

EXPLORER DAY HOW-TO: BIRDING

Here's the basics of what you need to know to run a successful bird count or other birding activity, including tips from the club leader community!



Bird count at Stanley Park, Vancouver, BC. Photo: J. Beechley.



Finding mentors

Find a birder who knows their local species well and is interested in sharing their knowledge with kids. Your local adult naturalist club is a good place to start. The [Birding in British Columbia](#) website has contacts for naturalist clubs and birding email lists.

Many leaders agree that a smaller group is best. Depending on your expected turnout, consider having more than one mentor so you can split the group up.

“Many birders are retired and not active on social media. You can contact your local adult naturalist club and either email their members or ask if there is a separate mailing list for birding.” Jenni, Club Leader, Nelson.

“Contacted the various birding groups in the city, such as nature organizations, bird count organizers, etc...A wonderful resource was the [Young Birders Program](#); we had a 17 year old guide as a Nature Mentor.” Deborah, Club Leader, Vancouver.

Where to bird?

Your mentor should have suggestions on good birding locations. You'll get a better turnout if the location isn't too far away. Sometimes accessibility is more important than maximizing your species count. Is your location accessible by public transit? If you are doing a winter count, is there shelter? A place to set up warm drinks? Bathroom? Is the trail wheelchair/stroller accessible? Include accessibility information in your email communication with members.

You can look for local birding hotspots at [ebird.org](#).

“For this year's count we walked some quiet residential alleyways so we could see birds attracted by feeders and gardens...The alleys could be done as loops, which helped with morale... Meet in an open, quiet spot like a parking lot or park first, so people can crowd around the mentor to hear any preamble, before you head down a trail. This is when you can bring out the larger format books and things to show the kids.” Mandy, Club Leader, Kamloops.

“We did a bird count at an urban waterfront park that is easy to access. It didn't have the best diversity of habitats, but the trail was flat and there was lots of parking. Lakes, ponds and other waterways can be pretty reliable for sighting many species of ducks, especially in winter when migrating species arrive in BC.” Jenni, Club Leader, Nelson.



When to bird?

You can go birding anytime. For the best views of spring and summer songbirds, you need to get an early start. You can bird successfully later in the day, there just won't be quite as much activity. Many clubs run birding events in winter, when large flocks of waterfowl arrive in BC. Waterfowl are great for beginners as they are easy to spot and the different species can be quite distinctive. You can also participate in the **Christmas Bird Count for Kids** in December or January (see Activities section). Be prepared to reschedule due to inclement weather. Bird activity, and participant enjoyment, decrease dramatically if it is very wet, cold or windy.

Equipment

"I had 3 pairs of kid binoculars which I had purchased at the Outdoor Learning store for only \$30/pr. These are surprisingly good!" Kathleen, Club Leader, Salt Spring Island.

"The children particularly liked looking through a spotting-scope that gave them a close look at a perched adult Bald Eagle. Through the scope they were able to see that the eagle wasn't bald (it had white head feathers), that eagle eyes, legs and bills are yellow, and that the eagle's body that first looked black, was really a very dark chocolate colour with hints of reddish-brown." Molly, Club Leader, Salmon Arm.

"I use birding scavenger hunts for young kids. I show older kids and parents how to use Merlin and iNaturalist apps." Cindy, Club Leader, Bulkley Valley.

"As it is very important to know what birds you would likely see, at a given time of year, a bird check list is helpful." Kathleen, Club Leader, Salt Spring Island.

Binoculars: suggest that members bring a pair if they can. You might be able to borrow a few extras, for example from a local nature centre. Binoculars can be difficult for young children, so take time to help them learn how they work. You might play a game where kids practice focusing on objects or people at different distances, or try binocular "eye spy".

This free PDF download from the Habitat Conservation Trust Foundation explains how to use binoculars:

<https://www.hctfeducation.ca/resource/?resourcecode=RR000042>

This video from the Cornell Lab of Ornithology has good instructions as well:

www.youtube.com/watch?v=pkPzl-VPmo4

Spotting scopes: these are great tools and can be easier to use than binoculars. Most families will not have one at home, but mentors who are really into birding have probably invested in one. Ask that your mentor bring theirs if possible.



