

# The Satisfaction of a Long Life List

Birding in Vermont is part treasure hunt, part outdoor adventure and a lot of sharing with your fellow bird watchers.

**M**y idea of the bird watching type is this: a focused and patient individual who sits in the woods for hours, waiting for a rare cockatoo to appear in the trees. In other words, the bird watcher has qualities that I lack. I'm a fidget. Watch me sit at my computer and you'll notice I can contort my legs into any number of yoga-like positions in a matter of minutes. And my observation skills are equally challenged. For example, during a trip to New York City, I walked past the now defunct "Bennifer" unaware we were sharing the same sidewalk—all while my friends waved and pointed, trying to get my attention.



Local birdwatchers (from left) Barbara Powers, Ruth Stewart, John Pitcher and Sue Westin  
Right: a view of Barbara Powers' bird log





*The bane of many trout fishermen's existence, the Great Blue Heron seldom misses a strike*

Considering these traits, I had concerns about my first bird watching experience. I decided to turn to local experts for help and advice. Manchester residents Barbara Powers and Ruth Stewart, who share decades of birding experience, offered to be my teachers. My goal: to prepare for a birding trip to the Tomhannock Reservoir in Raymertown, New York—a beautiful spot along Route 7. Powers, my guide for the day, said the location would be ideal for a beginner and promised we'd see all kinds of migrating geese and waterfowl.

The fact that there would be an abundance of birds gave me some assurance I wouldn't embarrass myself. I know what ducks and geese look like, after all. Although I did wonder what it was about the hobby that drew these people to spend weekends in the woods looking at birds.

"Birding is like a treasure hunt," Powers says. "Once you see the birds and their wonderful colors, you're hooked." To get started, she recommends simply watching birds in the backyard. Purchasing a field guide with color photographs of regional birds also helps beginning birders to familiarize themselves with different species (for more on helpful references see sidebar on page 60). When Powers started birding 35-years ago, she was surprised by the amount of birds she already recognized. "I knew a lot more than I

thought I did and studying my birding book helped me add more new birds to the list of species that I could identify."

Local nature organizations that sponsor events and field trips are also helpful for aspiring birders. According to Powers, the Woodstock-based Vermont Institute of Natural Science (VINS) is a key resource. At the VINS chapter in Manchester, she met an active group of birders and quickly honed her skills. Powers credits events like the annual VINS Birdathon, which requires participants to identify and locate as many species as they can in 24 hours, as a great way to get out and learn birding firsthand. The springtime event, which raises money for the nonprofit organization, welcomes birding novices and experts alike, but its name makes me wonder if birders are a competitive bunch. Powers assures me that bird watching is a fairly low-key hobby. "If anything, birders are more helpful than competitive."

She says Internet chat rooms, such as the Vermont-based "Bird Chat"—<http://vtbird@list.uvm.edu>—are a perfect example of camaraderie among birders. The site allows bird watchers throughout the state to post sightings on a daily basis. "Last year, someone spotted a rare bird in Cornwall and posted it on the site. Before long, everyone was heading there to get a glimpse of it."

Powers' birding buddy, Ruth Stewart, says the helpful nature among bird watchers is just one of the sport's many benefits. Stewart started bird watching in the early seventies as a way to enjoy the outdoors and spend some quality time alone—away from the demands of work and family. "It's a great form of escapism," she says. "And unlike other hobbies, bird watching is relatively inexpensive."

Stewart, who has traveled to nearly every continent on birding expeditions, says little equipment is needed for bird watching. "All that's really required is a good pair of binoc-

## Recommended Resources for Birders

**The Vermont Institute of Natural Science (VINS)** offers events, seminars and trips for birding enthusiasts. For more information, go to: <http://www.vinsweb.org/>

**Vermont Bird Chat** posts sightings of all birds, including rarities. <http://vt-bird@list.uvm.edu>

**Rutland County Audubon** sponsors monthly bird watching walks and special events. To learn more about the Audubon, go to: <http://www.rutland-county-audubon.org>

***Bird Watching in Vermont*** by Ted Murin and Bryan Pfeiffer is packed with tips on everything beginners and experts need to know about local birding.

***Peterson's Field Guides: Eastern Birds*** by Roger Tory Peterson is a well-organized guide that features detailed, color photographs on hundreds of species.

ulars," she tells me. Serious or more specialized birders might invest in a spotting scope—a large portable telescope that offers higher magnification. To prepare for bird watching trips abroad, Stewart listens to CD's that document birds from all over the world. She says the CD's help her to identify birds by their mating songs or warning calls.

