

Bird Your Local Patch

Getting ready for work one morning I spied a hummingbird in the rose bush outside the kitchen window. On closer observation it wasn't a black chinned, ruby throated or even a rufous hummer. It was much too big and the color wasn't right. What could it be? Having left myself no wiggle room (anyone can attest to my never being anywhere *early!*), I called my neighbor and she came down and spent a little time observing the green violet ear, a tropical hummingbird rarely seen this far north. We will remember this sighting for the rest of our lives mainly because Jimma took a magazine quality photo of the beautiful hummer in the sweetheart rosebush.

Another day outside that same window, I saw a plain bird at the feeder with a wash of yellow and a thick, seed eater bill. I wasn't sure what it was, but took a photo to aid in identification. It turned out to be a female evening grosbeak. I reported the sighting to eBird still not aware of how rare this bird was in Texas. It turned out to be very rare indeed.

Stories like this one play out all across the country and, indeed, the world. Birding one's local patch brings rewards to the individual bird watcher and benefits the entire birding community. Beginning bird watchers hone their skills at their local patches, and seasoned veterans find their best and most memorable birds there. Valuable information is collected about local breeding populations and movements of migrants that can be shared with the ornithologists of today and tomorrow. Birding one's local patch is probably the most useful thing a birder can do.

A local patch is any area close to your home where birds are found. It can be a city park, schoolyard, pond, marsh, abandoned farm field, or just about any other place in your neighborhood frequented by birds. It can be as small as an acre or two or as large as several square miles. Ideally, it is an area not frequented by other birders, so that your sightings add to the pool of knowledge about local bird populations and movements.

Birding your local patch affords you the opportunity to get to know the common birds in your area. You learn their songs, habits, and behaviors. You come to recognize them quickly and easily. You see how they feed, nest, and raise their young. You see how they interact with one another and with other species. Instead of just learning how to identify a number of species, you obtain a deep and intuitive understanding of their various appearances and tendencies. And when you are familiar with the common species and their haunts, you are more apt to find a rare or unusual bird when it visits your area.

Birding your local patch teaches you about migration. You learn when spring migration starts and when fall migration ends. You come to know the arrival dates for migrants and summer residents. You see what conditions favor movements of birds into your area. Winds, cold fronts, and precipitation take on new meaning. You see what migrants

eat as they fuel up before continuing on their journey, and you know better where to find them.

Birding your local patch benefits the local birding community. You can submit your sightings to eBird.org, so that they become part of a worldwide database of avian populations. Local bird watchers learn from your knowledge and experience, and find and bird local patches of their own. Your observations can be included in Christmas Bird Count data and breeding bird censuses.

Birding your local patch is even good for the environment. You use less gasoline when you drive to and from your local patch than you would use to get to a more distant, popular birding spot. You may even walk or cycle to your local birding site and not use any gas at all.

From enhancing your skills as a bird watcher to making important contributions to the expanding database of bird observations to helping preserve our natural world, birding your local patch brings great rewards to you, the birding community, and the birds themselves.

Go outside and play and bird your local patch today!