

A Spark of Curiosity

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Most birders and bird-watchers have a spark bird. To put it simply, a spark bird is a bird that sparks a person's interest and enjoyment in the study of birds. Mine was ... well, keep reading and you'll find out.

When I was about eight years old, my curiosity about birds was ignited. Since we moved to a new house I had been wondering what kind of hawks flew over our house. I had an old book my dad used in college on American wildlife, which I used to help identify them. I decided that the closest thing to them was the Mississippi Kite, but I was not certain, because the guide had out-dated, unreliable range maps. I decided to go to the library and do some research. I got a lot of books, including *Raptors*, a kid's guide, which was a great help. Also, I got the *Audubon's First Field Guide to Birds*. *Raptors* gave a variety of information, including range, calls, feeding behavior, and habitat preferences. This information confirmed the identification and triggered my attentiveness in birds and watching them. I told my parents and then kept looking for more birds. Then I identified the "blackbirds" as Common Grackles, the birds that ate my dog's food as European Starlings, and the so called "buzzards" as Turkey Vultures.

After that I was always looking for birds and reading about them. That Christmas I got three field guides: *National Geographic's Field Guide to Birds of North America, Fourth Edition*; *Reader's Digest Field Guide to North American Wildlife and Plants*; and *Audubon's First Field Guide to Birds*. I used them all the time, marking off the birds I

had seen and finding the birds I hadn't seen yet. I quickly learned the order the birds were grouped by, and also checked out all the books I could find at the library and read them.

After getting a dog for my birthday a year later, I regrettably lost my interest in birds. If I hadn't lost interest I would be a much better, more experienced birder. In March of 2008, I was cleaning out my bookshelf when I found my copy of *National Geographic's Field Guide to Birds of North America*. Flipping through the pages, I was amazed at all the different kinds of birds there were. I finished straightening up, then found an old pair of compact binoculars, and ran outside and looked into our tree. I found a European Starling, then found it in the guide and read the information. Then I looked for more birds in the tree. A few weeks later, I had regained my interest in birds.

My dad and I got some feeders and put them up. Then a few days later, we went to the library and checked out a large amount of books. Some of them helped more than others. My favorites were *Sibley's Birding Basics*, *Pete Dunne on Bird-watching*, and *Bird-watching for Dummies*. I was taking it in all at once and soon had identified all the birds in my yard. Then I went to my grandparents' farm and identified all the birds there, too. We went to the hotspots nearby. I decided some were better than others.

Then I found out about the websites for the ABA, E-bird, and Whatbird on the internet. Soon I was entering field data into E-bird, and doing the photo quiz on the ABA website. I upgraded to a better pair of binoculars and got a spotting scope for my birthday. In one year I've come a long way. My life list includes around 150 birds, and I've entered the ABA/Leica Young Birder of the Year contest. I've only met a few other birders, with none my age, so I mostly go birding with my dad and brother. I consider the

Mississippi Kite my spark bird and I still love to observe these beautiful and graceful birds.