

# Outdoors

## Birding can be enjoyed on many levels

**B**irdwatchers – or “birders”, as we prefer to call ourselves – come in several flavors. There are the little old ladies (LOLs) who hardly know one bird from another but just love to see them splashing in a birdbath or flitting around a feeder. And, by the way, not all LOLs are female.

Another group tries to identify birds. They buy birding field guides, or “bird books,” but don’t invest in high-quality binoculars or learn the art of distinguishing “field marks,” by which similar-appearing bird species can be told apart. My mother was one of these, but she encouraged my interest in everything that came under the heading of “nature.” In so doing she launched me on a lifelong hobby and career.

Then we have the “listers.” These birders keep lists of the bird species they see. They start with life lists and progress to year lists, trip lists, backyard lists, and even day lists. Listing is the competitive element of birding: the longest list wins.

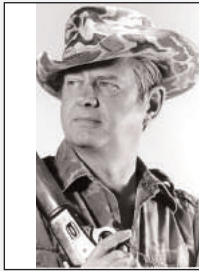
To be a serious lister, one must be good at bird identification. When one exhausts the species in his home area, he begins to make weekend trips to see some new birds. These may extend to overseas trips, or even round-the-world trips. There are birds that one can see only in Antarctica, for example, or in Timbuktu.

Obviously, the logical, ultimate – but unattainable – goal of a serious lister is to see every species of bird in the world.

Nobody has done it, but the time, effort and money spent in its pursuit is amazing. Lists of 500 species can be built without leaving Texas, and 1,000-bird lists are not uncommon.

A “lifer” – a new bird for the life list – becomes an event to be celebrated. Lifers have occasioned champagne parties that would remind you of New Years Eve.

### Currently Outdoors



John Wootters

I call another group of birders the “taxonomists.” Taxonomy is the science of naming things. Everything in the world known to science has a name. If it doesn’t have a name, it doesn’t exist ... or hasn’t been discovered yet.

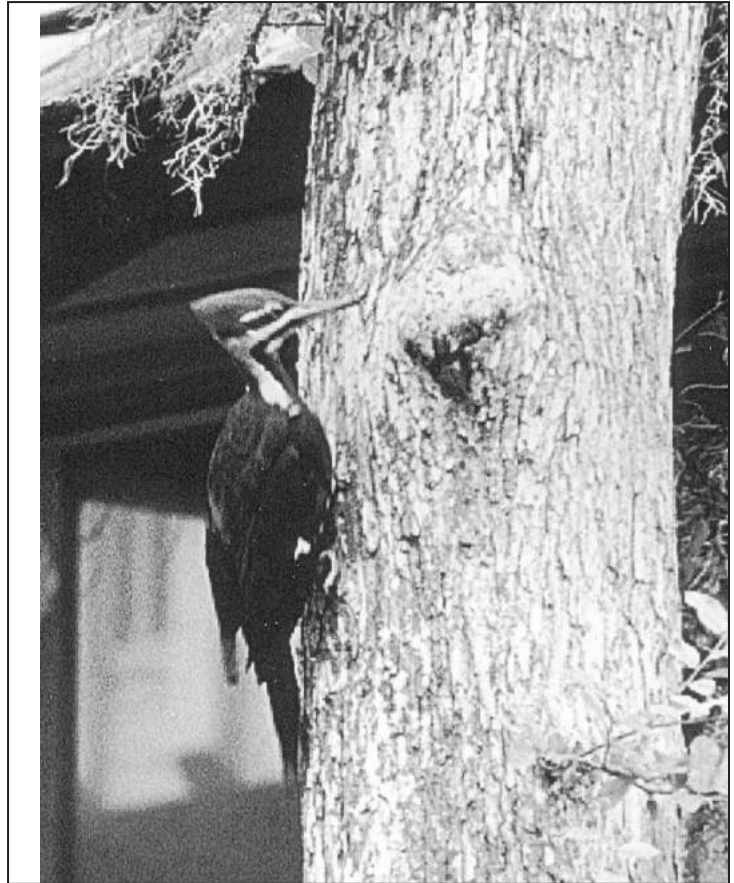
I’m a member of the clan that wants to identify every bird we see. I take it even farther; I yearn to know the name of everything – birds, mammals, snakes, insects, rocks, trees, weeds, stars, fish, sea shells, frogs – everything, even ancient arrowheads and other flint artifacts here in the Hill Country.

An amateur taxonomist trains himself to know and to look for subtle characteristics or markings of birds and other living things, details which separate subspecies. Birding provides an endless challenge to folks like me.

Finally, there is the aesthetic appeal of birds. You don’t have to know the name of a bird to appreciate its beauty. The bright colors, sleek shapes, and swift, graceful movements of birds are exciting. When you stop to think about it, this would be a very dull, drab world without birds.

Besides beauty, birding offers mysteries for the curious, involving migrations, navigation and the mechanics of flight. DNA studies are unlocking mysteries of bird evolution, from a group of dinosaurs that died out 60 million years ago, and relationships between modern bird families.

Bird life variety is truly stunning: there are birds that



Photos by John Wootters

**The largest and most flamboyant woodpecker in America (assuming the ivory-billed woodpecker really is extinct) is the pileated, photographed here in the author’s Houston back yard. The male’s flaming red crest, raucous voice and boisterous behavior draw attention to this crow-sized bird wherever he goes.**

forage in the depths of the ocean, others that inhabit the driest deserts, and still others that spend their lives amid perpetual ice and snow. Some sip nectar daintily from blossoms, and others eat roadkill. Some birds soar in the midst of the grandest scenery on the planet while others live in caves and holes in the ground.

Birds range in size from half-ounce hummingbirds to ostriches that stand seven feet tall and weigh upwards of 150 pounds. There are birds that can’t fly and others that spend their whole lives at sea, never touching land except to breed.

Birding is a rich hobby, one that can be enjoyed at every stage of life. Some birders get their kicks from bird photography, others from recording birds’ voices. There is room in birding for almost

anyone, regardless of your other fields of interest.

It can be as strenuous or passive, as expensive or cheap, as all-consuming or casual, as you choose to make it. It can be practiced literally anywhere in the world, and anywhere you go in the world you’ll find birders like yourself. Even when they don’t speak your language, your common interest in birds will make you friends.

**John Wootters is a semi-retired outdoors writer with more than 30 years experience. He was editor of Petersen’s Hunting magazine and author of the monthly column “Buck Sense” and has written the all-time best selling book on deer hunting, “Hunting Trophy Deer.” He has served on the Board of Directors of the National Rifle Association, and written for Shooting Times, Rifle, Handloader, Guns & Ammo and Petersen’s Hunting magazines.**