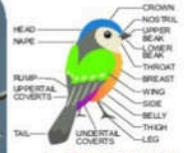
Child using a spotting scope in Salmon Arm.

DIY "binoculars": tape or staple two toilet paper rolls together for instant binoculars! Attach string to hang around a child's neck. Effective for focusing their eyes on a single bird and blocking out all the distractions.



Field guides: There are multiple options for great field guides. You can even check out a few from the library. Laminated pocket guides are cheap and indestructible, purchase a few with your club funds. You can also print out photos of some common species.

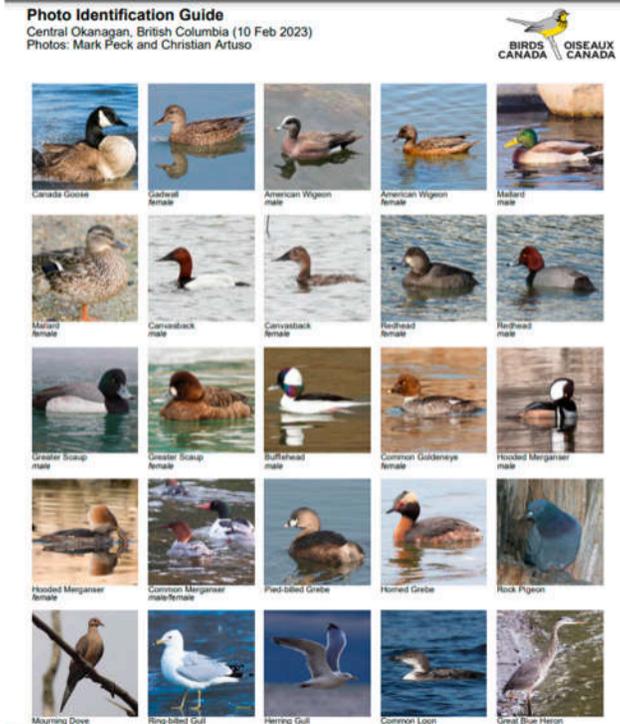
NatureKids Backyard Bird Safari Cards – Check with the Provincial Network Coordinator to order for your region. Members can also order extra cards from the NatureKids store.

				
<p>Pine Siskin Notice the fine sharp beak. Often aggressive with each other. Call sounds like a zipper!</p>	<p>Black-capped Chickadee Usually snatches up one seed at a time and flies off to store in little caches for the winter.</p>	<p>Mountain Chickadee Black-capped, with white stripe over eyes. Opens seeds by hammering them with its beak.</p>	<p>Chestnut-backed Chickadee As Black-capped Chickadee, with reddish brown back and sides.</p>	<p>House Finch Male often has a reddish head & breast. Female has no red. Both are striped.</p>
				
<p>Red-breasted Nuthatch Travels up & down tree trunks to hunt insects. Size of a chickadee with a very short tail.</p>	<p>Evening Grosbeak Large yellowish finch with huge beak for cracking seeds. Found in large noisy flocks in treetops.</p>	<p>Pine Grosbeak Male is dark red. Female grey. Shy and hard to find. Travels in small flocks, flying very fast.</p>	<p>American Goldfinch Male is bright yellow and black. Female is much paler. They love thistle seeds.</p>	<p>SOUTHEASTERN BC NATURE KIDS BC WWW.NATUREKIDSB.CA</p>

