

JOHN RAKESTRAW

# HOW TO USE A SITE GUIDE

Birding with the right info

The article listed 40 species of birds, all considered rare or vagrant in the United States, that had been seen in this yard. We paid our \$10 entry fee and walked the thickets of the 2-acre site. We found six species of birds, all common and all more easily seen at other sites on our trip.

The book described Salt Creek Falls as a reliable site for black swifts in the summer. We parked the car, walked to the falls overlook, and scanned the skies. After about 20 minutes, we saw three black swifts in the distance. The birds worked their way up the valley, eventually flying directly overhead.

In addition to your optics and field guides, among the most important birding tools you can have are

USFWS

site guides, resources to tell you where to look for birds. Unless you are birding in familiar areas or hiring a guide—both of which I heartily recommend—a good site guide is essential if you want to see a variety of birds. A bad one, however, will mislead you and cause you to waste valuable birding time. Learning to evaluate and use a site guide correctly will help you find many more birds in unfamiliar areas.

Site guides take many forms. They may be pages from websites of local Audubon chapters or bird clubs, single-page brochures from parks or refuges, pamphlets describing established birding trails, or books covering states or other designated areas. When evaluating a

site guide, ask yourself the following questions:

### **How Old Is This Site Guide?**

One of the first things to consider when evaluating a site guide is how old it is. What difference does this make, if it is simply telling you where to go? Habitats change. When habitats change, so do the birds that use them.

Changes can be human-made or natural. Housing developments, road construction, timber harvests, forest fires, plant succession, and the natural sedimentation of lakes and ponds all affect birding sites. Directions to sites can also change; new roads may be built, trails may be closed, or highway exits may be renumbered.

Try to find the most recent guide available. Check the publication date, remembering that the information in most books is at least a year old by the time the book is actually printed. If there is no publication date, look for other clues about the guide's age. Since bird names are in constant flux because of lumping and splitting of species, check for current species names. If the guide discusses blue grouse, solitary vireo, and plain titmouse, you know the information is several years old. If you find yourself reading about marsh hawks, sparrow hawks, and upland plovers, you know you are reading ancient history. Guides produced by state park or other departments may list the state's governor, giving you an easy way to check the

age of the publication.

An old site guide is not necessarily useless. For many sites, information that is decades old may still be correct. But if you have an older guide, consult other sources to verify the information. Contact local birders in the area to ask about current conditions, or check online discussion lists for the area you plan to visit. Websites may be more current than printed materials, but don't just assume this is so.

### **Who Wrote This Site Guide?**

Consider who wrote your guide. Is it a birder? Does the guide consist of contributions from many bird watchers compiled by an editor? Is it produced by a chamber of commerce or other commercial entity? Knowing who produced the guide will help you evaluate its usefulness.

My first choice is a guide written by one or two competent bird watchers. This provides consistency of style and methods throughout the work. You can compare your own experience at a site with the description in the guide, and then have a good idea of how other sites will compare with their write-ups. Don't neglect to read the introductory material at the beginning of the guide. There is often a wealth of information here, including helpful travel tips.

Some site guides consist of contributions from many different writers. The advantage to the principal authors or editors is that they do not

have to visit each site themselves. The shortcoming is often a lack of consistency in writing styles and site coverage. Every contributor wants to champion his or her favorite sites. This sometimes leads to extravagant praise and unrealistic expectations for a mediocre site, and disappointment for the visiting birder.

Some guides are produced by a chamber of commerce or tourism agency. These organizations want their areas to sound as appealing as possible to visiting birders, but their guides may not be backed up by solid birding expertise. Such guides are still useful for finding birding sites, but the bird information may not be entirely accurate or up to date.

### Does the Guide List Lots of Vagrants?

Beware of long lists of vagrants in a site guide. Rare birds may be what we remember, and are often a specific goal of a birding trip, but they are just that—rare. A list of rarities does not give you a good picture of the typical birding found at a site.

Bentsen-Rio Grande State Park in Texas is one of the best and most-visited birding sites in North America. There are species seen here that have not been found anywhere else north of the Rio Grande. But there are times—many times—when the only birds visiting the feeders at the park are red-winged blackbirds. Everything you read about Bentsen mentions collared forest-falcon. It's true, a collared forest-falcon *used*

RON AUSTING



***If the site guide lists "marsh hawks," now northern harriers, you know the list is outdated.***

to hang out at Bentsen-Rio Grande State Park. And I *used to* have a full head of hair. Things change.

