

# Florida birding

# 101

*By Mark Kiser*



Birdwatching, or birding, as it's often called, is a fast-growing, fun-filled pastime enjoyed by all ages. According to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, there are nearly 48 million bird watchers in the United States. Forty-two million Americans watch birds around the home, while 20 million travel to observe birds. Whether you are a casual or avid bird watcher, Florida is one of the best places to be.

Like many hobbies, birdwatching can seem intimidating at first. More than 500 bird species have been recorded in Florida, and many birds are similar enough in appearance (sparrows and gulls for example) that learning to identify them can be downright frustrating. Some species like warblers, vireos and rails are quite secretive, providing only fleeting glimpses. Sometimes the birds you see don't look like the pictures or drawings in the book you have. Names of birds even change on occasion, adding to the confusion.

With patience and practice, however, anyone can learn to identify, with confidence, their backyard birds and those in the wild. Luckily, you don't need much equipment to get started. The two essential items birders need are binoculars and a field guide. A notebook to record your



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**Above:** Birders enjoy a field trip to the Space Coast's Tosohatchee WMA. **Below:** The eastern meadowlark is most common in the open pastures and prairies of the Florida peninsula. **Facing page:** The eastern phoebe, a common flycatcher which winters throughout Florida, is often seen perched on utility wires, fences and treetops.

observations also is recommended. You'll be surprised at how often you refer to it.

### Binoculars

If you are new to birding, choose good-quality binoculars, aiming for the best mid-priced pair you can afford. Try a range of brands and models before you buy. Low-grade optics will give you fuzzy images, eyestrain, headaches — and not much fun. Good binoculars are well-worth the investment and will last for decades if properly cared for. Forget the really expensive models for now. You can always trade up later if you wish. When choosing binoculars consider the following:

- **Magnification** – Seven- or eight-power (magnification) binoculars are great for almost all types of birding and are easier to hold steady than the heavier, 10-power and larger models. You'll also locate birds more quickly.
- **Size** – The optics you choose should accommodate the

distance between your eyes.

- **Weight** – They should be light enough to carry comfortably for hours in the field.
- **Eyecups** – If you wear eyeglasses, make sure your binoculars have rubber eyecups that twist or fold down.

Practice using your optics at home until you can locate and quickly focus on a stationary object. Then try your hand at a bird flitting around your yard. Without taking your eyes off the bird, raise the binoculars up to your eyes. Keep using this technique, and soon you'll be able to "lock onto" birds at rest and in flight.

### Field guides

To help identify what you're seeing, there are numerous, excellent field guides available, some with photographs and some with illustrations. Beginners often find those with illustrations (like those by National Geographic, Roger Peterson and David Sibley) more helpful, as artists can portray all the various "field



**Above:** The indigo bunting will visit bird feeders and likes millet. **Below:** The northern parula, one of the most common warblers in Florida, is often easier to hear than to see. Both the bunting and parula breed in the northern portion of the state and winter in southern Florida.

marks” that help distinguish one species from another. However, photograph-based guides (such as Kenn Kaufman’s) can show amazing detail as well. Browse through several guides and pick one that seems right for you.

Next, spend time getting familiar with your field guide at home. You’ll want to learn how the book is organized, and where the major bird groups are located. Most guides are arranged according to the fossil record (how old the species are thought to be). Water birds like ducks, geese and loons are considered the oldest birds, and as such, they are at or near the front. Orioles, blackbirds and finches are at the back. Create some homemade tabs for the bird family groups in your new book; it will help you find the right page faster. Also, don’t be afraid to write in your field guide. Many birders jot down all sorts of notes – observations, behaviors, places and dates first seen, etc. – right on the pages.

## Getting started

For beginners, it’s best to start out learning your common backyard and local birds. You probably know quite a few already by sight and even some by their sounds. When trying to identify an unfamiliar bird, there are numerous clues you’ll want to look for, including silhouette (shape and size), plumage, behavior, voice and habitat. Study the bird as long as possible before trying to find it in your field guide (more often than not, the bird will fly off while you’re still flipping through the pages). Make as many mental notes as you can and write them down (or use a pocket recorder). Many birders practice learning bird songs and calls at home with tapes, CDs and software programs. This will help improve your birding skills immensely, as you’ll hear far more birds than you’ll ever see. Try learning just a few birds at a time; you’ll retain more that way.

Once you feel like you’re starting to get the hang of it, go along on a morning outing with someone more experienced. Local Audubon chapters and bird clubs offer numerous field trips in spring, fall and winter (summer birding in Florida can be a bit too warm for some). Don’t worry about trying to identify every bird you see. Focus on learning a few new ones each time, and your skills will grow. Even experts have trouble telling some species apart, and sometimes identification just isn’t possible due to distance, bad lighting or obscured views. It’s all part of the game, though, and what makes birding both challenging and rewarding.

For more information about selecting binoculars and field guides, and about learning to identify birds, download or request a copy of *Birdwatching Basics* at [www.florida-birdingtrail.com/birdbasics.htm](http://www.florida-birdingtrail.com/birdbasics.htm).



Before long, you'll want to get out and explore on your own the abundant birdlife and natural beauty Florida has to offer. The Sunshine State really is a birder's paradise (fifth overall in the U.S. in terms of bird species diversity) with many species you won't see elsewhere in North America, including the Florida scrub-jay, snail kite, mangrove cuckoo and smooth-billed ani. To help beginning and experienced bird watchers find specialty birds like these as well as new places to look for birds, the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission created the Great Florida Birding Trail, which currently has 445 sites. No matter where you live in Florida, there's a birding trail site nearby, waiting for you to discover it. For more information and free trail guide booklets, visit [www.floridabirdingtrail.com](http://www.floridabirdingtrail.com).

Most birders find their hobby an immensely satisfying, lifelong



DAVID MONAHAN

**Above:** The summer tanager is a fairly common summer resident of Florida's open woodlands in the northern half of the state. Its diet is primarily composed of bees and wasps, while other insects, spiders and berries are eaten in lesser quantities. **Below:** Bird watchers wander the trails of Chinsegut Nature Center.

pursuit. Once you've learned to identify the birds in your area, you long to travel to other states and countries to see "their" birds. Keep a journal or list of what you see; over the years you'll often refer to them. Not only do they help refresh failing memories, they become a great source of pride and accomplishment.

Most birders also feel a desire to help protect the birds they love to watch, because many species are becoming less common or are already in serious decline. Do your part by following the birder's code of ethics ([americanbirding.org/abaethics.htm](http://americanbirding.org/abaethics.htm)) and encouraging others to support conservation efforts for important bird habitats.

It's never too late to get hooked on birding! **FW**

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