

\ TRAVEL \

Wing It! Make 2021 a Birding “Big Year”

by FIYASE GUCKMAN
photography by BENNY JACOBS-SCHWARTZ, BIRDS by BHS
April 12, 2021



Allen's Hummingbird / Southern California

Thanks to bird watching, flights to exciting new places are cleared for takeoff.

If wanderlust is calling you, a road trip within America's borders is not only an appealing option but also a realization that you don't have to travel too far to experience some of the great wonders of the world.

Short-distance nature vacation itineraries are on the rise because of our strong collective desire to break out of our homes. Along with hiking, biking and other time-tested outdoor pursuits, birding is suddenly a new and cool way to connect with the great outdoors again. All you need to get started is a sense of adventure, a decent set of binoculars, a camera and a guidebook or guide.

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"Bird watching will always be a relevant activity as long as there are birds and people looking at and listening to them. My hope is that this moment in time is strengthening people's interest in birds, whether by giving people more opportunities to notice the birds in their backyard, or by causing people to yearn more for opportunities to see birds in parks and wild places," said John Franklin Garret, Bird Project Assistant with Cornell Lab of Ornithology.

It's interesting to note that the gradual migration towards birding's resurgence began a decade ago. "The Big Year" (2011) starring Owen Wilson, Steve Martin and Jack Black, reflected a percolating interest in birding just as 2004's "Sideways" set its road trip story against the backdrop of America's growing fascination in wine and winery culture. Unlike that earlier film, however, "The Big Year" reflects how committing oneself to a consuming-but-enriching hobby and getting outside a personal comfort zone to do it can be life-changing.



Flame-faced Tanager / Ecuador

"As the area gets larger, so does the cost, and it is rare for a person doing a country and certainly a world Big Year to be working full-time, or generally even part-time, and they have to have a good amount of money as there is a lot of spur-of-the-moment flying involved when a rarity is sighted. Rarities are the make-or-break of a Big Year."

Greg Miller, who inspired the Jack Black character, has been to the Gulf Coast and gave a talk at an Alabama Ornithological Society Spring meeting on Dauphin Island a few years back. There are also special Big Years. One birder did a U.S. year by bike a few years back, while others do photographic one. Every year, there are a number of attempts at U.S. and World Big Years, and every state has a Big Year record."

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Many of these individuals, in turn, tell him that making birds a part of their lives during the pandemic has freed their minds from the confining effects of lockdowns and quarantines.



Acorn Woodpecker / California

David Booth, an environmental scientist and member of the Gulf Coast Bird Club and Louisiana Ornithological Society, has observed that some people just getting started with bird watching have dedicated themselves to a lifestyle that incorporates tracking birds along with other activities that connect them with nature. Many of these individuals, in turn, tell him that making birds a part of their lives during the pandemic has freed their minds from the confining effects of lockdowns and quarantines.

"I am meeting people who started making birding or bird feeding a more important part of their lives because the pandemic has limited their activities," Booth says. "Making your yard a place where birds are more welcome has a de-stressing effect that people welcome, much like gardening. Others have gotten into bird identification with the proliferation of new electronic cameras."

They enjoy getting out to places like Pintail Loop at Cameron Prairie National Refuge and shooting nature shots. Then they are interested in identifying what the birds and wildlife are that they have captured. Other people have hobbies overlapping into birding, enjoying birds in their yard, or as they golf, fish and hunt. Finding out more about their identity and habits is the next natural step."



Hoqu / Alaska

According to Benny Jacobs Schwartz, who is based in Los Angeles and operates specialized tour company **Birds by BIJS**, traveling around the United States for birdwatching is very exciting, especially for those just getting back into travel in 2021 and open to seeing their country through a fresh “birds eye” perspective.

He adds that backyard birding got a lot of press as of late, with people becoming aware that they can have meaningful bird sightings and bird watching experience outside their front and back doors. For example, he can spot up to 20 species just from walking down his block in his San Fernando Valley neighborhood.

While Jacobs Schwartz doesn’t do full-on “Big Year” tours, he plans itineraries based on natural phenomena around the U.S. in different seasons. “In the spring, I like going down to the southeast Arizona, on the edge between Mexico and Arizona, as birds more typically found in Mexico may actually wander north of the border and can be counted on a different checklist,” he continues. There’s so much to see, and in a good year, someone who’s really working hard can see upwards of 600 different species of birds in the United States.”

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White Tailed Kite / California

FROM YOUR NEST TO THEIRS

Haffenden explains that while birding with friends and in small groups is a fun social activity, it is also well suited to doing alone or with family or friends from your bubble. Simply put, there are birds everywhere, from the backyard to city parks, nearby open spaces, reserves, beach state parks and other places where safe distances can be maintained.

