



AN INTRODUCTION TO BIRDWATCHING

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1. I would like to get to know the birds in my area a little bit better. What tools do I need as a beginner?

As a complete novice in bird watching, you will need only two things to begin with: some useful binoculars and a good identification book. If you are not yet sure whether you would like to do practice bird watching in the long term, then you should not invest a lot of money. You can find well-manufactured binoculars of a good quality from about 60 pounds; sophisticated lenses for higher demands, which also enable you to have enjoyable observations for a prolonged period of time, cost about 150 pounds or more.

2. Which binoculars should I buy?

It depends on how, where and when you plan on using your optical tools. Do you want to observe in your own garden and find out what types of birds breed there, go looking for food or visit their feeding house in the winter? Then all you need to begin with is a pair of all-round binoculars with 8x or 10x maximum zoom (for example 8 x 40 or 10 x 42). These binoculars have a luminosity which should be more than sufficient for observations in the daylight and a field of vision which should be large enough to follow birds which move quickly. If you would like to observe at night or at dusk, then you should consider buying a pair of night glasses (for example 7 x 50 or 8 x 56), which you can obviously use for the whole day.

3. What do the numbers on the binoculars or the spotting scope mean?

Normally you will find two different figures on your binoculars or your spotting scope, for example "10 x 25" or "12 x 50." The first number always shows the magnification, the second shows the diameter of the object lens in millimetres. A lens with the numbers "10 x 25" therefore magnifies 10-times, and the object lens (the opening of the binoculars) has a diameter of 25mm. The magnification factor 10 means that you can see a bird as if it is 2.5m away, when it is actually 25m from you.

In tight spaces (for example in a garden overgrown with trees and bushes), a magnification factor of 8 is enough. In the open country or by the water, it is recommended to use binoculars with 10x or 12x magnification. But be warned: Try them out before buying, to see whether you can use binoculars with 12x magnification without any blurring.

4. What identification book will help me a little more?

There are many bird identification books (also called field guides) on the market. It is also important to take into account where you would like to do your observations. Is your planned place of observation your closest environment or should the field guide also cover your holiday destination (for example Spain or Turkey)? There are some good identification books, which only deal with the birds in Central Europe. If the book covers the whole of Europe (including the Middle East and North Africa), then some bird species will appear, which you almost never see in Central Europe and would unnecessarily confuse a beginner.

On the other hand, birds are very mobile, and often appear in places that you wouldn't expect them to be, especially during migratory periods. You really do need a good identification guide, for example one which deals with all the birds in Europe, the Middle East and North Africa. This is important because some species are very similar. If only a part of them are discussed in the book, then you cannot always be sure if the bird in front of you can be identified properly.

5. Where is the best place to birdwatch?

In principle, everywhere. Even right in the middle of an urban area we can come across an astonishing amount of different species, if we just look and listen attentively. Many birds have managed to take advantage of the opportunities available to them even in populated areas. Black redstarts, originally birds that live high up in the mountains, live on the roofs of our cities. Blackbirds, great tits and blue tits, greenfinches, collared doves, swifts and many others are city dwellers. Kestrels nest in church towers and other tall buildings, unless you don't let them in and even the rare peregrine falcons can sometimes be seen brooding in the middle of the city, from high buildings to churches. There they live comfortably off pigeons which are easily reachable. The bustle and the noise of the traffic below do not disturb them and also the breed is relatively undisturbed, even high above the hustle and bustle of the city.

6. What habitats should I search for?

You can't answer this generally. Many birdwatchers develop individual preferences over the course of time. It can be very rewarding to search for a favourite observation spot, which is often just outside your front door and to see what changes over a period of time. Bird populations change very quickly, above all during the migratory period. Because many birds and many songbirds are also nocturnal migrants, it can happen that, in the morning, countless small birds can rest in a meadow landscape with hedges or single trees, while in the previous afternoon only a few birds could be seen.

Searching on a field full of pigeons, you can often find a dove under the road or wood pigeons. Drawing ruff often rest on dry fields and lucky people can discover a dotterel or in winter a Merlin, a small falcon which is hidden behind the tree sparrows and gold bunting. The highly mobile birds are always great for an unexpected surprise.

7. Why do I need a spotting scope?

Spotting scopes are monoculars with magnification between around 20 and 80 (depending on what lens you use). They can then be used (where possible) to see for great distances or to search large open areas for birds. The classic area to use them is large surfaces of water. A spotting scope is greatly suitable for either observing slowly-moving objects, so swans, geese, divers, gulls, cormorants and other water birds. Due to the high magnification, the field of view is quite small.

Therefore the optic offers the possibility of perceiving details, which would completely escape you with binoculars. How big is the white spot on the outermost (tenth) feather of the seagull, which is floating 400 or 500m away? Is it a yellow-legged gull or a Caspian? Maybe they lift a stretched leg out of the water and you can see if it is pale or intense yellow. Is the head pure white or do they have a dark dash? Modern optics with coated lenses allow you to solve these problems, which were previously unresolved.

