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This has been a big year indeed for the ABA birding community. *Birding* magazine continues as the premier resource for birders, and our new *Birder’s Guide* series has focused attention on popular and useful topics, including travel, gear, listing and taxonomy, as well as the many ways ABA members contribute to conservation and help build the birding community. The growth in our online resources continues to astound, with tens of thousands of unique monthly users for *Birding News*, the *ABA Blog* and the *ABA Rare Bird Alert*. Our young birder camps have enjoyed universally admired successes. A major new field guide series has been launched with Colorado, New Jersey, and Florida with more titles coming soon. In addition, the ABA has advanced the cause of bird conservation initiatives in the National Wildlife Refuge System by offering the 2014-2015 *Federal Duck Stamp* through our website.

Just as important are recent initiatives by our Checklist and Recording Standards & Ethics committees and by the *ABA Awards program*. The hard-working committees have refined and provided guidance for how to bird “the ABA Way”—and have added more species to the ABA list! And a new *Betty Petersen Award* recognizes major contributions to bird conservation and the birding community.

Your year-end gift will help the ABA birding community continue to grow these and other programs, as well as support the development of new innovations that will secure both the legacy and future of birding.

I wish you a joyous and bright holiday season and a happy and prosperous New Year. And I hope that birding and belonging to the ABA community continue to bring meaning and excitement to you all the year through.

Good birding,

Jeffrey A. Gordon, President
American Birding Association

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**PS:** Your year-end gift, right now, will make a vital difference in keeping your ABA strong and effective throughout the New Year. Thank you for your support!

---

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gear can be scary! Birder’s Guide to Gear is here to keep
you from sinking in too far and to help you with advice
that you can depend on. Photo © donjohnstonphotos.com
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The American Birding Association, Inc., seeks to encourage and represent the North American birding community and to provide resources through publications, meetings, partnerships, and birder networks. The ABA’s education programs develop birding skills, an understanding of birds, and the will to conserve. The ABA’s conservation programs offer birders unique ways to protect birds and their habitats.

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Be sure to check out our other offerings:
Birders are defined, in part, by their gear. Put some binoculars and a camera around someone’s neck, perhaps a hat on their head, and people will immediately start to assume they’re out birding. At the American Birding Association, we strive to give the birding community helpful and practical information about the gear we all carry or might consider carrying. Further, we take the view that optics, field clothing, and so on are merely tools that help us get more out of birding, rather than an end in themselves.

If you’re not yet a member of the ABA, I hope you’ll be inspired to join by the wealth of useful tips and techniques that you’ll find here. Throughout all our programs and publications, we aim to help make your birding better. If you are already a member and know someone who would benefit from this issue, I hope you’ll share it with them, along with a personal invitation to join.

Member or not, everyone can access the entire Birder’s Guide series at aba.org/birdersguide. It’s a great way to get to know and start to engage with the ABA community.

Good birding,

Jeffrey A. Gordon
President, American Birding Association

Everyone expects to find articles on binoculars and cameras in a guide to birding gear. And, indeed, you’ll find a review of compact binoculars and an article on getting the most out of your camera in this issue. But we’re also trying to think outside the box and are covering one or two topics that may surprise you. Please let us know what you’d like to see reviewed or discussed in the next issue, no matter how unconventional. Even better, consider writing an article for us. Birder’s Guide only exists because our talented pool of ABA members contributes manuscripts for publication. We depend on you sharing your knowledge with the rest of us!

By the same token, we at the ABA depend on our members to give us feedback about what they want—and don’t want—to see in ABA publications. Please consider taking just a moment to share your thoughts with us, either via the email address printed above or at aba.org/birdersguide.

