

Getting Youth Involved in Birding

Way back in the 60's I was just a kid on the bus headed for school when crossing Wallace Creek, I saw a prehistoric creature. That creature turned out not to be a pterosaur, but instead a great blue heron. Later I took a trip to Canada with my great aunts, Baby & Nina. Aunt Baby was an avid birder and though she never knew it, she had a profound influence on how I looked at the world of birds. I had always loved the outdoors, but after that trip, I *began to notice birds*. I wasn't immediately an avid birder but the seed was planted.

Some years later I read an article in a farm magazine about how Eastern Bluebirds were losing their natural nesting cavities and soon noticed a pair nesting in a fence post of the horse pen. That inspired me to put up boxes for them in the pecan bottom. Fast forward a few years. I was with a group at Colorado Bend State Park led by a park ranger who was a great birder. The emphasis was on listening as much (or maybe more) than searching for birds by sight. When we found both the golden-cheeked warbler and the black-capped vireo in the same morning in the same field of view, it really got me excited. It was incredible to think of what all I had been missing by just not paying attention to the sounds around me. I became more aware after that whether it was my own back yard or a parking lot in the middle of town. Now at the crack of dawn as I lay there trying to wake up I am greeted by my "little buddies" who are already hard at, singing and searching for something to eat. After studying for several years I can also discern when there's a stranger lurking about the place. I might not know who it is but I know it's a bird that isn't a regular. This usually prompts an investigation. Maybe that's why I never get the house cleaning done?!

Perhaps there is some young person in your world that has begun to notice birds. Or someone whom you know would enjoy bird watching. All it takes is four simple elements to start them on their way: binoculars, a field guide or bird book, a bit of guidance from another bird watcher (you!), and a bird or two to observe. This Bird Club article is dedicated to a goal we should all share: helping young people to discover the great outdoors with the birds in particular and enhancing their involvement in bird watching.

Idea #1: Help them link up with the young birding community.

If you have a child, grandchild, nephew or niece, or just a young neighbor who is interested in birds, a great place to get them started is on Young Birders microsite (<http://yb.birdwatchersdigest.com/youngbirders>). This resource-rich site is sponsored by Leica Sport Optics, a company with a long history of supporting activities for young birders. Another fun site has blogs by other young birders (<http://baypoll.blogspot.com/>)

Idea #2: Give them their first field guide.

You'd be hard pressed to find a seasoned birder who cannot recall their first field guide. For many of us, that thing was like a toy catalog in early December: We scoured every page, our imaginations running wild as we took in the seemingly endless array of bird species that share our world. New bird watchers—especially young birders—benefit from an easy-to-use volume such as *The Young Birder's Guide to Birds of North America*.

Idea #3: Give them a simple, easy-to-use feeder.

Who doesn't enjoy feeding birds? An easy-to-use feeder can be a great way to encourage a youngster to connect with the birds right outside their window. Goldfinches and hummingbirds are especially good at catching the eye and sparking the imagination, so a thistle sock or hummer feeder makes an ideal gift for someone who is just starting out as a bird watcher.

Go outside and play and take those kiddos with you!