The beauty of observing with a spotting scope is also that you cannot disturb the birds, because you can still keep a large distance from them. To observe rare birds of prey (eagles, golden eagles and peregrine falcons) in their nest would be irresponsible, if you are equipped with just a pair of conventional binoculars. From great distances (more than 1000m) you do not disturb them and can therefore participate in the family life of these large interesting birds, because you can perceive details in their coming and going from the nest.

8. What accessories do I need for my spotting scope?

Most people are in the position to make use of binoculars with 10x or 12x magnification quietly and without any blurring. Obviously this doesn't apply to a spotting scope with far stronger magnification. For this you most definitely need a tripod, on which the spotting scope can be mounted and which can be moved in every direction. Whether you prefer technically demanding spherical heads or rotatable head support is of secondary importance. Try both of them out and decide for yourself, which one is most suitable for you.

Both systems obviously offer the possibility of fixing the spotting scope onto a chosen setting. It is nice when you can observe an interesting bird over a long period of time or want to show it to a fellow observer. In most cases, a hand movement is enough to remove the locking and to make the spotting scope tilt and swivel, for

example, then when the observed water bird suddenly flies up or simply floats "out of the picture." Good metal tripods start at prices of around 40 pounds; Ball or tilt heads cost between 25 and 40 pounds.

Another important cause variable is the weight. Wooden tripods are very stable, but also very heavy. They are suitable for being used when stationary, even in the water. Metal, especially aluminium, combines low weight with great stability (important when it's windy!). Anyone who has to carry their spotting scopes or tripods over long distances are clearly thankful for every single gram that they can save on weight. The ultimate in this regard are tripods made of carbon fibre, however these are more expensive.

9. How much will a good spotting scope cost?

Here the same thing applies for any technological device: Anyone who wants something of higher quality should not hesitate to invest in a high-end spotting scope, for example from Zeiss or Swarovski. Such devices cost at least 1500 pounds, but can be used for a whole lifetime. Many manufacturers even give you a 30-year warranty. Anyone who knows that they will often use their device outside under differing weather conditions, is well advised to not buy a cheap scope.

For beginners, who do not yet know whether birdwatching will become a lifelong passion for them, a device of decent quality should be enough, something that will deliver good results on a sunny day as well as when it is more overcast. Such scopes cost between 150 and 400 pounds (for example a Bresser 20-60 x80 with multicoated optics and a waterproof case).

What is decisive when buying is taking into account how, when and how often you would like to use the device. Compare it to driving a car: a salesman, who travels 100,000km a year should (for good reason) invest more in a car than someone, who only travels now and then. For the latter, they should go for a cheaper car, which at the same time is technically sufficient and is reliable for long-distance journeys, even if it's not the model of choice.

10. What do I need to keep in mind when buying a spotting scope?

One important thing to consider when buying a spotting scope is its luminosity. One main indicator, of how luminous a device is, is firstly the lens diameter, which is the second figure of your device's specifications. Anyone who is outside with differing light conditions should go for a spotting scope with a minimum diameter of 80mm. The bigger the object lens is, the more light will come into the spotting scope.

The luminosity is also dependent on the quality of the manufactured lens and on the price, but especially on the magnification that you chose. Higher magnifications cost light, that is to say that the higher the magnification factor that you set, the darker the picture will be.

11. Can I only use my spotting scope by the water?

No. Large water surfaces are of course the classic place to observe, because you can see everything there, especially in the migration period and in the winter, when water birds move very slowly over the surfaces. However, spotting scopes are always useful, when you can't get closer to the birds or don't want to (for example for your own protection).

Scanning extensive rock walls for golden eagles or wallcreepers is a lot more fun with a powerful spotting scope and is also far more successful than with some simple binoculars.

Time and again, it is amazing how birds are able to hide themselves in their habitat. The colourful wallcreeper is no exception. Wallcreepers often scour the entire rock face, and then fly off further down and climb back up while keeping a look out. The birds, which resemble large butterflies, love to stay near flowing water.

Anyone who wants to not only identify and to "tick off" birds, but also to watch them in detail, should definitely invest in a spotter scope rather than merely some binoculars, in all open or semi-open habitats.

12. How do I find and identify birds in the woods?

Anyone who wants to observe and identify forest birds, you have a real problem in the spring and summer: Trees and shrubs are leafy and the view of the observer is often restricted to just a few metres until the next "green wall." Birds are practically everywhere, but are often very hard to see. If you cannot see them, you should try and listen to them. All bird species have very characteristic, species-specific calls, which in most cases allow you to identify them. Try to identify the bird call. It's best to begin with the species that you already know quite well (blackbird, great tit or a chaffinch). At the beginning it is very helpful to concentrate on an individual that you can see and hear clearly. The loud, blaring song of the chaffinch is so catchy that you can recognise it immediately. If you then slowly wander through the forest, you can guess, based on the singing chaffinches, roughly where the area ends and the next one begins, and therefore how large the chaffinch population is.