Good birding,

Michael L. P. Retter
Editor, Birder’s Guide
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Ray Arnaudo is a retired U.S. Department of State official with more than 30 years of experience in international environmental and science policy. He is a Senior Scholar at the American Association for the Advancement of Science. From 2009–2013, he served on Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton’s Policy Planning Staff; before that, he headed the U.S. Antarctic Treaty Secretariat. He was the Senior Advisor for nuclear energy and multilateral nuclear nonproliferation with the U.S. Department of Energy at the U.S. Embassy in Moscow from 2006–2008, and directed the U.S. Department of State Office of Oceans and Polar Affairs. He has also been the Science and Environment Counselor at the U.S. Embassy in London. But Ray has been a birder for longer than that and has watched birds on all seven continents. He is a native San Franciscan, currently residing in Falls Church, Virginia.

Amar Ayyash lives in Frankfort, Illinois, where he teaches math for a living. Most of his time in the field is spent watching and photographing gulls. His fascination with this family of birds has resulted in the most well-known gull website in North America, anythinglarus.com. Amar serves on the Board of Directors of the Illinois Ornithological Society and coordinates its annual Gull Frolic.

Sheridan Coffey identified her first bird, a Red-winged Blackbird, at the age of eight in the field behind her house in rural Pennsylvania. Now living in San Antonio, Texas, she works as a corporate travel consultant. She is a member of the San Antonio Audubon Society Bird Records Committee and has led numerous field trips for San Antonio Audubon and other organizations. Sheridan has been on numerous trips to Middle and South America, during which she photographed birds, butterflies, and anything else that moved. Her second passion is knitting. She has combined her interests by designing bird-themed sweaters and hats.

Ashli Gorbet is a wildlife biologist and ornithologist based in Albuquerque, New Mexico. She leads birding tours for BRANT (Birding Research And Nature Tours) and serves as the Secretary of the New Mexico Ornithological Society. She is a licensed bird bander with Rio Grande Bird Research and is the project leader for her significant study on the breeding biology of Black-throated Gray Warblers. On any given day, Ashli may be found rescuing rattlesnakes, counting butterflies, monitoring Gunnison’s Prairie-dog colonies, or conducting bird surveys. All the while, she works tirelessly to share her passion for nature with others.

Anita Guris has been birding for 27 years. She resides in Green Lane, Pennsylvania with her spouse of 24 years, Paul. Anita is a lifetime member and fellow of the Delaware Valley Ornithological Club, where she is Scholarship Chairperson for the annual Adam J. Sabatine Memorial Scholarship Award. She also serves on several other Club committees. Anita enjoys photography, design, travel, and sharing her passion for birds with beginners, in spite of her having the debilitating conditions of mixed connective tissue disease and systemic lupus erythematosus.

Oscar Johnson Villaseñor is a lifelong birder, originally from southern California. He has spent much of his life traveling and birding in the ABA Area, Central America, and his other native country, Mexico. He recently started a Ph.D. program at Louisiana State University, where his area of concentration is on South American birds.

Stephan Lorenz caught the travel bug first and later developed chronic birding fever. Fortunately, they go hand in hand. While traveling and birding on six continents and schlepping too much gear on initial trips, he learned to pare things down to the minimum. He has been fortunate to work as a guide in Alaska, Texas, Costa Rica, and Brazil. His writing and photos have appeared in several publications. He leads tours for High Lonesome BirdTours. In his other life, Stephan teaches biology at San Jacinto College in Houston, Texas, where, along with his wife Claudia, he takes breaks from international travel.

Ron Ridout’s birding career spans more than five decades, including work at Bird Studies Canada for the past 22 years. He is the founding President of Ontario Field Ornithologists and worked as the Ontario Region Editor of American Birds/Field Notes from 1992–1998. He is the author of A Birding Guide to the Long Point Area. Ron currently serves on the Ontario Bird Records Committee.
Jennifer Rycenga is a member of the Sequoia Audubon Society board in San Mateo County, California, where she promotes citizen-science initiatives: Bio-Blitzes, iNaturalist, and eBird. She edits the online “San Mateo County Birding Guide”. When not birding, Jennifer teaches at San José State University in the Humanities Department; this year, while on sabbatical, she is completing a cultural biography of white abolitionist Prudence Crandall. She lives with her wife and birding companion, Peggy Macres.

