

# EXPLORER DAY HOW-TO: BIRDING

How to run a successful bird count or other birding activity, including tips from the NatureKids BC club leader community!



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



## Why birding?

Kids have a natural interest in birds, and observing birds and how they interact with their environment is a great way to nurture a close connection with nature. Birding unlocks our powers of observation and close attention, and opens our senses to the sights and sounds all around us. Birds can be found in forests or on city streets, and even right outside our windows. With a little preparation, you can encourage a love of birds and birding at any age. So grab your binoculars and try birding!

## Finding mentors

Birding is a great opportunity to get out in nature with others, including mentors who are experienced in identifying bird species and love to share their passion with others. 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 NatureKids club leaders agree that a smaller group of participants 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.

*“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. 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? Bathroom? Is the trail wheelchair/stroller accessible? Include accessibility information in your email communication with participants. Your local park or schoolyard can be a great place to look for birds. Look for edge habitats, where the vegetation type changes.

You can search for local birding hotspots at [ebird.org](http://ebird.org).

*“For this year's count we walked some quiet residential alleyways so we could see birds attracted by feeders and gardens...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. The trail was flat and there was lots of parking. Lakes, ponds and other waterways can be 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 NatureKids 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 participants 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:

### **Nature Exploration Tools: How to Use Binoculars**

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

### **How to get crystal clear focus with your binoculars**

*DIY “binoculars”:* tape or staple two toilet paper rolls together for instant binoculars! Kids can decorate their creations. Attach string to hang around a child’s neck. Effective for focusing their eyes on a single bird and blocking out all the distractions.



*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.**

*Field guides:* There are multiple options for great field guides. You can even check out a few from the library. Laminated pocket guides can be found in many bookstores and are cheap and indestructible. You can also print out photos of some common species.

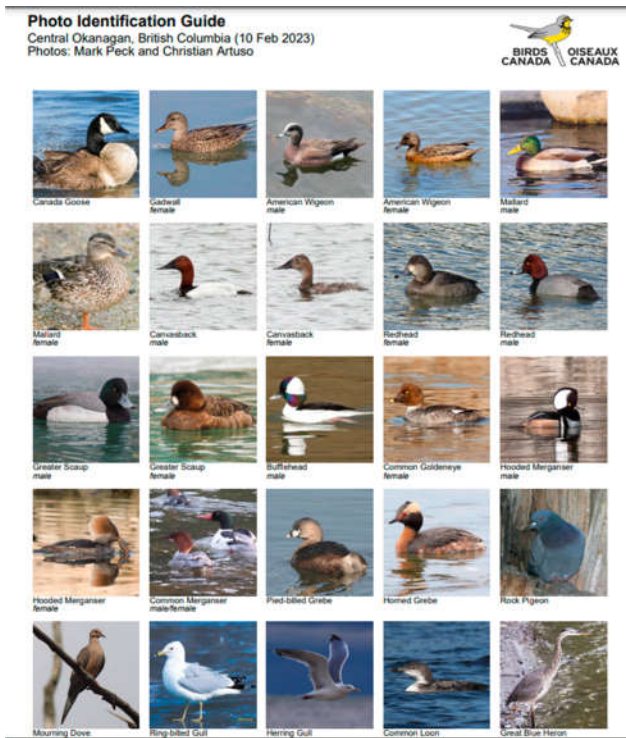
NatureKids Backyard Bird Safari Card: Available from the [NatureKids Online Store](#).