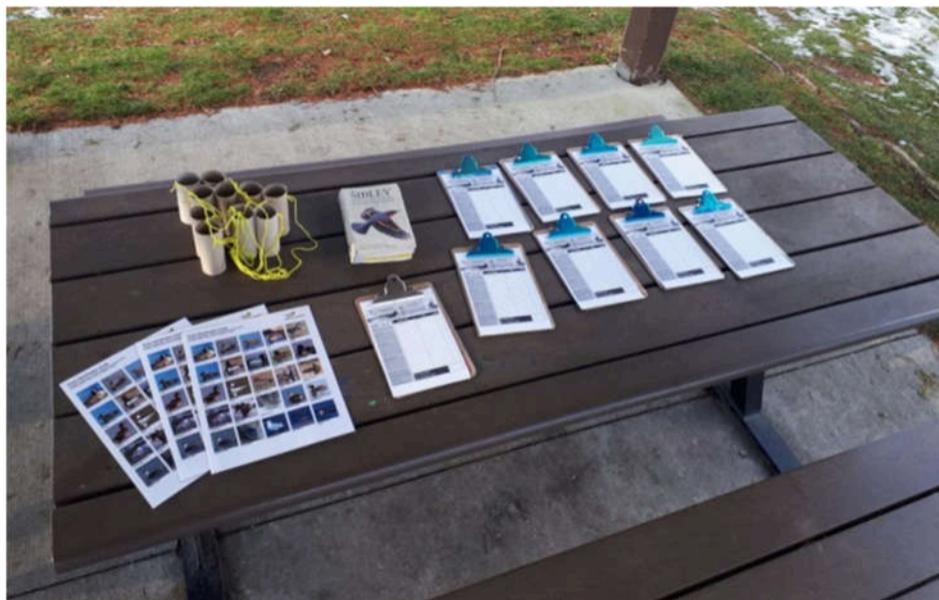
“The guest birder and the leaders brought a bunch of ID books that we shared, but the best thing was the local “most likely birds” list from Birds Canada that you can print for your area. Those were very popular and most people wanted to take the copies home when we finished - which was great!” Mandy, Club Leader, Kamloops.

Birds Canada has a great resource. Enter your location and the date and the website will create a two-page colour sheet with names and photos of the most likely species. Here’s an example of a winter birding sheet for the Central Okanagan. Click on the image to create your own photo ID guide or go to

https://naturecounts.ca/apps/checklist/index.jsp?_ga=2.62856996.907288088.1675994022-1020365890.1673720668.



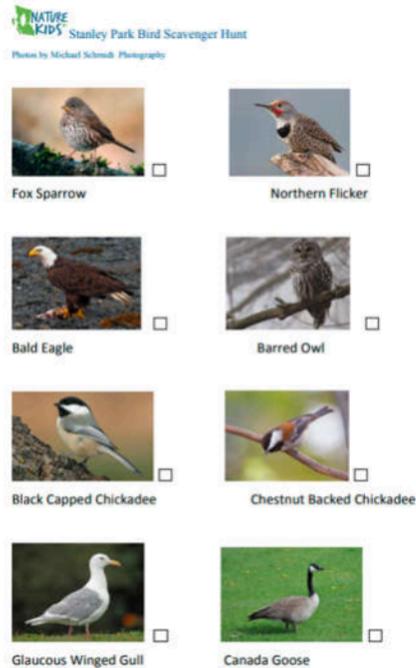
Data sheets, checklists, clipboards: feel like a real citizen scientist and record your sightings. You can also simplify the data sheet further and make it a scavenger hunt or bird bingo! Checklists are popular as well. Some parks may have them pre-made, or create your own using the most likely birds for your area.



Data sheets, DIY binoculars, and photo ID guides ready for an Explorer Day in Nelson. Photo: J. Stol.

This simple data sheet from Birds Canada is found in their Christmas Bird Count for Kids resources. This scavenger hunt is available on the NatureKids website in the Educational Resources section: naturekidsbc.ca/educational-resources

BIRD TALLY	BIRD SPECIES	TALLY	TOTAL
DATE	<i>e.g. American Goldfinch</i>	### /###	8
LOCATION			
BIRD COUNT			
PARTICIPATION			
TOTAL BIRD SPECIES			
TOTAL INDIVIDUAL BIRDS			



Here is a simple Bird Bingo sheet. You should make your own with species you are likely to find in your area.