Bill Schmoker wrote the “Geared for Birding” column in Winging It and is a frequent photo contributor to Birding and other ABA publications, in addition to a wide variety of books, magazines, and other media. He is an author on the ABA Blog and proud of his involvement with the ABA Young Birders program; he is a Camp Colorado and Camp Avocet instructor and photo module judge for the Young Birder of the Year contest. Bill is a past president of Colorado Field Ornithologists and currently on that state’s bird records committee. He is pleased to be a member of the Leica Birding Team and is cranking along in his 24th year of teaching eighth grade.

Since 1997, Sharon Stiteler has achieved her goal to get paid to go birding. In 2004, she founded the popular blog, Birdchick (www.birdchick.com). She travels the world as a field trip leader, birding consultant, humorous keynote speaker, bird surveyor, and writer. She wrote the books Disapproving Rabbits, City Birds Country Birds, and 1001 Secrets Every Birder Should Know; is #32 in the “Geek A Week” trading card set; and works part time as a National Park Service ranger. She contributes regularly to “Outdoor News Radio” and “All Things Considered”, and has appeared on “NBC Nightly News” answering bird questions. When she’s not digitizing or performing improv, she’s a blue ribbon beekeeper. You can find her on Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, and Google+ as “Birdchick”.

Alex Wang grew up in Tacoma, Washington, but his passion for avian conservation led him to Hawaii, where the need is great. He is a graduate student at the University of Hawaii at Hilo and has nearly completed a master’s degree studying the movements of the endangered ‘Akohekohe (Palmeria dolei) using radio telemetry. Alex is nerdy enough that he enjoys leafing through field guides of places he may never visit just to see what’s out there.
What Makes a Good Field Guide?

Birder's Guide posed this question to a variety of accomplished birders in the U.S. and Canada. Read on to see what they said.

Editor's Note: Just as this issue was going to press, the second printing of the second edition of The Sibley Guide to Birds was released. It was not considered by the birders below. The second printing corrects both of the major criticisms of the first: overly dark red tones and too-pale, gray, hard-to-read text on a white background. The reds are now paler and truer, and the gray text was turned to a high-contrast, easy-to-read black, making The Sibley Guide, in this birder's opinion, the field guide to beat in the ABA Area. You can read reviews of the first and second printings of the second edition on the ABA Blog at tinyurl.com/brumfield-on-sibley and tinyurl.com/stiteler-on-sibley, respectively.
Field Guides

Amar Ayyash
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Whether you lug it around in the field, keep it in the car, or leave it at home, a “good” identification field guide is indispensable. I often hear birders fretting about the utility of a field guide: Will it fit in my back pocket? Is the print easy to read? Does the table of contents lend itself to quickly finding the family I’m looking for? These concerns vary from user to user, and depend somewhat on experience and where the guide is used. What single feature makes a first-rate field guide? Accurate illustrations! Although photographic field guides are usually packed with lovely images of “real” birds, illustrated guides tend to furnish more information and detail.

I like a field guide that illustrates age, sex, and seasonal plumage differences. Ideally, the bird is drawn in flight and in a natural pose. Very helpful are guides that use field mark notations adjacent to the plates, homing in on the most distinguishing field marks.

The accompanying text reinforces the illustrations, but should also point out differences between similar-looking species as well as various subspecies and regularly occurring hybrids. Standard in most field guides is a voice description, but some also find ways to emphasize foraging behavior and habitat, which I find an added bonus because these notes aid the identification process.

Precise range maps are quite rare, and field guides with subsequent editions tend to be more up-to-date in this respect. I prefer that range maps be included with the species account and not in a separate section.

The truth is, every field guide has different strengths, and, fortunately, purchasing one is not like buying a pair of binoculars or a spotting scope. I have several ABA Area field guides in my library, and I often find myself cross-referencing them. If in some strange circumstance I were only allowed to keep one, I’d have a tough time choosing between the National Geographic Complete Birds of North America and The Sibley Guide to Birds. Both are impeccable works of art that provide a wealth of information.

