetic or ecological reasons<sup>[according to whom?]</sup>.

This more scientific side of the hobby is an aspect of ornithology, coordinated in the UK by the [British Trust for Ornithology](#). The [Cornell Lab of Ornithology](#) hosts many citizen-science projects to track the number and distribution of bird species across North America. These surveys help scientists note major changes from year to year which may occur as a result of climate change, disease, predation, and other factors.<sup>[32][33]</sup>

## Environmental education



Moroccan students watching birds at Nador's lagoon as a part of [environmental education](#) activities organized by the [Spanish Ornithological Society](#)

Due to their accessibility and ubiquity, birds are a useful tool for [environmental education](#) and awareness on environmental issues. Birds easily transmit values on respect to nature and the fragility of [ecosystems](#).

## Competition



Birdwatchers watching Britain's fifth-ever [white-tailed lapwing](#) at [Caerlaverock, Scotland](#), 6 June 2007

Birding as a competitive event is organized in some parts of the world. These are found to be more exciting by some.<sup>[34]</sup> The birding competitions encourage individuals or teams to accumulate large numbers of species within a specified time or area with special rules. Some birdwatchers will also compete by attempting to increase their life list, national list, state list, provincial list, county list, or [year list](#). There have however been criticisms of such events especially when they are claimed to aid conservation when they may actually mask serious environmental issues.<sup>[35]</sup> The [American Birding Association](#) was originally started as a club for "listers", but it now serves a much broader audience. Still, the ABA continues to publish an official annual report of North American list standings.

Competitive birdwatching events include:

- Big Day: teams have 24 hours to identify as many species as possible.
- [Big Year](#): like a big day, but contestants are individuals, and need to be prepared to invest a great deal of time and money.
- Big Sit or Big Stay: birdwatchers must see birds from a circle of prescribed diameter (e.g.: 17-foot<sup>[36]</sup>). Once birds are spotted, birdwatchers can leave the circle to confirm the identity, but new birds seen may not be counted.

## Networking and organization

Prominent national and continental organizations concerned with birding include the [British Trust for Ornithology](#) and [Royal Society for the Protection of Birds](#) in the United Kingdom, and the [American Birding Association](#) and the [Cornell Lab of Ornithology](#) in North America. Many statewide or local Audubon organizations are also quite active in the United States, as are many provincial and local organizations in Canada. [BirdLife International](#) is an important global alliance of bird conservation organizations. Many countries and smaller regions (states/provinces) have "rarities committees" to check, accept or reject reports of rare birds made by birders.

## Equipment and technology



Birders using a tower hide to gain views over foreground vegetation. Bay of Liminka, south of [Oulu, Finland](#).

Equipment commonly used for birding includes [binoculars](#), a [spotting scope](#) with [tripod](#), a notepad, and one or more [field guides](#). Hides (known as *blinds* in North America) or observation towers are often used to conceal the observers from birds, and/or to improve viewing conditions. Virtually all optics manufacturers offer specific binoculars for birding, and some have even geared their whole brand to birders.

## Sound equipment

Recognition of [bird vocalizations](#) is an important part of a birder's toolkit. Sound information can assist in the locating, watching, identification and sexing of birds. Recent developments in audio technology have seen [recording and reproduction](#) devices shrink in both size and price, making them accessible to a greater portion of the birding community.

The non-linear nature of digital audio technology has also made selecting and accessing the required recordings much more flexible than tape-based models. It is now possible to take a recording of every birdcall you are likely to encounter in a given area out into the field stored on a device that will slip into your pocket, and to retrieve calls for playback and comparison in any order you choose.

## Photography

[Photography](#) has always been a part of birding, but in the past the cost of cameras with [super-telephoto lenses](#) made this a minority, often semi-professional, interest. The advent of affordable [digital cameras](#), which can be used in conjunction with a spotting scope or binoculars (using the technique of [afocal photography](#), referred to by the [neologism](#) "[digiscoping](#)" or sometimes *digibinning* for binoculars), have made this a much more widespread aspect of the hobby.

## Videography

As with the arrival of affordable [digital cameras](#), the development of more compact and affordable [digital video cameras](#) has made them more attractive and accessible to the birding community. Cross-over, non-linear digital models now exist that take high quality stills at acceptable resolutions, as well as being able to record and play audio and video. The ability to easily capture and reproduce not only the visual characteristics of a bird, but also its patterns of movement and its sound, has wide applications for birders in the field.

## Portable media players

This class of product includes devices that can play (some can also record) a range of digital media, typically video, audio and still image files. Many modern [digital cameras](#), [mobile phones](#), and [camcorders](#) can be classified as [portable media players](#). With the ability to store and play large quantities of information, pocket-sized devices allow a full birding multimedia library to be taken into the field and mobile Internet access makes obtaining and transmitting information possible in near real time.

