

Questions from Lakeshore Park

What is birding? Birding is simply an acronym for the sport of watching birds. Birding can be watching the birds that come to your feeders in your backyard. It can be observing birds while you take a walk or hike. Or it can refer to a more serious approach of watching, studying and keeping records of the birds you see. Serious birders are likely to take specific trips to places like Seven Islands State Birding Park so they can see a greater variety of birds and ones they don't often see in their backyards or public parks. In all cases, birding is just the joy of watching birds.

What influenced me to become a birdwatcher? I grew up hunting and fishing with my dad. Because we loved nature and the outdoors we were somewhat interested in birds. When I was a freshman at UT, my dad and I went on a several days birding trip to the Everglades with a young man named Fred Alsop who was getting his doctorate in Ornithology at the University of Tennessee. Fred's enthusiasm for locating and identifying birds rubbed off on dad and me. We pretty much gave up hunting at that point preferring to watch, study and photograph birds rather than shooting them. It has since been a lifelong hobby of mine.

What's my Favorite thing about birdwatching? This one is easy as I have shared it with people many times. My favorite thing about birdwatching is it has taken me to hundreds of National Parks, National Seashores, National Wildlife Refuges, State Parks and numerous other types of world treasures. While I love birds and observing them, the real payoff for me has been the places I have gotten to see. A few years ago, I set out to see 100 species of birds in each of Tennessee's 95 counties. It took four years as I had to make multiple visits to most counties. Again, the real benefit I got out of the quest was driving the backroads of Tennessee and seeing how diverse, beautiful, and great our state is.

What are the key items a birdwatcher should have with them? Number 1, 2 and 3 are a pair of decent binoculars. While you can enjoy birds without them, using a pair of binoculars increases the enjoyment ten fold or more. You can zoom in and see so much detail that you cannot see with the naked eye. You don't have to have a real expensive pair of binoculars but if you really want to see more and enjoy more, spend at least a couple hundred dollars and buy a decent pair of birding binoculars.

If you really want to learn what species of birds you are seeing, a small bird field guide is good to have. Or you can use a fold out type guide that shows the common birds in Tennessee. Wild Birds Unlimited in West Knoxville has several types of good bird identification options to choose from.

As you get more serious, your will likely find your smartphone will get loaded with many apps that will help with locating, identifying, and recording all your birding adventures.

What are some of the key etiquettes to birding? So much of birding involves listening. Good birders identify more birds by sound than they do by sight. But when you are learning it's the other way around. When you are in a group of birders, be aware that too much talking and loud talking when the group stops to look at a bird is usually detrimental. Learn to listen and make as little noise as possible when others are trying to focus on birds.

When is the best time of year to watch birds in East Tennessee? If you are watching birds at a feeder in your backyard, the best time of year is now. It's always good and always fun.

If you are interested in seeing the biggest variety of birds, spring and fall migration are the best times. Many species of birds are passing through the state on their way to nesting grounds further north or to wintering grounds further south. Spring migration is mid-April to mid-May. Fall migration is mid-September to mid-October. During spring migration most of the birds are in a bright colorful plumage (their feathers) and are easier to identify. During fall migration there are many more birds due to all the young that were born but they have molted (changed their feathers) and are more dull and harder to identify.

If you just want to go see hundreds of birds nesting in Knox County in one spot, go to Seven Islands State Birding Park between mid-May and mid-June. The weather is mild, the birds are singing constantly and they are usually easier to see.

If you are still new to birding and are interested in seeing more birds check with the Knoxville Area Birding group and see what bird walks are scheduled. All their walks are open to the public but some are specifically for new birders. You can see what is going on by going to knoxbirds.org and looking at their calendar.

What is the most popular bird that one would find here in East Tennessee? Different people will have different answers. But the bird I feel more casual birders talk about is the Northern Cardinal. The males are bright red with a reddish beak and a red crest on their head. Cardinals are communal, meaning they hang out in a group as opposed to a bird like a Northern Mockingbird that has his own territory and doesn't allow other mockingbirds near. So, when you have one cardinal you could just as easily have 10. Northern Cardinals are eloquent, they have good temperaments, and they are feeder munchers. By that I mean they love to hang out at the feeder for long periods picking up one seed at a time and munching on it till they get inside and savor the seed.

Are there any specific types of birds that migrate to Tennessee? This question is too big for a small answer. There are numerous birds that migrate through Tennessee and there are numerous birds that migrate to Tennessee, both for the summer and the winter. In spring, many birds that rely on insects to feed their young come from further south. This includes warblers, flycatchers, kingbirds, swallows, swifts, vireos and more. These birds would simply not survive in winter, so they return south in the fall. We also have large numbers of birds that nest further north in summer then move south to East Tennessee in the fall and spend the winter here. These include many species of sparrows, ducks, gulls, kinglets and more. A good

example is at Seven Islands State Birding Park they have two species of sparrows during the summer but have 8 species of sparrows over the winter.

What's something you think anyone who is new to birding or thinking about getting into birding should know? Wow, big question. Like most hobbies or sports, learning can be a challenge. There are so many birds to learn about and so many sounds to learn to identify. Then the birds make it so difficult because they change their colors at different times during the year and each bird seems to have many variations of sounds they make. It goes on and on and yes, it can be challenging.

But birdwatching tends to be one of the most relaxing sports known to man. You don't have to keep score, you don't really need to know what birds you are looking at and you don't have to feel pressure to do things a particular way. All you need to do is enjoy the beauty of nature. And birds are everywhere so birding is a pastime you can often enjoy at work, at home, while taking a walk or as your travel around this great country. I will say though, the more you learn about birds the more you will likely get out of the hobby of birding.