Sheridan Coffey
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Birding success relies on two basic and equally important tools: the right binocular and the right field guide. But it can be a bit daunting to browse for ABA Area field guides in a large bookstore or online (such as at Buteo Books). Each year it seems there is another new guide out there. How does one choose? Is there one “right” guide? What makes a good field guide, particularly for the inexperienced birder?

A field guide should be more than a series of pictures of birds. It should have accurate maps showing the range of each species as well as whether the species is present year round, a seasonal resident, or a migrant. At least a minimal amount of text should describe the size of the bird, both sitting and in flight; the voice; and any particularly important field marks, such as primary projection beyond the tertials.

Many experienced birders prefer painted illustrations to photos in their main field guide. This may seem counterintuitive, but it is much easier to portray an “average” bird in a painting than in a photo. It’s a rare individual bird that is a true average. Catching the typical position of the bird in a photo can be very difficult. Lighting can be deceptive. Depending on age and molt, feather color can be off. A good illustrator takes all of these into consideration.

The guide should be arranged in taxonomic order. This enables a new birder to learn how bird families fit together—to realize that a warbler is a different type of bird than a flycatcher even if they have some features in common, like color or size. In the field, it becomes easier to narrow things down when one recognizes a bird is a plover rather than a rail. There is one caveat with taxonomic order; it can change over time. Falcons may end up next to parrots, but they are still falcons, so it isn’t necessary to update your guide every year.

I have two favorite guides: the National Geographic Field Guide to the Birds of North America and The Sibley Guide to Birds by David Allen Sibley. Both have stood the test of time. Sibley is a bit bulky to carry in the field, but versions
for both the eastern and western parts of the U.S. and Canada are available that are more easily carried in a pocket or bag. I strongly suggest having more than one field guide. Comparing different illustrations can sometimes shed light on identification problems.

The most important thing to remember is to not limit your use of the guide to when you are in field—if you even use it there at all. Keep it next to your bed. Take it on the commuter train. Put a copy in your desk at work for break or lunch time. Flip through it, even for a few minutes, whenever you can, and it will become a part of you. Don’t just look at the birds that are in your area. Seeing the Crested Auklet in my very first field guide inspired me to dream of Alaska. Eventually that dream came true.

Ashli Gorbet
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Field guides are as varied as birders themselves, and each book speaks to different birders in different ways. For learning new birds, as well as intensively studying familiar species, I find field guides which show multiple illustrations to be indispensable. They capture a more comprehensive range of postures and appearances that I expect to encounter in the field. The best field guides include an array of plumages of all age and sex classes, along with intermediate or transitional plumages.

Behavioral information can be that clinching piece of evidence which helps confirm an ID. Field guides that include basic information on the general habits and habitat of a species are far more practical to me than books that ignore these critical elements of identification.

The field guides that always make it onto my short list for their stellar illustrations and extreme portability are the western and eastern versions of *The Sibley Guide to Birds*. Though I keep a copy of “Big Sibley” in my car, when I’m birding out of a suitcase I prefer the smaller volumes. These compact versions also offer tidbits of behavioral information that are absent from the original “Big Sibley”.

For even greater portability, I often scrap the paper book altogether and rely on my *Sibley eGuide to the Birds of North America* on my smartphone. With the exception of the sidebars, this app has all of the information housed in the original version of “Big Sibley”, along with the behavioral information of both regional Sibley guides.

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When looking for a field guide to purchase, I check for three features: the accuracy of the images; assistive marks that point out key field marks; and the simplicity of range maps, text, and comparisons between similar birds.

It is critical for the images to be accurate. They should have a clean, methodical layout, with minimal distractions on the page. I’m very perceptive of color, so having the correct color printed on the page is very important to me when identifying a bird. Putting a name to a color is often subjective, making the color accuracy of the printed image oh so important.

