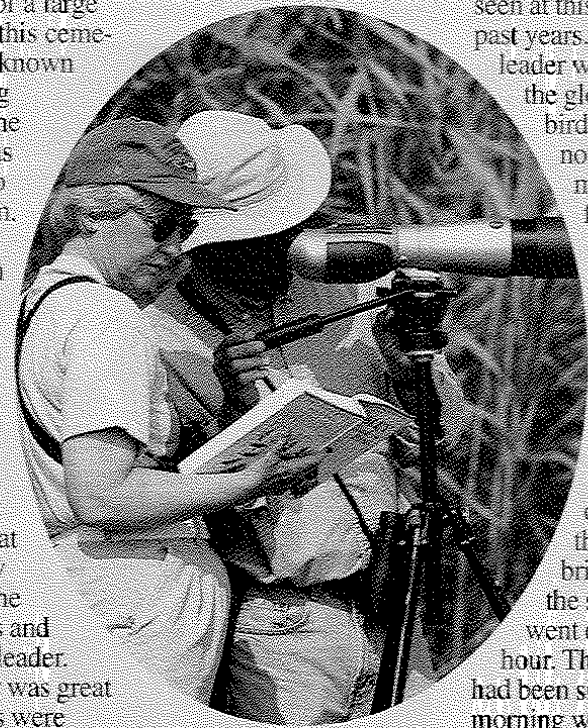


The Perfect Birding Guide

This was going to be great. I was going on a birding trip to one of the largest and oldest cemeteries in the country. A forested oasis in the middle of a large urban area, this cemetery is well known for attracting migrants. The field trip was scheduled to start at 8 a.m. This is a little later than I like to start birding on spring mornings, but I had an hour's drive to the site.

I arrived at the cemetery along with the other birders and met the trip leader. The weather was great and the birds were singing. Everyone in the group was anxious to get started. Eight o'clock came and went. The leader wanted to wait for any late



*Five steps
to becoming (or
to selecting) a
birding guide.*

JOHN RAKESTRAW

arrivals. Finally, he gathered everyone together, pulled out a checklist, and proceeded to read the name of every bird that had been seen at this cemetery in past years. While the leader was reliving the glories of past birding trips, I noticed a Baltimore oriole flying by and wondered what other birds might be in the area. After finishing the reading of the checklist, our leader then gave us a brief history of the site. This went on for half an hour. The birds that had been singing that morning were winding down as the sun rose higher.

At 8:45 we finally started birding. We worked our way back through the cemetery,

DAVE GARDNER

driving to particular areas, then getting out and exploring on foot. By midday we had arrived at the back part of the property. Here was undeveloped woods, by far the best bird habitat we had seen all day. But by this late hour, the bird activity had greatly subsided. Since that day, I have avoided birding trips led by that individual.

Guided bird-watching trips, whether professional tours or friendly outings with a more experienced birder, are a great way to learn about birds, hone your identification skills, and explore new birding sites. Along with the fellowship of birding with others, you benefit from the leader's years of experience in the field. No matter what your level of expertise, you will probably find yourself guiding other birders at some point. This is a wonderful opportunity and a great responsibility. The way you guide your fledgling birders may inspire them or turn them off to birding forever. Consider the following two scenarios.

SCENARIO I: a boardwalk at a well-known migrant trap.

LEADER: I've got a Swainson's thrush and a veery.

BIRDER 1: Where? (**BIRDER 2:** looks up Swainson's thrush and veery in his field guide.)

LEADER: The

Swainson's looks a little reddish. It reminds me of the *ustulatus* subspecies I saw on my last trip to the West Coast. The subspecies that we see here is usually a duller brown.

BIRDER 1: Is the veery on the ground or up on a branch? There it is! Wait, is that the Swainson's? (**BIRDER 2** puts down his field guide and adds Swainson's thrush and veery to his trip list. **LEADER** sees another bird and takes a few steps down the boardwalk.)

LEADER: Gray-cheeked! I've got a good view right here. This is great to

have three of the *Catharus* thrushes all together. I saw a Bicknell's thrush at Cape May last fall. You could see the shorter primary projection and the reddish color. This bird is definitely a gray-cheeked. Oops, he's gone.

BIRDER 1: Is the veery still there? (**BIRDER 2** adds gray-cheeked thrush to his trip list.)

SCENARIO II: The same boardwalk at the same migrant trap.

LEADER: I've got a Swainson's thrush and a veery.

BIRDER 1: Where?

LEADER: The Swainson's is right in front of us, about 15 yards out, and the veery is back by the large mossy tree, moving left. (**LEADER** steps aside to let **BIRDER 1** stand where **LEADER** was standing and points out the birds to **BIRDER 1**. **LEADER** then helps **BIRDER 2** find the two birds. When everyone in the group has a view of the birds, **LEADER** takes a few steps down the boardwalk.)

LEADER: Here's a gray-cheeked. He's to the right of the veery on a branch about three feet off the ground.