## Remote birdwatching

New technologies are allowing birdwatching activities to take place over the Internet, using robotic camera installations and mobile phones set up in remote wildlife areas. Projects such as CONE [\[1\]](#) allow users to observe and photograph birds over the web; similarly, robotic cameras set up in largely inhospitable areas are being used to attempt the first photographs of the rare [ivory-billed woodpecker](#). These systems represent new technologies in the birdwatcher's toolkit. [\[37\]](#)

## Communication

In the early 1950s the only way of communicating new bird sightings was through the postal system and it was generally too late for the recipients to act on the information. In 1953 James Ferguson-Lees began broadcasting rare bird news on the radio in Eric Simms' *Countryside* program but this did not catch on. In the 1960s people began using the telephone and some people became hubs for communication. In the 1970s some cafes, like the one in [Cley, Norfolk](#) run by Nancy Gull, became centers for meeting and communication. This was replaced by telephone hotline services like "Birdline" and "Bird Information Service". [\[38\]](#)

With the advent of the [World-Wide Web](#), birders have been using the [Internet](#) to convey information; this can be via [mailing lists](#), [forums](#), [bulletin-boards](#), web-based [databases](#) and other media. [\[39\]\[40\]](#) While most birding lists are geographic in scope, there are special-interest lists that cater to bird-identification, 'twitchers', seabirds and raptor enthusiasts to name but a few. Messages can range from the serious to trivial, notifying others of rarities, questioning the taxonomy or identification of a species, discussing field guides and other resources, asking for advice and guidance, or organizing groups to help save habitats. Occasional postings are mentioned in academic journals and therefore can be a valuable resource for professional and amateur birders alike. [\[41\]\[42\]](#) One of the oldest, Birdchat [\[43\]](#) (based in the US) probably has the most subscribers, followed by the English-language fork of Eurobirdnet, [\[44\]](#) Birding-Aus [\[45\]](#) from Australia, SABirdnet [\[46\]](#) from South Africa and Orientalbirding. [\[47\]](#)

Several websites allow users to submit lists of birds seen, [\[48\]](#) while others collate and produce seasonal statistics, distribution maps.

## Code of conduct

As the numbers of birdwatchers increases, there is growing concern about the impact of birdwatching on the birds and their habitat. Birdwatching etiquette is evolving in response to this concern.<sup>[49]</sup> Some examples of birdwatching etiquette include promoting the welfare of birds and their environment, limiting use of photography, [pishing](#) and playback devices to mitigate stress caused to birds, maintaining a distance away from nests and nesting colonies, and respecting private property.<sup>[50]</sup>

The lack of definite evidence, except arguably in the form of photographs, makes birding records difficult to prove but birdwatchers strive to build trust in their identification.<sup>[51]</sup> One of the few major disputes was the case of the [Hastings Rarities](#).

## Socio-psychology

See also: [Biophilia hypothesis](#)

[Ethologist Nikolaas Tinbergen](#) considers birdwatching to be an expression of the male hunting instinct while [Simon Baron-Cohen](#) links it with the male tendency for "systemizing".<sup>[52]</sup> There have been suggestions that identification of birds may be a form of gaining status which has been compared with [Kula valuables](#) noted in Papua New Guinean cultures.<sup>[53]</sup>

A study of the motivations for birdwatching in New York concluded that initial motivations were largely similar in males and females, but males who participate actively in birding are more motivated by "sharing knowledge" with others, and active female birders are more motivated by their "intellectual" interest in studying birds, and by the "challenge" of identifying new and rare birds and improving their skills.<sup>[54]</sup> A study suggests that males leaned towards competitive birding while females preferred recreational birdwatching.<sup>[55]</sup> While the representation of women has always been low,<sup>[56]</sup> it has been pointed out that nearly 90% of all birdwatchers in the United States are white with only a few African Americans.<sup>[57]</sup>

Other minority groups have formed organizations to support fellow birders and these include the Gay birders<sup>[58]</sup> and the Disabled Birders Association.<sup>[56][59]</sup>

The study of birdwatching has been of interest to students of the sociology of science.<sup>[60]</sup>

## Famous birdwatchers

See also: [List of birdwatchers](#)

There are about 10,000 species of bird and only a small number of people have seen more than 7000. Many birdwatchers have spent their entire lives trying to see all the bird species of the world.<sup>[61]</sup> The first person who started this is said to be [Stuart Keith](#).<sup>[62]</sup>

Some birders have been known to go to great lengths and many have lost their lives in the process. [Phoebe Snetsinger](#) spent her family inheritance travelling to various parts of the world while suffering from a malignant melanoma, surviving an attack and rape in New Guinea before dying in a road accident in Madagascar.<sup>[63]</sup> She saw as many as 8,400 species. The birdwatcher [David Hunt](#) who was leading a bird tour in [Corbett National Park](#) was killed by a tiger in February 1985.<sup>[64][65]</sup> In 1971 [Ted Parker](#) travelled around North America and saw 626 species in a year. This record was beaten by [Kenn Kaufman](#) in 1973 who travelled 69,000 miles and saw 671 species and spent less than a thousand dollars.<sup>[66]</sup> Ted Parker was killed in an air-crash in Ecuador.<sup>[67]</sup>

From 2008 the top life-list has been held by Tom Gullick, an Englishman who lives in Spain. In 2012 he became the first birdwatcher to log over 9,000 species.<sup>[68]</sup> In 2008 two British birders, Alan Davies and Ruth Miller, gave up their jobs, sold their home and put everything they owned into a year-long global birdwatching adventure about which they wrote a book called "The Biggest Twitch". They logged their 4431st species on 31 October 2008.<sup>[69]</sup>

Birdwatching literature, field guides and television programs have been popularized by birders like [Pete Dunne](#) and [Bill Oddie](#).

## In media

The 2011 movie [The Big Year](#) depicted three birders competing in an [ABA](#) Area [big year](#).

## See also

- [Bird feeding](#)
- [Bird hide](#)
- [Bird migration](#)
- [Butterfly watching](#)
- [Important Bird Area](#)
- [List of birding books](#)
- [List of ornithology journals](#)

### Institutions:

- [American Birding Association](#)
- [Cornell Lab of Ornithology](#)
- [National Audubon Society](#)
- [Royal Society for the Protection of Birds](#)
- [World Series of Birding](#)
- [BirdLife Australia](#)

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