Activities

A guided walk with stops to look at different birds may be enough for your group. Prepare for the day by learning a few of the most common species in your area ahead of time. Wrap up your event by gathering together and sharing what everyone saw. You can write all the species down on a white board or large sheet of paper.

If you'd like to include some additional activities, here are a few suggestions from club leaders.

Participate in an existing bird count

Find out if there is a regular bird count in your area and ask if your group can join in. An example is the Nature Vancouver counts at the UBC farm (every second Sunday of the month) and UBC Botanical Garden (first Wednesday of the month).

naturevancouver.ca/bird-surveys/

Christmas Bird Count for Kids (CBC4Kids)

The CBC4Kids makes for a great Explorer Day. You can register your event, find resources, and submit your findings using the Birds Canada website:

www.birdscanada.org/bird-science/christmas-bird-count-for-kids

Great Backyard Bird Count

The **Great Backyard Bird Count** is an annual four-day event. You can count for as little as 15 minutes on a single day, or for as long as you like each day of the event.

Participate by entering your sightings through eBird (app or website) or Merlin (app).

See links in the Digital Resources section, below.

Make feeders or birdhouses

Be sure you know which type of bird you are trying to attract, and choose an appropriate design. Feeders can be as simple as some peanut butter or lard spread on a pinecone and rolled in birdseed.

Note: Feeders can attract bears and rats so might not be appropriate depending on your location and the time of year. Sometimes feeders are not recommended due to the chance of spreading disease. See **Keeping Feeder Birds Healthy** from Birds Canada and **All About Birdhouses** from NestWatch.org to find the best designs and tips for making sure your efforts are truly helping the birds!

Bird Banding

All over the world birds are captured and small metal bands are placed on their legs. As the birds are recaptured in different locations their migration can be tracked. Some banding stations may welcome small groups of visitors. Ask your local birders if they know anyone who is banding birds in your area. Here are a few banding stations that offer public programming.

Vancouver Avian Research Centre. The VARC banding station at Colony Farm Regional Park in Port Coquitlam welcomes groups to learn about bird banding. They also offer guided birding walks.

Wild Research. Banding and other public education opportunities, including the Iona Island Bird Observatory.

Vaseaux Lake Bird Observatory. Located south of Okanagan Falls, the banding station is open from August to October.

Rocky Point Bird Observatory .Victoria-based organization with a focus on research and community education.



Bird banding stations give children a chance to see birds up close. Photo: L. Bol.

“Rocky Point has volunteers who do bird banding... they are happy to do tours of the bird banding station to show how the birds are collected in pouches from the nets, categorized, weighed, measured and banded. They usually let the kids set them free which is just AWESOME!” Britta, Club Leader, Victoria.



Games!

Especially on a cold day, an active game can be a fun way to get your birding activity off to a good start. Games can also be a great way to “wake up” all your senses. This is a great list of games and activities to try:

creativestartlearning.co.uk/nature-play-learning/20-outdoor-bird-games-and-activities

Digital resources

Birds Canada

www.birdscanada.org

Lots of great information here including the **Christmas Bird Count for Kids** and other Canadian citizen science projects.

Birding in British Columbia

birding.bc.ca

A hub for birding information for British Columbia, Canada. Featuring Rare Bird Alerts, a directory to nature clubs and online birding groups, birding forums, and more.

Cornel Lab of Ornithology

www.birds.cornell.edu

The Cornell Lab is a leading resource for bird research and education. Find information and high quality photographs of all bird species. They also offer K-12 lessons, activities and webinars.

Merlin

merlin.allaboutbirds.org

The Merlin app by Cornell University is great for bird ID. It also has a useful sound ID function to identify bird calls.

eBird

ebird.org

A project of the Cornell Lab. Explore birding hotspots in your area, and submit your findings. Your sightings contribute to hundreds of conservation , peer-reviewed papers and student projects, and help inform bird research worldwide.

British Columbia Field Ornithologists

This group organizes birding trips and research projects, as well as the Young Birders Program.

bcfo.ca/bcfo-young-birder-program

Text by Jenni Stol, 2023