I find it helpful for the images to be augmented with arrows or other markings that point to field marks on a bird, helping you to recognize which marks distinguish one species from another. In addition to images of the birds, concise text explaining a species’ habitat, comparisons between similar-looking birds, and color-keyed range maps all combine to help you identify birds accurately.

My preferred guides are *The Sibley Guide to Birds* and *Eastern Birds* by Roger Tory Peterson.

Oscar Johnson Villaseñor
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With such a wide range of field guides to choose from these days, and often with multiple guides for a single region, it can be difficult to make an informed decision on which to purchase before embarking on a birding trip to some
new country. These guides are often not available in local stores, so purchasing them online is usually the easiest option. However, without looking at the guide in the hand, how are you supposed to decide which to purchase?

Field guides typically come in two forms: massive tomes of invaluable information on identification, natural history, and status and distribution, with numerous illustrations; or smaller, utilitarian guides that include one or two simple illustrations for each species along with a brief species account and either a summary of the distribution or a range map. These two types of guides have very different uses, in my opinion, but only one is truly useful as a field guide.

As an example of the field guide conundrum, here is what happened to me this past year when I was planning my first trip to South America—Colombia, to be specific. There are two field guides published for that bird-rich country. One is a voluminous tome that is nearly indispensable for a visiting birder (A Guide to the Birds of Colombia; Hilty & Brown, 1986), and the other is a small handy guide that can fit in one’s back pocket (Field Guide to the Birds of Colombia; McMullan, Donegan, & Quevedo, 2010). With a country boasting nearly 2,000 species, a small field guide leaves out a lot of information, but who wants to carry a book weighing nearly 3 lb. (1.3 kg)? Let’s face it: enormous “field” guides can almost be considered coffee-table books! What I quickly realized is that the smaller guide lacked one key aspect that would have made it ideal for such a trip: good illustrations. The illustrations were so atrocious that I could hardly recognize the species that I was familiar with. How was I supposed to identify a bird in the field if the illustrations didn’t match what the bird looks like? It was frustrating, to say the least.

There are precious few field guides that combine a manageable size with good illustrations and accurate (even if brief) text. A guide with those three things would, in my opinion, constitute a good field guide. Good examples of a utilitarian field guide that combines these three requirements include Birds of Europe (Svensson, Zetterström, & Mullanrey, 2010), the Eastern and Western Sibley Guides (Sibley, 2003), and The Birds of Costa Rica (Garrigues & Dean, 2007).

Ron Ridout
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My first field guide was the 1947 edition of Roger Tory Peterson’s A Field Guide to the Birds. In the early 1960s, it was the only game in town, and I carried it on every field excursion. While field guides have improved a lot since then, I still appreciate its simplicity of design and evocative text.

Having owned all of the major guides, I have developed distinct preferences over the years. First and foremost, and despite having a degree in Advanced Photography, I am firmly in the artwork (versus photographs) camp. There is nothing more instructive than a plate of illustrations rendered by a skilled artist. I consider Guy Tudor to be the finest bird illustrator, with several Europeans close behind. David Sibley is the best of the current North Americans.

Beyond the quality and consistency of the artwork, concise and well-written text covering key field marks, similar species, habits, habitat, and voice is essential. A range map in blues, purples, reds, and oranges should be placed with the text. Colors such as yellow and light greens should be avoided.

The plates should always be on the page facing the text and range maps. The species illustrations should be opposite their respective write-ups as much as possible. Renderings of distinct plumages of each species are important, though not at the expense of the size of the illustrations. An adequate compromise can sometimes be difficult to achieve.

Of the current ABA Area guides, I am torn between Sibley and the 6th edition of the National Geographic guide. Each has its strong points. I have a preference for some of the artwork in the Nat. Geo., particularly David Quinn’s plates, but, overall, Sibley’s artwork is more consistent. Until the most recent edition, the lack of continental rarities in Sibley placed it behind the Nat. Geo., but that has been fixed. Sibley’s technique of placing key identification points around...
the illustrations is very useful.

So, if I could only take one guide with me on a trip in the ABA Area, it would be the second edition of *The Sibley Guide*.

