



Which Light is Right for Night?

Night-birding can be an exciting and rewarding endeavor, essentially doubling the potential birding time of any day. The hours between dusk and dawn bring the possibilities of nocturnally active species like owls and nightjars, flight calls of nocturnal migrants, and can extend either side of a big day when every minute is accounted for in the planned itinerary. To get the most out of a journey into the dark side of birding, some specialized equipment and tips may be in order.

I remember the first time I went on an organized owling trip, heading out at midnight to start off a Christmas Bird Count at Bonny Reservoir in eastern Colorado. Folks were doing obvious preparations like bundling up and grabbing lights, but to my surprise the experienced birders all donned binoculars as well. Lesson learned—always bring your bins, even at night. Distant silhouettes can be scrutinized, and illuminated birds can be studied perfectly well at night through good optics. And if things get slow, binocular astronomy can be quite rewarding! If you have the choice in your arsenal, go with a full-sized binocular and/or lower magnification (7X or 8X instead of 10X+) to maximize your light-gathering ability. Top binocular lines will provide the brightest images in any size/magnification combination due to their optimal light transmission resulting from their use of premium glass and proprietary lens coatings.

Lights are tools to use but not abuse. Always follow the ABA Principals of Birding Ethics (www.aba.org/abaethics.htm), particularly the clause about using artificial light sparingly. Make sure

you and/or your group get adequate looks, but don't linger the light too long on a nocturnal bird. I like to have two light sources when I head out at night—a headlight and a hand-held light. Using a bright light for close tasks can blow your night vision for minutes, so having a milder option is nice—I recommend something like a Petzl Tikka. It is tiny and runs for ages on a single set of batteries, but can light up tricky footing or help with tasks like changing a memory card or finding dropped keys in the dark (<http://en.petzl.com/petzl/LampesAccueil>). For spotting birds, I've switched from a bulky rechargeable spotlight to a small but powerful LED flashlight. Utilizing a single 5-watt high-output LED, the SureFire L2 LumaMax is palm-sized (6.2" long and just over 4 oz.), but provides ample illumination to see night birds without overdoing it (www.surefire.com). I find the light's output sufficient for viewing birds as far out as I can find them, and my

autofocus DSLR can acquire and correctly focus on a subject using only this light. It has two intensity levels, the 15 lumen setting suitable for most work and the 100 lumen level for extra reach when needed. Either output level is available by pushing a momentary button on the back, or by locking on with a twist of the rear cap to either level. The cap also twists back to lock out the push-button switch, preventing accidental battery discharge in a crowded pack. The light is small enough to hold alongside one of your binocular barrels, allowing you to study the bird as you illuminate it. Another neat trick I've figured out is to use the light's included spring clip to snap it onto my camera's lens hood when I'm photographing at night, allowing me to aim, focus, and snap a "pic" without a helper. The SureFire uses two 123A lithium camera batteries, with the advantage of long shelf life and minimal cold weather effects. Expect about an hour of burn time at the high setting, but up to 18 hours at low output. There are similar competing high-intensity compact LED lights out there if you feel like shopping around—look for 3- or 5-watt LED units to get enough light on your night birding outings.

Bill Schmoker is an ardent birder and photographer whose images have appeared internationally in a spectrum of periodicals, books, web pages, and on interpretive signs. He has especially enjoyed his involvement with ABA's Institute for Field Ornithology (see page 3) and with their youth programs. Bill is a regional editor for North American Birds, the president of Colorado Field Ornithologists, and 8th-grade science teacher and he will be a speaker and field trip leader at the ABA Snowbird Convention in June.



Northern Saw-whet Owl, March '07, Boulder County, CO. © Bill Schmoker.