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

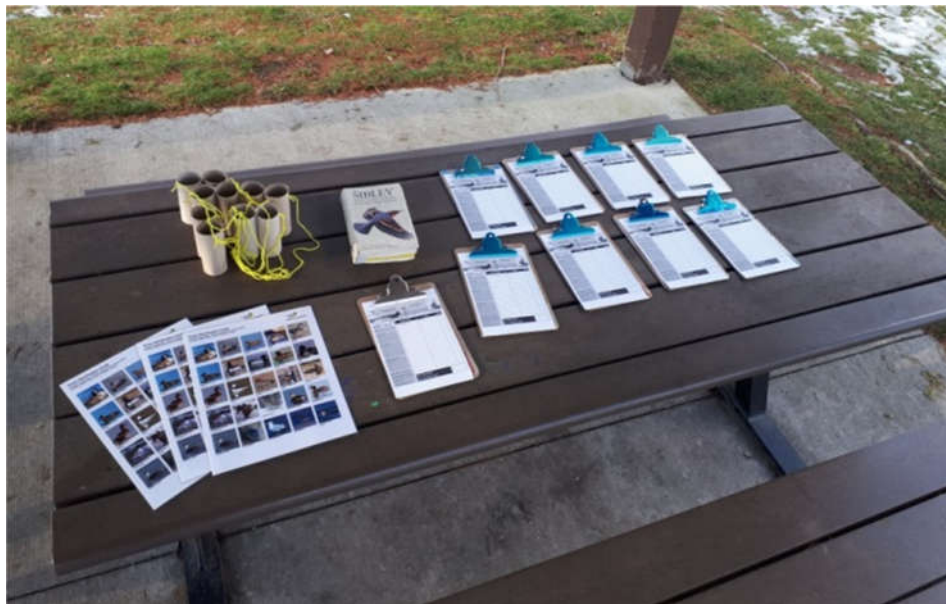


*“The guest birder and the leaders brought a bunch of ID books that we shared, but the best thing was the local “most likely birds” list from Birds Canada that you can print for your area. Those were very popular and most people wanted to take the copies home when we finished - which was great!”* Mandy,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











*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 data sheet from Birds Canada is found in their **Christmas Bird Count for Kids** resources. You can also create a simple scavenger hunt using photos of some species common to your area, like this example from NatureKids BC.

NATURE KIDS Stanley Park Bird Scavenger Hunt  
Photos by Michael Schmidt Photography

 Fox Sparrow <input type="checkbox"/>	 Northern Flicker <input type="checkbox"/>
 Bald Eagle <input type="checkbox"/>	 Barred Owl <input type="checkbox"/>
 Black Capped Chickadee <input type="checkbox"/>	 Chestnut Backed Chickadee <input type="checkbox"/>
 Glaucous Winged Gull <input type="checkbox"/>	 Canada Goose <input type="checkbox"/>

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

 Common merganser	 Canada goose	 Gull
 Mallard - male	FREE	 Barrow's goldeneye
 Black capped chickadee	 Mallard - female	 American coot



## Activities

A 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. Try to observe individuals or groups of birds and ask open-ended questions about the behaviours you observe. Pay attention to their calls and songs. What are they saying? Wrap up your event by gathering together and sharing what everyone saw. You can write the species down on a white board or sheet of paper.

If you'd like to include some additional activities, here are a few suggestions from NatureKids 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/](http://naturevancouver.ca/bird-surveys/)

### **Christmas Bird Count for Kids (CBC4Kids)**

The CBC4Kids is a great way to participate in citizen science. 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](http://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 or for as long as you. 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!

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 good list of games and activities to try:

[creativestarlarning.co.uk/nature-play-learning/20-outdoor-bird-games-and-activities](https://creativestarlarning.co.uk/nature-play-learning/20-outdoor-bird-games-and-activities)

## Digital resources

### Birds Canada

[www.birdscanada.org](http://www.birdscanada.org)

Home of the [Christmas Bird Count for Kids](#) and other Canadian citizen science projects.

### Birding in British Columbia

[birding.bc.ca](http://birding.bc.ca)

Features Rare Bird Alerts, a directory to nature clubs and online birding groups, birding forums, and more.

### British Columbia Field Ornithologists

[bcfo.ca](http://bcfo.ca)

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

### eBird

[ebird.org](http://ebird.org)

Explore birding hotspots and submit your findings. Your sightings help inform bird research worldwide.

### Merlin

[merlin.allaboutbirds.org](http://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.

### Cornell Lab of Ornithology

[www.birds.cornell.edu](http://www.birds.cornell.edu)

A leading resource for bird research and education. They also offer K-12 lessons, activities and webinars.

### Find the Birds

[findthebirds.com](http://findthebirds.com)

A free educational mobile/computer game about birds and conservation.

### Sierra Club BC

[sierraclub.bc.ca/wp-content/uploads/Birds-of-BC-May-2020.pdf](http://sierraclub.bc.ca/wp-content/uploads/Birds-of-BC-May-2020.pdf)

My Bird Journal, a guide to birding with kids, with sample journal pages and scavenger hunts.

Text by Jenni Stol, NatureKids BC, 2023