**Jennifer Rycenga**
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Field guides communicate through distilled objective descriptions, in prose, pictures, and maps. They can be mined for nuggets, rewarding repeated visits with new perspectives and answers to questions you didn’t even know you had. The field guide epitomizes the best practices of field ornithology from the 20th century. But are field guides still relevant in the 21st century, bedazzled as we are with apps, the web, and the rushing river of perpetual information?

Two recent experiences convince me of the ongoing utility of field guides. I have been expanding my knowledge of other taxa (butterflies, moths, reptiles, trees, spiders). My library of field guides has therefore expanded. Learning families and inter-relationships between species, and comparing where to look for key field marks—issues like these are now second nature to me with birds. But the process of learning again with other taxa showed me that the field guide’s portability and formatting fit both field exigencies and relaxed learning when at home.

Recently, I found myself spending a delightful hour with my favorite ABA Area field guide, the National Geographic. My library of field guides has therefore expanded. Learning families and inter-relationships between species, and comparing where to look for key field marks—issues like these are now second nature to me with birds. But the process of learning again with other taxa showed me that the field guide’s portability and formatting fit both field exigencies and relaxed learning when at home.

Second, I like having the reference maps and illustrated plates on adjacent pages so that you can look at them concurrently. A range map can be a determining field mark in itself; it is worth trading some written detail for the ability to glean a species’ likely distribution at a glance.

Third, I find illustrations more useful than photographic guides. I believe the illustration is a composite that conveys the most important details and field marks all at once, drawn upon from the memory and experience of the illustrator. A photo may be more “real”, but it cannot convey all that information unless multiple shots are used, taking up valuable space in the field guide.

With that in mind, I would rather use a pocket National Geographic or a regional Sibley guide than their comprehensive counterparts for the “field”. They are compact enough to fit in my cargo or jacket pocket.

**Alex Wang**
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First, I think there is a difference between a true “field guide” and a birding reference book. While the latter can be much more detailed, the first and foremost parameter for a field guide is usefulness in the field. For me, size is paramount. Birding can be a gear-intensive activity. From binoculars to a camera, scope, and/
Does a Girl Go in the Woods?

There is a delicious irony about birding in a sewage treatment facility, one relating to human filtration and its limits. Despite the utilitarian ambition of the Back River Sewage Treatment Plant, there wasn’t any place in the whole aquatic labyrinth for needy birders to deposit processed coffee. And most of the three hundred–plus birders present had ingested great quantities of coffee during their predawn drives.

—Pete Dunne, The Feather Quest

Editor’s Note: For a subject (and activity) that comes up so regularly on birding trips, the actual mechanics of “going” in the field are seldom openly discussed by birders. And I think that’s a shame. Based on my years of leading birding tours, I know how difficult it can be for about half of the birding population to just hop out of the van and “use a bush”. In many cases, having the right equipment could likely have made the process much easier and less stressful, especially for some participants whose knees aren’t as flexible as they once were. So even though you may be part of the 50% of birders reading this for whom the topic has little relevance, I hope you’ll agree that this article has the potential to significantly improve the birding lives of the other 50%. If you agree, please read on. If not, or you just don’t want to read about peeing, I encourage you to flip on to the next article.
This is a review for the ladies.

Thanks to fieldwork and my love of foreign travel, I consider myself an expert when it comes to using the restroom outdoors. Wherever I go, I make an immediate mental note of where I can scurry away should nature start calling loudly and clearly.

When I pack my birding backpack, I often include a special device that allows me to relieve myself while standing up. I’ve had more than one female friend ask, “Why not just squat like the rest of us?”

Sometimes squatting is not convenient. You may find yourself up at Sax-Zim Bog in northern Minnesota in winter looking for owls with a fresh 13 inches of snow on the ground. Or maybe you just watched a four-foot rattlesnake slither in front of a photography blind at Martin Ranch in south Texas, suggesting that squatting next to a shrub might be ill-advised. Or let’s say you have bad knees, and bending them is not an option. Or perhaps your body is changing for medical reasons, and you need to go all the time—more than the prescribed number of restroom stops on a field trip.

