



by Karen Stephens

# Bird Watching Helps Children Become Nature-wise

Children are fascinated by nature discovery. When parents revisit natural wonders through the eyes of children, we're reminded that life, when all is said and done, is still infinitely remarkable. Taking time to really get to know the birds who share our habitat is a wonderful pastime for families. It's good, clean fun, and builds values of respect and compassion for nature and all living things.

Though most of us don't live in the thick of natural resources, almost any habitat has a variety of birds to capture children's interest. Any time of year is good for viewing birds. Each season offers new insights on how birds cope within the environment. During spring and fall, mass migration of some birds takes place — an outstanding phenomenon. How DO hummingbirds make it across continents without burning themselves out?

Children begin to notice similarities and differences in birds and that builds their skill for identifying birds. But the really fun part of bird watching (or as some call it: birding) is observing bird behavior. With experience, kids refine skills in concentration, observation, and reasoning. And they learn to deduce the hows and whys of bird behavior. In fact, observing birds in action — whether it be comical or combative — is much more fun than just rattling off names!

Whether you live among subdivisions, cornfields, woodlots, or near a river, lake, or stream, you can put these bird watching basics to good use with your kids. It's the stuff family ties are forged on.

## **Teach Children Good Birding Manners**

Be respectful of habitat and neighbors' yards. Don't shake trees, take eggs, or wreck nests. Walk slowly and quietly. Point out birds, don't yell. Shoot birds with a camera, nothing else. Leave grounded fledgling birds alone; Mom is probably nearby waiting for you to leave before she helps it back to the nest. (It's a myth that birds can smell and reject human contact.) Keep pets leashed so they don't chase birds, disturb neighbors, or destroy fragile habitats. Take only memories away with you and leave only footprints behind.

## **Bird Watching Supplies**

A water bottle and backpack of snacks is wise. If you go into rugged areas, take a first aid kit, too. Dress so you don't invite poison ivy or insect bites.

Bring binoculars (or a spotting scope) so school-age kids can focus on details, like bird color or beak shape. (So preschoolers don't feel left out, let them make their own binoculars by taping together two empty toilet paper rolls. Attach yarn for a neck strap.)

A camera or a sketch pad and pencils help children focus on detail and allow them to reflect on what they observe. A pad and pencil for recording species is handy, too. (Kids can keep a yearly bird record to track bird population increase or decrease.)

Bird identification guides, called field guides, name birds and help distinguish between similar looking birds. They narrow down possibilities by providing range maps of seasonal bird territory and preferred habitat. Some illustrate nest styles, too. Following are a few field guide options.

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**For children younger than age 8, check into:**

- *Birds, National Audubon Society First Field Guide* by Scott Weidensaul (New York: Scholastic, 1997).
- *Birds* by Gillian Doherty (London: Usborne Publishing, 2000). This book lists lots of great Internet links.

**For adults and children over age 8, include:**

- *Peterson Field Guides: Birds (Eastern or Western North American region)* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1980), and
- *The Audubon Society Field Guide to North American Birds (Eastern or Western region)* (New York: Alfred Knopf Publishing, 1977).

**Bird Identification Basics**

Birds are identified by field markings. Gradually introduce children to markings that are most obvious and easy to observe. As they master one criteria, introduce another. With practice, children learn to juggle all criteria for identification. So details are clearer, teach children to keep their back to the sun as much as possible. Below are field markings to spot when identifying birds.

- **Predominant color.** Mostly yellow, like a goldfinch, or mostly black, like a robin?
- **Comparative size.** Small like a sparrow, medium like a blue jay, or large like a crow?
- **Bill shape, size and color.** Black, long, and strong like a Northern flicker, short and blunt like a cardinal, straw-like as in a hummingbird, curved like a hawk or owl?
- **Body shape.** Long and sleek like a catbird, or round and plump like a chickadee?
- **Wing shape.** Swallows have pointed wings, broad-winged hawks are — well, broad.
- **Eye color.** Yellow like a brown thrasher, red like a loon, or black like a house finch?
- **Distinct feather color, shape, or design.** Red epaulettes of the red-winged blackbird? Rusty tail of the red-tailed hawk? Crest of a cardinal or titmouse? Black bib of the chickadee? White streak above the eye of a Carolina wren?
- **Flight pattern.** Hummingbirds fly up, down, frontwards, AND backwards. Other birds may undulate, fly straight, and even bob and weave.
- **Unique habits.** Flickers are a woodpecker that pecks at the ground to eat. Nuthatches often cling upside down on trees and make their way down to eat insects.
- **Bird songs and calls.** This takes concentration and practice. However, many backyard birds do produce distinctive sounds, like the “drink your tea” of the towhee or the backwards “whinny” of the screech owl.
- **Nest site and materials.** Mud, twigs, grass, feathers, and fur are typical construction materials, though hummers use lichen and spider webs. Tree cavities are nest spots for woodpeckers; wrens use most anything. Some birds nest high, others near the ground.
- **Foot details.** Webbed like a duck? Note color, number of toes. Even placement of toes, such as on a woodpecker, give identification clues.

**Bird Watching Sites**

- Your own back yard can be a great bird habitat, especially if you offer landscape with good bird options for eating, drinking, nesting, and finding shelter from predators. Plant seed and nectar producing flowers, such as purple coneflower, sunflower, honeysuckle, bee balm, trumpet creeper, and butterfly bushes. Plant native berry-producing bushes and nut-producing trees. Have kids provide fresh water daily in bird baths and fill bird feeders as needed. They can tend your bird-friendly garden, too.
- City parks, forest preserves, beaches, lakes, rivers, bogs and wetlands, idle farmland pastures, and other natural areas are good places to observe bird behaviors.

**Birding Resources**

- *Birdwatching for All Ages: Activities for Children and Adults* by Jorie Hunken (Chester, CT: The Globe Pequot Press, 1992).
- *Backyard Bird Watching for Kids: How to attract, feed and provide homes for birds* by George and Kit Harrison (Minoqua, WI: Willow Creek Press, 1997).
- *The Birdfeeder Book: An Easy Guide to Attracting, Identifying and Understanding Your Feeder Birds* by Don and Lillian Stokes (Boston: Little, Brown & Co., 1987).
- National Audubon Society: [www.audubon.org](http://www.audubon.org).

**About the Author** — Karen Stephens is director of Illinois State University Child Care Center and instructor in child development for the ISU Family and Consumer Sciences Department. For nine years she wrote a weekly parenting column in her local newspaper. Karen has authored early care and education books and is a frequent contributor to *Exchange*.

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