

Finding a Rare Bird

Local and/or state bird news is usually chock-full of bird sightings and sometimes includes downright rare birds that get some folks worked up into a birding frenzy. We can all appreciate rarity: I think even if you are not interested in chasing birds and taking part in the competitive aspects of birding, bird rarities still have an intrinsic allure. Humans get excited and place value on rarity. No matter how long you have been birding, you will always get all giddy when you find a rarity!

The kicker is that even the most extreme bird rarities are usually found by regular people, not by crack teams of bird experts. Much of it is just serendipity: being at the right place at the right time. This could be at your kitchen sink looking out at your feeders which is where I have been lucky enough to find two exciting birds in Sloan Community. Once it was the evening grosbeak which is a rarity in this part of Texas. On another occasion, it was the beautiful, but uncommon green violet ear hummingbird. When a special bird makes his appearance, it is imperative to be ready and to follow through with the right actions.

First of all, keep calm. If the rare bird comes to you, and you have a pretty good idea of what it is, your natural tendency may be to freak out and immediately run off to find someone, but keep your wits about you. The real joy of rare birds is sharing them with others, but first you need to really look at the bird. You want to be pretty certain that you have identified it correctly, because let's face it—hitting a home run is way better than hitting a foul ball.

So, you want to both communicate to others that you think you are seeing a rare bird and also try to confirm that it is indeed what you think it is. But both steps require you to be diligent and carefully document what you see. It also requires that you be objective and assess the situation, making sure you are not falling into the trap of seeing what you want to see rather than what is really there. It's also necessary that you hang around for a while, and really look to make sure your tentative identification is correct and that enough evidence is there for you to get the rare bird "hotline" buzzing.

The good news is that you don't necessarily have to know exactly what the rare bird is right away. If you have a camera or a cell phone, take a lot of photographs. Take some field notes, and concentrate on where the colors and patterns are, any odd behaviors, anything prominent—bill shapes, tail shapes, color and extent of edging on wings. Pencil and paper are great tools for getting better at bird identification. If you don't carry these into the field, don't delay; start today.

Trust your gut when you are birding: If something just looks "off" in some way, get a better look. Convince yourself of what it is, and why.

No phone, no camera? No problem. Do what you may not have done since kindergarten: draw. A simple sketch, even a crummy one, of a bird can help to define

where the streaks were or the red spot or exactly what “had white near the butt” means. But don’t wait until you find a rare bird—do it now, beginning with drawing common birds in your backyard. Trying to represent a live bird as an image makes your brain do some fancy footwork, and it actually helps you to observe carefully and remember what you saw. In fact, if you want to get better at bird identification, you will do it faster sketching than any other method.

What if you have no notepad? Observe everything and try to remember it all, like painting a picture in your head. Then run home, get your notebook, and draw the bird.

Once you confirm your sighting, your drawing and story won’t seem as crazy as they did at first. But you could not have convinced anyone of anything had you not kept calm, thought about documentation, and had practiced observation, drawing, double checking, stepping back and reassessing, and so on. All those procedures come in handy. So go outside & play and be ready for the unexpected!