BIRTHING BASICS

Cold weather is moving the snowbirds south. Thousands are flying in to take advantage of mild weather while they feed and build energy reserves for the long journey home in the spring. No, I am not talking about your neighbors, but the winged ones that visit here in the winter.

This is a great time to take up bird watching with family and friends. Share some time together, visit some of the popular nearby birding locations and enjoy the outdoors. If you have not finished your shopping list, maybe this will give you some ideas.

Birding is a fun hobby that is suitable for young or young at heart. All it takes is a pair of binoculars and a bird guide for our area. You can observe birds eating at a backyard feeder, on a walk at the lakeshore or in one of our many community or state parks.

Basic equipment and an easy to use bird guide are not expensive. You don’t have to spend a lot of money, but you might get hooked and want to go visit other areas of the state to find different birds than we have here.

Birders in Florida spend nearly $477 million each year. According to the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC), annual retail sales in Florida related to birding are second behind California.

FWC has a great free online publication to help you select and use binoculars and learn the basics of bird identification. Find it on the internet at http://myfwc.com/gfbt/Birdbasics.htm.

Birds are identified by key characteristics including shape, size and color. It is difficult to recognize many of the LBJ’s (little brown jobs as my Audubon friend calls them). However, you will soon learn to recognize the most common birds.

You will notice herons have long legs for wading at the water’s edge while woodpeckers have short legs and toes pointed in opposite directions to help them climb tree trunks and hang upside down on small limbs.

The beaks of birds give you hints about what they feed on. Ibis have long curved bills to probe into the soil for insects and worms. Cardinals have short beaks designed for cracking seeds. Herons have long pointed beaks for spearing fish. Hawks have shorter curved bills for ripping flesh as they feed.

Sometimes, colors help you identify birds. Colorful red cardinals, blue jays and bluebirds and the yellow-rumped warbler will be easy to spot. Other brown warblers may be more difficult. The point of feathers on the head of the tufted titmouse helps you recognize this grey bird at your feeder.
Field guides are a great resource in learning about bird identification and biology. There are many to choose from and you might find one at a second hand book store. Look for guides specific to the Southeastern US or Florida. There are even handy laminated charts with the most common birds. I find these are lightweight and fit easily into a backpack or boat bag.

Cornell Lab of Ornithology has some good information and identification tips on birds that visit feeders on their website at http://www.birds.cornell.edu.

Once you get the basics of shape, size and color figured out, there are a few more hints to help you narrow down the specific type or species of bird you are looking at. How the bird moves and where you find it are some ways to help you distinguish similar looking birds. Learning birds by their calls when you can’t even see them is an advanced skill that you will learn with experience.

Want to know where the birding hot spots are? Get a map of the Great Florida Birding Trail. Maps of sections of the trail are printable from the web at www.floridabirdingtrail.com or call FWC staff at (850) 488-9478.

If you want to meet other birders and learn about our local feathered friends, check out the Kissimmee Valley Audubon Society. They have monthly meetings with guest speakers and fabulous field trips.

Learn lots of birds in a day and join Audubon members for the upcoming Christmas Bird Count (CBC). For over a century, volunteers have been collecting information on early-winter bird populations. This helps scientists and birders monitor the ranges and numbers of many bird species.

This year’s CBC will be Sunday, December 30, 2007. Teams work together in areas to see how many different types they can identify. It becomes a fun contest and beginners learn the common birds fast. You do NOT have to be a good birder to participate. The participants last year identified a total of 110 bird species!

There is a $5 fee for participants but first timers are free. After the count, join all the teams for a Count-Down Dinner at The Catfish Place in St. Cloud to swap stories. Contact Peggy Cholley for more information at pegs04@CFL.RR.com or call 407-580-5384.

A birding field guide, binoculars and feeder are inexpensive gifts but provide hours of enjoyment throughout the year. Best wishes for a safe and happy holiday season.

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