“There’s no need to touch anything other than your gear, notebook, field guide and phone most of the time,” Haffenden says. “This means you can get out of the house, be as social and get some exercise. Most birders also find interest in other aspects of nature—trees, flowers, butterflies, dragonflies and so on—as they progress, so there’s always something of interest.”

Garret agrees that one can be as serious about bird watching in his own backyard as about birding on the road. “If you’re lucky enough to have a backyard where you can plant shrubs that birds like, or have feeders, this can be a great way to see both unusual species and really closely study common species for your area,” he says.



Red Tailed Hawk / Southern California

“There’s always more to learn, and some of the most serious birders out there spend most of their time watching their backyard birds. You can observe many aspects about birds much more easily in your backyard than in other places, including molting patterns, pecking orders at feeders.”

Although not everybody lives in a well-planted neighborhood, there’s always somewhere within driving distance with enough birds to get into practice according to Jacobs Schwartz and Garret, building a foundation for more ambitious trips in the future. Furthermore, if you have a decent sized yard, patio or terrace, they suggest investing in and setting up some bird feeders, installing a fountain and planting plants native to your region. From there, you’ll see all these interesting and surprisingly unusual birds landing in your yard.



Wooded Thrush / Oregon / 12/20/2020

“At home, you can practice using your binoculars to get onto a bird quickly and get it in focus quickly as it will take some time to build this skill,” suggests Booth. “This is the number-one skill to avoid frustration and a lot of empty branches. Next, take a look through your field guide to get familiar with the different groups of birds, so when out looking you will have an idea of whether you are looking at. This makes it much quicker to find the bird in your guide when you need to.

Also, use the guide to get an idea of when a bird is likely to be in the area you are birding in, whether it’s likely at all, and its size. Become very familiar with your local birds, so you won’t always be distracted by another cardinal or mockingbird when you are looking for a tanager or a shrike.”

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Verde / SE Arizona

"As things open up in a post-COVID world, birding allows you to dig a little bit deeper into what makes the U.S. so geographically interesting," says Jacobs Schwartz once you're ready to look beyond your back yard. "You can almost think of bird watching as a scavenger hunt contextual road map, especially since anybody can tour national park tours around the U.S. and see how the birding experience differs from place to place.

While 'The Big Year' is exaggerated slightly for comic effect, many aspects of the birding experience are extremely accurate. Some people will fly out on the drop of a dime to chase a tropical storm during spring migration or fly out to Minnesota in the dead of winter to track great grey owls and other boreal owl species. Others pursue their 'Big Year' experiences by attending a variety of festivals and events dedicated to birding."



Anna's Hummingbird / Southern California

GEARING UP

One of Jacobs Schwartz's favorite things about working with bird watching newcomers is that they have a beginner's mind, open to being educated and learning new things from a guide, who has the role of the teacher. "I enjoy the challenge of helping them maintain that excitement," he says. "Maybe the saw something on Netflix or 'Planet Earth,' and they'll ask me a question triggered by an observation that we had on the trail.

"For example, on a tour I led in Alaska, somebody asked me how far a bald eagle could rotate its head. It was one of the most specific questions that I had little to no idea about, even though it is common knowledge an owl can rotate its head almost 360 degrees. This is a cool moment for me, as a good guide allows an absence of information to catalyze them to research it and investigate deeper as we birders can also often take things for granted."

Jacobs-Schwartz suggests new birders just spreading their wings should have a starter kit that includes beginner birding field guide, a good DSLR digital camera and a decent pair of binoculars (some quality sets are available for less than \$150) and some good outdoor clothing. He adds that the website for your local of the National Audubon Society is another excellent resource. "Some chapters offer in-person guided tours with field guides, including those with social distancing," he says.



Booth, meanwhile, believes that beginners can start simply by using their eyes and a good beginning bird watching guide to identify the birds you see. He recommends the "National Geographic Guide to Birdwatching Sites." Garret recommends the free Merlin Bird ID app, and a basic digital camera will get you on the right path.

"Although a lot of people now resort to the internet or an app for identifying birds, an old-fashioned field guide gives the best learning curve for beginners and intermediate birders," stresses Booth, who also believes some additional skills are worth cultivating to maximize every birding outing.

"For the optimal experience, learn bird calls if you can," he advises. "The best way to do this is when you hear a bird calling, go hunt it down and watch it call. This will associate the bird with its sound(s) in your memory much more easily than via a book or a sound app."

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YOUR PERSONAL "FLIGHT" PATH

According to Jacobs-Schwartz, the San Diego area is one of the best birdwatching areas in the Southwest and is home to the San Diego Bird Festival. "People may be surprised that in United States, there are numerous birding festivals, especially as most people think of festivals as music, theater or food oriented," he says.