My best example of needing “help” occurred on a trip I took to Kazakhstan. I was the lone female for most of the trip, and our guide was not big on comfort or urinary privacy. On a particularly rainy day, I begged for a dry place and offered to buy the group coffee or tea if we stopped at a café with a restroom. His answer was to pull up to a large gas pipe. He told me, “Finally, a quiet spot to use the bathroom in private!”

I skipped over the wall, found a spot, leaned against it, and began to relieve myself in sweet seclusion. Some movement caught my peripheral vision, and I looked down to see a scorpion about to crawl on me. I leapt up and tripped over myself to avoid a sting. I had never been more grateful for the quick-dry fabric of convertible field pants, as I assessed how much of a mess I had made in my panic to flee. I wished I had had a urinary device with me then!

Funny thing was, I had packed a device that allows me to stand up while urinating, but airport security in Almaty confiscated it. After I had experienced all the restrooms of Kazakhstan, I guessed that a female security agent saw it in my luggage and thought it was a great idea, so kept it for herself. I was sympathetic.

Over the years I have become well-acquainted with various models. Some work very well for discreet bathroom breaks in the outdoors. If your first thought is a large hard plastic funnel that is difficult to discreetly pack and requires the flexibility of a trapeze artist to use, let me assure that great strides have been made in the world of female outdoor urination. These are not like kitchen funnels. They are compact, sometimes flexible designs that, with a little practice, can help you out of a bind in the wild.

**GoGirl • go-girl.com**

This flexible funnel is made out of medical-grade silicone and comes in either pink or camouflage colors. Due to the shape, this device requires you to lower your pants half way down, and it helps if you bend your knees slightly. You hold the soft funnel against your body from the front and back, and liquid flows into the large reservoir and out the tip. The tip of the GoGirl funnel is a bit short, and you have to be careful not to dribble on your pants towards the finish as the flow slows.

GoGirl is compact and discreet. It is reusable and rolls up neatly to fit in a provided plastic tube. The tube even includes wipes and a plastic bag for safer and cleaner storage after use in the field. When you get home, simply wash and dry before storing for future use.

GoGirl can be purchased individually or in multi-packs, with an average price of about $12 per funnel.

**Whiz Freedom • whizproducts.co.uk**

This is another flexible and reusable funnel, but it has a slightly smaller reservoir and a longer drainage tube that allows for more distance and less risk of dripping on your clothing and shoes. Whiz Freedom advertises that it is made from anti-bacterial, anti-microbial, anti-fungal, medically approved, soft plastic, and it comes in purple or white. The shape of this device requires the user to lower her pants half-way down the legs. There is also an option to purchase an extension tube if you are overly concerned about leakage onto your trouser legs. It doesn’t come with storage but will easily fold up to fit into a sandwich bag. You can purchase a carrying case separately. When you return home, simply rinse and let the funnel dry before using again.

*Photo © Sharon Stiteler*
storage. The company mentions that this particular funnel is machine washable. Whiz Freedom is from the U.K.; with the current exchange rate, the price comes to about $30.

**Shewee • shewee.com**

This is possibly the most discreet device available and comes with its own nondescript travel case that resembles a toothbrush case. It is supposed to not only allow women to urinate while standing up, but also claims the user can simply unzip her trousers without having to lower them halfway like other funnels. The narrow funnel of the Shewee is long and extends far back. Because of the thin shape and shallow reservoir, you have to keep a tiny bit of space between it and your body during use to prevent leakage. Shewee sells specially made underwear in the “boy shorts” style with a fly front for easy access. This product is for experienced professionals. The small reservoir requires extreme flow control and even then you could still have a breach. But once you are used to the set-up, it’s handy for cold weather because you don’t have to undo as many layers.

The Shewee is available in “Power Pink”, “Pure White”, and “Nato Green”. The funnel itself is in the $16 price range, but you can get the underwear and funnel together in an “Active Pack” for about $28.

