
Introduction

It's early November here in Maine, and I'm sitting in a coffee shop with my laptop open, busily typing away at a draft of this book. Although the overall bulk of autumn bird migration is winding down, we're entering one of my favorite times of year: rarity season. Therefore, I need to know what the weather is like—will these southwest winds that are so good at guiding vagrants our way continue, or will this front that is approaching from the west produce a fallout of late-season migrants? Also, I want to make sure that if a “good” bird is located, I find out about it as soon as possible; there's no point in writing a book on birding if I'm not able to get out and go birding, especially when my state list requires it. So there are a cluster of minimized windows at the bottom of my screen—weather forecast, email, and the listserv archives. And the cell phone is nearby.

The next weekend will be our fifth annual Rarity Roundup. On the first or second Sunday in November, a group of us get together to scour the southern Maine coast for rarities. Now I readily admit that I stole this idea from the great birders down in the mid-Atlantic Coast, but for each of the past five years (and counting), I've organized a roundup here in Maine.

Granted, many of the people simply participate as an excuse to get together at the end of the day to enjoy good food, great beer, and engaging conversation as we compile our cumulative list and wait in anticipation to hear what we might have to chase first thing the next morning. But the impetus for the event is that Maine is a relatively large state, with a myriad of peninsulas, islands, and other places where birds may concentrate, but very, very few birders to check them all.

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For at least one Sunday, at the peak of the rarity season, a dozen or more of us get together to scour the south coast in the hopes of finding the next mega-rarity, or simply, “mega.” Of course, we can’t check every nook and cranny, even in this more limited geographic area, so we focus on the best places. Using geography and habitat to refine our effort to thoroughly check the places that are most likely to produce good birds, we head out to improve the collective Rarity Roundup list, and perhaps find that mega that will cause each of us to abandon our routes and rendezvous at some local hotspot to exchange high fives over someone’s great discovery (such as the first state record Gray Kingbird discovered during Rarity Roundup VII in 2010).

Whereas the Christmas Bird Count attempts to count every bird in every section of the circle, a Rarity Roundup attempts to find only the cream of the crop. We all but snub our nose at the usual cast of characters as we look for the golden needle in a haystack. It’s not a practice that I usually preach, but for one full day out of the birding year, it’s all about finding the buried treasure.

But why November? And why along the coast? And where do we go? The simple answers will be found in chapters 2, 3, and 4. A combination of weather, geography, and habitat variables focuses our search for the good birds. Although these are some of the topics that we apply to finding rare birds on the Rarity Roundup, we can also apply many of them to our daily birding—for both the rare and the common—throughout the year.

In nothing more than coincidence, seven months have passed, and I’m putting the final touches on the first draft in early June—at the same coffee shop, looking out the same window. It’s now spring rarity season (or, really, early-summer rarity season), so once again I am left to daydream about what’s out there. Well, let’s find out! And by applying a few new tools, we can make that search more efficient and more effective, and at the same time, help to make ourselves better birders.

Although the title *How to Be a Better Birder* seems fairly straightforward, I have decided to not explicitly attempt to offer a definition of it, because it means something a little different for just about everyone. For some,

it's about building a bigger list. For others, it's simply about identifying more birds more of the time. And yet others may feel that becoming better birders will allow them to share the joy of this hobby/sport/passion/sickness with others. I don't like labels, whether it's "beginner," "intermediate," or "advanced." No matter what level of birder you are, or think you are, there is always more to learn—and more challenges to confront. That being said, I will make a few assumptions that by picking up a book entitled *How to be a Better Birder*, you already consider yourself a birder. Therefore, you have already acquired a basic knowledge of many birding terms, from feather groups to the most frequently used vernacular and birding slang. I'm hoping you have already devoured the myriad of resources targeted at "beginning" birders and are now ready to take the next step.

So while I hesitate to define just what being a "better birder" really is, my goal with this book is to give some helpful hints, spur additional study, and simply provide some information that we can apply to our own birding in pursuit of becoming better birders, whatever that means to you. You'll find some chapters more inspiring than others, and you'll want to learn more about some topics. But, I do believe that birders of all levels can use these tools to make themselves better birders.

By no means are the topics presented here the only issues related to becoming a better birder, and by no means are any of these an exhaustive treatment of the topic. They are most definitely not the end-all, say-all definitive treatments of any of these topics. Instead, my goal is to simply introduce you to other ways of thinking, other methodologies, and other disciplines that we can use to apply to our own growth as a birder. Hopefully, some of these topics will excite you enough to dig deeper, beginning with some of the resources that I have outlined in each chapter.

Many of the chapters are peppered with personal opinions, personal preferred methodologies, and so on. Your own interests and opinions and the opinions of other birders will probably vary considerably, but the tools can be applied to suit your needs. There's an explosion of new technologies and new advances in the collective knowledge bank and toolbox of the birding community, and I want you to be part of this excitement.