

Birdfreak Guide to Taking Kids Birding

Kids are wonderful. They not only have the great capacity to learn, but they want to learn. Everything around them is new and exciting. Take a kid birding and you not only provide the opportunity to teach a child new things, but you afford yourself the opportunity to share in the same excitement of learning when nearly everything was brand new and interesting.

This guide will provide a starting point to ensure you have a good time birding with a child (or children). By no means is this guide all inclusive, but it will certainly help enhance a child's appreciation of nature, turn them into a birder, and provide future generations with the conservationists we so desperately need.

Note: This guide is intended for kids aged 6 to 16.



Education Level

It is important when birding with kids to know their level of education. You don't want to bombard the child with terminology above their heads, but equally as important you should never talk down to them. We repeat: never talk down a child you are teaching about birds and nature.

Kids are sponges and love to learn. Sometimes just pointing out something interesting, odd-looking, or unique is all it takes to spark further investigation.

Binoculars ("Bins")

Bins are the most important item in birding and also one of the most difficult for kids to use. Big and bulky bins are difficult to use. Equally difficult are cheap, low quality bins. If the child is your own and

you have the means, either purchase mid-range bins (\$200-\$500) that they can use for several years or let them borrow yours. Just like with veteran birders, better quality binoculars will make a huge difference.

A common misconception is that kids need to have compact, colorful bins. For really young ones (7 and under) or children that are a bit clumsy, they are a good idea. But once a kid is 8 or older, they can handle a “real” pair of binoculars. Remember, these kids can manipulate iPods, video games, and nearly any other gadget placed in front of them – bins are no different.

Make sure before heading into the field the bins are adjusted properly including the strap. Make sure the bins don’t hang too low and are comfortable around the neck of the child. This will help ensure the trip isn’t cut short because of discomfort.

Make sure the kid knows the bins aren’t a toy but a tool. This is yet another reason not to use plastic, colorful bins.

Field Guides

The second most important item for birding is a good field guide. There is a multitude of guides to choose from but again it is important to not “dumb down” to a kid. Get a “real” guide or let them use your trusted one with pages marked. Kids would prefer to use a “grown-up” guide over something specifically stating it is for kids.

We recommend the **Kaufman Field Guide to North American Birds** because of its completeness and ease of use. **The Sibley Guide to Birds** is also good because it uses drawings which might appeal to kids more, but currently you need an Eastern or Western one specifically since the full guide is too large for the field.

Before heading out into the field, let the child page through the book and show them how it is arranged. You can also bookmark the guide for birds you anticipate seeing.

Start With Feeder Birds

Backyards and bird feeders are an excellent way to start a kid birding. They provide all the essentials: birds (of course!), an area to practice using bins, and the opportunity for long term study. Plus, as many great birders will tell you, it is important to get the “common” birds down before seeking anything elusive or rare. Younger kids that haven’t mastered the use of bins will enjoy watching birds visit the feeders with the naked eye.

Once the feeders have been thoroughly scrutinized it is time to go into the woods (or fields, prairies, wetlands, etc.). Try to go to a place where you know there will be birds. Even if the birds are common (or even the same ones as the feeders) this will give kids more practice using bins and also up the excitement of finding new birds.

Important: One of the best things about being out in nature is the sense of discovery. Kids are bombarded with order and structure in school and home and even in video games. There are rules and

regulations in the games they play and everything is pre-planned. Birding breaks them free of this. Let the child explore. This includes beyond birds. If they want to flip over a rock, kick over a fallen tree limb, or try and catch a frog let them. Just like when a Brown-headed Cowbird is perched in plain view, don't overlook it and move on. Let the kid enjoy the sense of discovery.

Keeping the Interest Going

Kids tend to get hungry and thirsty when they are bored. Make sure to always bring snacks and drinks and maybe even a lunch to eat out on the trail. It is fun to eat outside (again, away from structure and order) and also gives a "goal" to the walk – reaching a special place in the woods to eat.

Many of the new(er) gadgets used in birding are perfect for keeping the interest in kids. If you are willing to lug around a spotting scope, do so. Many birds love to perch in plain view and a close-up view of a Red-tailed Hawk or Great Blue Heron brings an amazing new appreciation and excitement of these birds.

Audio devices such as iPods with portable speakers are a great way to "call in" birds and also to teach children the bird sounds. If you see an Eastern Towhee, playing their song and call even after the bird has flown, will help teach the child what to listen for.

Multiple Kids

Birding with more than one kid is fine and has some great advantages. For starters, you are teaching more kids at once but also the more eyes help spot movement or hear a strange bird call. But there are limits. The most kids any one adult birder should take out at a time depends on their age and ability. We recommend four to six kids per adult because it is easier when viewing a found bird and also for walking on narrow paths (than having a larger group).

Some of the potential pitfalls of birding with a group of kids are the added noise of talking and playing around. Be prepared to walk at a slower pace, and accept the fact that having children with you may limit what you see.

Signs to Know When to Quit

If a kid is showing the signs of boredom, tiredness, etc. it is best to end the outing. Forced enjoyment of something is a ridiculous idea and you'd be better off trying again another time. Kids are finicky (just like adults) and sometimes they just aren't in the mood to learn new stuff or hike in the heat or cold.

The most important thing about birding with kids is to make sure they aren't feeling like they are learning. You shouldn't quiz them or expect them to remember everything they see or hear. Ask them what their favorite sighting was and share in their excitement. Keeping a list is a good idea. You can use how many species you saw as a goal to beat the next time out.

Parting Notes

There have been great debates about whether or not to keep "life lists" of birds seen. We enjoy them and thus keep them (although not that up-to-date). For children, life lists can be a cool addition to their birding outings. Reaching goals helps retain the interest and relive the memories of new birds found.

You could even celebrate a child's 50th, 100th, etc. bird in a special way. Of course, building a big list shouldn't be the only reason to go birding, but everyone likes feeling a sense of accomplishment.

For the very youngest birders, you might want to skip the list because it is hard to know what they actually see or will remember seeing later, but the choice is up to you. (Although this guide is intended for kids six and older, there is no reason why very young children can't go on your expedition with you. Even those young enough to ride on your back in a carrier will enjoy being out in nature).

We began birding at a very young age and currently are providing the leadership to three young birders that will most definitely last a lifetime. This document will be updated as we learn new things that work with birding with kids. It only takes a spark to set a fire of lasting enjoyment of nature. We truly feel sorry for those kids that miss out and never see a Northern Harrier browsing for rodents or hear the haunting sound of a Wood Thrush. Nature is too wonderful not to enjoy.

We hope you enjoyed this guide and if you are worried about taking your niece, grandson, daughter, or son's friend out birding be like Nike and just do it! The worst thing that can happen: they don't like birding much. *Or they develop an obsession with beetles!* The best thing: as the kid grows up, they will understand how birding isn't geeky and that birds are indicators of the environment. Conserving their habitat is perhaps the best thing you can do environmentally.

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Please credit <http://birdfreak.com> and good birding out there!!