So what does a long list of vagrants actually tell you about a site? Two things. First, there are lots of common birds at that site. The more birds that use a site, the more likely it is that a rarity will be among them. Second, a lot of birders visit that site. The more eyes you have looking for birds, the more likely it is that a rarity will be found. Rare bird reports are good information to have, as they help prepare you for something unusual. But don't let a list of vagrants lead you to expect those birds. That will just lead to disappointment.

A much more valuable tool is a list of common birds for each site. Knowing which birds frequent a site gives you a good picture of the habitat and enables you to form realistic expectations for your visit. Look for

clues to each species' abundance. The two phrases "birds found here include black swift" and "this is a reliable site for black swift" mean very different things.

### **Does the Guide Include Too Many Sites?**

Some would argue that there is no such thing as too much information. What could be wrong with including a plethora of sites in a guide? One possible drawback to a lengthy guide is the inclusion of mediocre sites.

When you have limited time in an unfamiliar area, you want to spend it at the most productive sites. Many sites produce exceptional birding on occasion but are fairly unproductive on a typical day. A site guide should direct you to sites that offer the best birding on a day-to-day basis.

One instance where you might appreciate an overly inclusive guide is if you have a lot of time to spend in one area. Then you have the time to explore both the best sites and the less productive ones. A good site guide will differentiate the two, so you can plan accordingly.

### **Does the Guide Put Too Much Emphasis on Small Sites?**

Beware of any site smaller than 20 acres. Some site guides rave about certain migrant traps. When conditions are right, these small sites offer incredible birding and often have a long list of vagrants. But the key phrase here is "when conditions

are right." For a few weeks of the year, when weather conditions are just so, migrant birds will gather in small clumps of trees or city parks that offer temporary shelter during migration. The trees may be "dripping with warblers" on those mornings, and if you happen to be there at the right time, the birding may indeed be phenomenal. But for most of the year at most of these sites, you may find few birds.

That is not to say these sites aren't important. Small migrant traps are crucial to migrating birds and should be protected. But if you are visiting an unfamiliar area, don't invest too much time in these sites unless you are there during the productive season and in good conditions. A good site guide is specific about the best times to bird these smaller sites.

### **How Good Are the Directions?**

The purpose of a site guide is to direct you to places. Most site guides provide written descriptions about how to reach the sites. Some have small maps for each site, whereas others have maps showing an overview of large areas and the general location of individual sites. No matter how detailed the maps or instructions may be, they are seldom, if ever, a substitute for a good road map.

Obtain a state highway map at the least. If the sites you are visiting are located on county roads, use a state atlas or county road map.

Government-issued maps tend to illustrate these smaller roads more accurately than commercial atlases do. If you are driving on Forest Service roads, you should definitely obtain a map of that national forest.

### What Other Information Does the Guide Include?

Some guides include lists of trees, reptiles and amphibians, butterflies, and other natural history information. Some birders appreciate this extra information. It's usually available in other sources, however, and including it in a birding guide makes the document bulkier and harder to use in the field.

Information more pertinent to birders includes descriptions of habitat, general weather patterns, and potential hazards. Guides should include contact information for any parks, refuges, guide services, and birding/conservation organizations located in the area. National wildlife refuges, national forests, and many state parks have their own websites, which provide maps and other information helpful to visiting bird watchers. Having phone numbers, electronic addresses, and mailing addresses readily available allows

you to access this information without making the site guide too bulky.

A site guide should include a checklist of birds found in the area, with an indication of seasonal abundance. This gives you both a way to keep track of your sightings and an idea of what species to expect in a given season.

Site guides are invaluable tools that enable you to find productive birding sites in unfamiliar areas. Treat them as tools, not art objects.

Throw them in the car and carry them in the field. Make notes in the margins, and keep track of your sightings. You should also consider any site guide as a work in progress. If you find an error, or find that the habitat or bird



**Upland sandpiper.**

list of a site has changed since the guide was written, contact the author or the publisher so subsequent editions will be up to date and useful to bird watchers in the future. ✍

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