The same method can now be used to identify the other species. This is in the spring, especially in the early morning hours when most forest birds sing persistently and relatively simply.

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You don't have to be particularly musical to distinguish the songs. Many bird songs are clearly divided into stanzas, such as the loud, flute-like song of the thrush, which they often repeat several times. Others are simply constructed and so catchy that you can immediately recognise them, if you know who sings it. An example is the chiffchaff, which sings its name practically non-stop from March to May (“zilpzalpzilpzilpzalpzilp....” often broken up with “trrrt” calls. It is not always as easy to describe bird sounds with letters. Get used to rewriting the tone, volume and sound character in your own words. Bird songs can be melodic, soft, sonorous, energetic, shrill, demanding or hard. They can be divided into stanzas, falling, rising, simple or very complex. Some forest birds make a soft sound, barely audible apart from when you're very close, before they actually start singing. (Warblers do this).

If your knowledge of bird sounds is slowly growing, then it is easier to focus on the still unknown bird calls and to selectively pursue this.

13. Do birds always sing?

No, but only in the time of pair formation and propagation, which is generally in the spring and early summer. Only then do they also claim their own territory, which they defend with their singing against conspecifics. Some species sing even on sunny autumn days, but then they are usually quieter and more subdued. City birds (blackbird, great tit, blue tit, etc.) can already hear her singing on friendly winter days.

Utterances that we hear during the rest of the year are known as calls. You are not bound to the breeding season and can easily perform various functions (e.g. warning, contact or begging calls). You should also learn bird calls, which can sound totally different to the singing. Who hears the faint "Zipp" nocturnal migratory song thrushes for the first time might not think that it belongs to the same bird, which is noisy in the spring and is often in full song from the top of a tree.

14. Why do birdwatchers use binoculars as well as a spotting scope? Isn't just one of them enough?

No, the purpose of a spotting scope is different to that of some binoculars. Ambitious observers therefore often go for both. Binoculars with their relatively large field of view, are suitable for scanning the air or for inspecting (for example) a forest edge or a body of water to see if there are any interesting birds there. If the distances are small or you find yourself in a close landscape (forest, scrubland etc.) then binoculars are often sufficient.

But if you have, especially in open landscapes, discovered an interesting observation object, it can be very rewarding to inspect closer with a high-magnification spotting scope.

Of course you can also track moving birds with spotting scopes. This requires some practice though, due to the smaller field of view. It is not easy to keep a bird in the frame when it is flying quickly, while your spotting scope is moving too. However you will get better at finding a bird in the sky or keeping a flying bird in the frame the more you do it, because familiarity with the device improves over time too and it will become automatic (like changing gears when driving a car: it is automatic for an experience driver).

15. What interesting habitats can I observe, apart from in the water or the woods?

Every single habitat can be interesting - sometimes even barren farmland. Birds are highly mobile and many species will be migrating, although not necessarily on completely empty wasteland, but rather the open space and the absence of interference (apart from the weekend, although there are many people on walks). Skylark, seeds and carrion crow, wood pigeon, hollow, street pigeon, lapwing, starling, wheatear and whinchat - these are just some of the bird species that can be observed seasonally in the meadows.

In general, however, the principle applies: the less intense a piece of land is used, the less people come to it, the more interesting it is probably as bird habitat. This is not just for habitat management measures that are specially made so as to make habitats for birds and other animals and plants more attractive.

Therefore, search in the cleared field for "wild" spots, such as hedges, single trees, unpaved roads, unused gusset with vegetation (thistles, arable weeds, grasses, burdock, etc.); for banks that are perhaps only mowed once a year, for material storage sites and small excavations in the landscape, ponds, streams with vegetated banks etc. Birds use such "neglected" sites for foraging, as cover or for breeding.

The reed warbler, which attracts attention with its singing from late April until well into the summer, often only needs a reed of 1 or 2 meters wide for nest building. Yellowhammer (on moister sites and reed buntings) put their soil nests on embankments and roadsides if they are only partially natural and rarely disturbed. Every landscape structure that stands out from the so-called intensively used normal landscape, is worth a second look.

Stay at a distance for a while in such places and watch what happens. Small birds who might initially be hidden, often dart back out of the cover when they realize there is no immediate danger. The tree sparrow nests in an old nest box that someone has attached to a tree. In an old barn a wagtail flies in and out, which probably has its nest in any niche or gap. A red-backed shrike appears on a thorn bush and has its nest there, while it lurks for larger insects or mice. Patience pays off here, and a good device helps you to witness interesting life events in their environment.