(**LEADER** makes sure that everyone in the group finds the third bird. **LEADER** is now in an excellent position to discuss identification tips or answer any questions from the group.)

The differences in the leader's actions in the two scenarios are not all that great, but the birders in scenario II have a much more satisfying birding experience. Making a little more effort to help your group see the birds makes the trip better for everyone.

Whether guiding or being guided by other birders over the years, I have noticed certain behaviors and attitudes that greatly improve the success and enjoyment of bird-watching trips. Follow these simple rules and you can become the perfect birding guide.



A trip leader's job is to make sure everyone sees the bird.

TOM VEZO

RULE 1. Concentrate on the here and now. No bird seen in the past, no matter how rare or how beautiful, is half as interesting as the birds in front of you right now. Birders like to share their experiences with others. We want to relive the excitement of a rare sighting. We also want to establish our birding credentials within the bird-watching community. But this constant reminiscing can be distracting.

I was on a hawk-watching tower with the official counter and one other birder. The conversation turned to hawk banding. I've never banded, so I just observed their exchange. One birder mentioned banding sharp-shinned hawks. The other countered with the actual number of sharp-shins he had handled. The first birder upped the ante by mentioning his experience banding goshawks. The other then bragged about the challenges of single-handedly removing a goshawk from the net. This contest went on and on. I don't know if the two ever established their pecking order. I left the tower and went to look for birds.

When you are in the field, concentrate on the present. Don't yammer on and on about birds you saw yesterday or last week or five years ago. Birding memories can be shared and enjoyed anytime and anywhere, but birds can only be seen in the field and in the present. Pay attention to the birds around you and save your tales of past glories for the car ride home.

RULE 2. Help your fledglings find the birds. Being a trip leader comes with the responsibility of helping other birders. Members of your group may lack certain knowledge or skills that you take for granted.

Plan your birding trips to take advantage of the best habitats at the best times. Some sites are more productive at certain times of day. Be aware of variables, such as weather patterns or tide levels that may also affect birding success at individual sites. Larger groups of bird watchers require wider trails and more open habitat if you want everyone in your group to be able to see the birds.

When you find a bird, make sure your charges get a good look. Don't stand where you are and try to describe the bird's location as you continue to watch. Once you have made the ID, stand aside and help others find the bird.

When you are in a leadership position, you may have to sacrifice some of your own birding. But helping other birders find a new bird has its own rewards.

RULE 3. Don't feel obligated to share everything you know. Different people enjoy birds on different levels. Some want to know every detail of a bird's behavior and genetic makeup. Others are content to simply enjoy a bird's outer beauty. The information available to birders is much more sophisticated than in years past. The topics of subspecies, minute plumage details, behavior, and vocalizations are all worthy of study. But nobody likes a know-it-all. Answer questions if asked, but don't be afraid to watch birds in silence.

RULE 4. Don't be afraid to say, "I don't know." As a trip leader, you are considered to be the expert, but experts don't know everything. When asked a question you can't answer, be honest. It may inspire the questioners to research the answer on their own.

When you are in a leadership position, you may have to sacrifice some of your own birding.

If you give incorrect information, someone will inevitably catch your mistake and you will lose credibility.

We all make incorrect identifications from time to time. Encourage members of your group to speak up when they have other opinions about a bird's identity.

They may be right. Even if they are not, this provides an opportunity to teach your group about specific field marks and identification tricks that you have learned.

RULE 5. Model proper birding behavior for your group. As more and more people take up birding, proper ethics and behavior become increasingly important. As a trip leader, it is your responsibility to see that your group does not do anything to compromise the well-being of the birds you are seeking. It is also your responsibility to keep your group from disturbing other bird watchers. Your group will mimic your behavior.

Keep conversation to a minimum. We tend to forget that birds are wild animals. A few species don't seem to mind being around people, but most birds, like any other form of wildlife, will flee or hide when approached. If you were trying to get close to a deer, you would either stand still, waiting for the animal to come close to you, or you would carefully stalk the animal. Many birds require this same degree of finesse.


When you do speak, keep your voice low. This forces your group to listen and encourages them to also

speak softly. Boisterous behavior not only scares birds away but also disturbs other bird watchers. Don't allow members of your group to distract others with unrelated stories (see Rule 1). Pointing out a wildflower or a lizard is great, but don't let some-

one distract the whole group with a detailed account of her recent trip to Arizona.

Getting an entire group in position to see the same bird requires a little extra effort on your part. Plan your approach so you don't repeatedly flush the same birds or get too close to nests.

So what could my cemetery trip leader have done differently? First of all, he should have started on time and gotten right to finding birds. Starting late and then talking about past sightings wasted valuable time that could have been spent watching birds. Second, he could have started in the best habitat, and then explored less productive areas as time allowed. Exploring the best habitats when the birds are most active greatly increases your chances of finding more and better birds.

Guiding other birders can be very rewarding. If you find yourself in this position, or are looking for someone to guide you, consider these rules. Your trip will be more enjoyable and you will probably see more birds, too. 

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buzz topic

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