For beginners like me, however, she recommends concentrating on the bird's appearance first. This means becoming familiar with birds' seasonal plumage and markings. In other words, while a species might be one color in the spring, its feathers may be a completely different color in the fall. So how do Stewart and her birding counterparts commit these details to memory? She says birders note their sightings after every excursion. The written record not only documents what they have discovered, but also helps birders to remember what was special about each species they saw. According to Stewart, bird watchers refer to these records as 'life lists' and will often separate their lists into various categories. Stewart keeps lists of birds she has seen throughout the United States, but she is aware of passionate birders who keep a life list for nearly every sighting—from pictures of birds they see on holiday cards to bird songs they've identified on TV golf tournaments.

So what else do serious birders look for beyond hearing a warbler sound off behind Tiger Woods? Stewart says knowledge of migration patterns and breeding habits are also important for identification. Birders will congregate at various hot spots throughout the year, knowing full well they'll see a specific species. She says the Dead Creek National Wildlife Refuge in Addison County is an example of such a spot. "In October, the place is hopping with thousands of migrating snow geese. It's quite the spectacle."

While the bird watching season in Vermont lasts until mid-November, Barbara Powers says prime birding occurs in May, when birds are searching for their significant others. "Birds are more vocal in the spring. It's great fun to listen to their mating calls and try to figure out which species is delivering those calls." Also during this time of year, feeding birds stop in Vermont before migrating to their northern breeding grounds. "Spring is an exciting season—you never know what might show up in your backyard bird-feeder," she says.

It's the promise of discovery that keeps the bird watching faithful going

back for more. With this idea in mind, my concerns about our field trip to the Tomhannock are replaced by genuine excitement. All that's left to decide is what to wear. Powers advised that dressing for a day out in the field is very important. A long-sleeved shirt and long pants in light colors are the smartest choices for keeping pests at bay. On warm days, when bugs start to appear, she says it's best to bring along plenty of bug spray.

The day of our trip arrives and in typical New England fashion, it's cold and damp outside (i.e. no bug spray required). We drive to Bennington to pick up Powers' friend—Jack Leonard—a retiree who has over 40 years of birding experience. The two met through their involvement in VINS' latest project, the *Breeding Bird Atlas*: a five-year survey that charts nesting birds throughout the state of Vermont. Both Powers and Stewart

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are in charge of designated blocks in Manchester and Bennington, and they chat excitedly about their discoveries as we drive out towards our destination.

Powers decides to take us to a diner parking lot outside of Raymertown, where there is a clear view of the reservoir. I follow my guides' lead as she scurries down to the water, binoculars in hand. I peer into my own binoculars and all I can see are tall waves of grass. Powers thinks she



Field tools

sees an American Black Duck and she goes to the car for her spotting scope. Once the scope is ready for viewing, she points the lens in the duck's general direction. I'm impressed by Powers' sharp eye and detective-like abilities. Sure enough, there in the water, is a Black Duck.

Other than the duck, there's not a whole lot to see at the diner so we return to the car and drive north on Route 7. Powers quickly stops at a farmer's field along the side of the road and points to the sky. "There are crows dive-bombing that hawk!" she cries, grabbing the spotting scope from the car. "What drama!" echoes Leonard. I see the hawk flying from tree to tree with three crows chasing behind him, and wonder what exactly is happening. Powers' explains that the crows view the hawk as a predator and they are quite literally trying to chase him off their turf. West Side Story comes to mind, but instead of the Jets vs. the Sharks it's the Crows vs. the Hawk.

The rest of the day is spent driving around the perimeter of the reservoir, stopping at some key sites. During one stop, Leonard spots two birds in the water, but is unsure of what they are. I peer inside my binoculars and lo and behold, I recognize these birds! No pun

intended: I'm staring at a pair of loons—a species any Mainer with a canoe knows by heart. It's my proudest moment of the day.

Hawks. Crows. Black Ducks. Loons. I realize that Powers is right: I may be a novice, but there are quite a few species that I recognize. Still, there are others that I've never seen before. She points out an American Golden-Eye (no relation to James Bond), a duck that has large puffy cheeks and distinctly yellow eyes. We spot a Double Crested Cormorant—a great winged bird with a long beak that has the elegance of a Crane. My favorite sighting is of a duck called a Hooded Merganser. The male has a triangular white marking on its head that looks a lot like a marching band helmet.

Back home, I open my field guide and look up the section on Ducks and Swimming Birds. It's remarkable how I'm able to identify what I've seen during my trip. Before long, I've recorded nearly 20 species on my first life list: Birds of the Tomhannock—not as exciting as Birds of the Masters Golf Tournament, but it's a start. ◇

*Jennifer Hazard, a frequent contributor to STRATTON Magazine, divides her time between Manchester and Yarmouth, Maine.*