"An online search, however, will tell you that birdwatching festivals were booming before COVID hit, especially those based on certain bird populations specific to those areas, such as San Diego, southeastern Arizona and the Rio Grande Valley in Texas. Further east, there's a Space Coast Birding Festival in Florida, which is crazy good for birding. Alaska, as a state in general, is pretty, pretty spectacular, but there are also festivals in the Midwest and the East Coast to look out for."

Haffenden recommends several sites along various migratory routes, such as Dauphin Island, Cape May in New Jersey, Point Reyes in California, Magee Marsh in Ohio, which present a spectacular variety of birds in a short time, especially in spring migration. He also points to areas such as the lower Rio Grande Valley in Texas and southern Arizona, which have an interesting mix of US and Mexican birds.



Cactus Wren / St. Antonio

Booth, meanwhile, is partial to Southwest Louisiana, which has 500 species of birds than can appear here at different times of the year, as well as Big Bend National Park in Texas, Everglades National Park and Yellowstone National Park.

"The 'eBird's Top U.S. Hotspots' page is a good way to get a feel for where some of the best birding destinations in the U.S. are," adds Garret. "I personally enjoy birdwatching in remote places that are relatively under-birded—the potential for discovery in these places is rewarding.

"If that's more your speed, this kind of birding can be done anywhere, but some National Parks that fit that description include Theodore Roosevelt National Park in North Dakota and Great Basin National Park in Nevada. (I also recommend) Bosque del Apache NWR, Cape May Point, Andrew Molera State Park in Big Sur," he says.

GET BIRDING!

The following parks and natural landmarks, some overseen and managed by Aramark and our birdwatching experts, offer distinctive birding experiences and tours defined by their unique geography and/or new programs dedicated to birding adventures.



Olive Backed Sunbird / Borneo

ASILOMAR/CALIFORNIA STATE PARK

Asilomar near the Monterey Peninsula has long been recognized as one of the top five birding destinations in North America with 107-acres of protected state beach provide endless exploration of beautiful, feathered friends such as the Acorn Woodpecker, California Scrub-Jay, the Snowy Plover and the Wandering Tattler. Asilomar has also added a new "Bird Watching Package" that includes accommodations. There are also wildlife spotting and complimentary ranger tours.

CRATER LAKE/CRATER LAKE LODGE

In addition to bald and golden eagles, on the most common bird watching trips, you can see at Crater Lake National Park include ravens, Clark's Nutcracker, Gray Jay, Steller's Jay, Dark-Eyed Junco and Mountain Chickadee.

GLACIER BAY NATIONAL PARK/GLACIER BAY LODGE

Named a World Heritage Site in 1992, Glacier Bay National Park and Preserve encompasses 3.3 million remote acres and serves as an abundant plant and bird life habitat. At Glacier Bay Lodge, birding tours are popular as well as ranger-led walks include up-close experiences with the environment and its inhabitants, including bears and moose.

OLYMPIC NATIONAL PARK & FOREST/LAKE QUINAUT LODGE

Lake Quinault Lodge is located right in the Quinault Rainforest in Washington State. It's a rare refuge for species dependent on old growth forests and an essential habitat for more than 300 species of birds including northern spotted owls, golden eagles, falcons, grouse, marbled murrelets and tiny penguin-like rhinoceros anklets. Described as one of the "the quietest places on Earth," the Olympic National Park encompasses 922,651 acres of preserved wilderness with three distinct ecosystems: coastal, rainforest and sub-alpine.

BRIDGER TETON NATIONAL FOREST-TOGWOTEE MOUNTAIN LODGE

At Bridger-Teton National Forest, there are more than 355 species of birds including trumpeter swans, sandhill cranes, and bald eagles. The Bridger-Teton National Forest is 3.4 million acres and is adjacent to Grand-Teton National Park, and Yellowstone National Park and the National Elk Refuge. The Bridger-Teton has three nationally dedicated wilderness areas, which include the Bridger Wilderness, the Gros Ventre Wilderness and the Teton Wilderness.

TAHOE BASIN NATIONAL FOREST-ZEPHYR COVE RESORT & MARINA

Lake Tahoe is a major draw for birding enthusiasts! Northern Goshawk is listed as special interest by the Forest Service and the states of California and Nevada.

YOSEMITE NATIONAL PARK

Hundreds of bird fanciers flock to the valley each year to watch feathered beauties forage for berries or organize their yearly migration travels. The area is so hospitable to the United States bird population that the American Bird Conservancy has designated Yosemite a Globally Important Bird Area. Great Grey Owls, Peregrine falcons, songbirds and dozens of species of butterflies can be spotted all over the park.