**Freshette • freshette.com**

This thin, plastic funnel with five-inch-long tube has a loyal fan base. The tube stays in the funnel until you are ready to use it, at which point you pull out the tube until it clicks. Make sure it clicks, or there will be a surprise leak onto your pants! Once you are finished, you can pop the tube back up into the funnel and store the device in its travel case for future use. Of all the devices, this one gives the best chance of your using it while only unzipping the fly of your trousers. However, depending on the type of pants you are wearing and your body shape, you may have to pull your trousers down halfway to allow the device to fit properly against your body. The long tube is flexible, but not so much that you could spell your name in the snow.

Freshettes are in the $24 price range and can be ordered in pairs for about $40.

**Urinelle • urinelle.biz**

This company claims to offer a disposable and biodegradable funnel. Perhaps it is disposable in Western toilets, but I wouldn’t bury it in the woods. The cardboard funnels come in a pack of seven, and you can fit the wrapped, flattened funnels in a large coat pocket. To use, lower your trousers halfway and press the large end of the funnel against your body. Because you are holding thin cardboard, the flow will feel quite warm and even wet in your hand. Trust the cardboard: there is no breach. These do the trick, but are not reusable.

Urinelles are sold in packs of seven and average roughly $10 per pack.

**Stadium Gal • stadiumpal.com/gal**

Stadium Gal is the sister product of Stadium Pal, made famous by the David Sedaris essay on the “Stadium Buddy”. The female version is a complex medical product that was originally meant for female urinary incontinence. To use the product as it is intended, a smooth body surface is required with which to temporarily attach the funnel, and then a tube is used to funnel liquid into a bag that is strapped to the legs and can be emptied later. This might be ideal for a situation like a photo blind, where you might be hunkered down for several hours, but it is not as comfortable to use while walking around. You can, however, use part of the device as a funnel without using the adhesive. One of the advantages to the funnel is that it’s customizable: it’s able to be cut into different shapes to fit anyone’s body. Due to the adhesive, this attachment to the body cannot be reused over several days. That part of the apparatus has to be repurchased. If you hold the funnel up without removing the adhesive cover, it can be reused.

Stadium Gal runs about $35 per package, and you have the option of purchasing a storage bag that is either 17 oz. (good for one restroom break) or 34 oz. (good for two or three, depending on how much liquid you drink).

**Depend • depend.com**

Depend is a brand of absorbant, disposable underwear that makes an effort to look more like regular cotton underwear; there are even different styles and cuts. You can either use their website tool to determine which style is right for your needs or purchase a sample pack at your local drugstore. When you wear one, it feels like bulky cotton underwear but is not very noticeable. It is primarily for urinary incontinence, but if you do not want to drop your pants outdoors, it will work. The surprisingly absorbent underwear can take a lot of liquid: at least one
Does a Girl Go in the Woods?

Tips

• Tap Water. To see how the device will work for you, hold it under a faucet or use a measuring cup full of water and watch how it fills up and flows. You can also experiment with the volumetric flow rate, to give you an idea of how much liquid the device can take at once without spillage.

• Read The Instructions. This may seem like a no-brainer, but each product has its own design which works in a certain way to avoid overflow problems. Some require you to hold the funnel tip-to-tail rather than side-to-side in order to prevent leakage. Most products come with helpful (if sometimes comically written) instructions, or offer demonstrations on their websites.

• Practice. All of these devices require practice, and I suggest you do so in the shower. Standing while urinating is not natural for most women, and it may take some time to persuade your body that you can do this. Aim is different. I encourage you to practice with trousers so you know where liquid could land as the volume of liquid changes during use. Each woman is shaped differently, and you will want to know what it feels like to use the device properly. It’s better to figure all of this out at home with a washer and dryer handy than in the middle of the field before another eight hours of birding with a group of 10 people.

• Flow Control. Each device has a reservoir, and it can be easy to go faster than the funnel can expel fluid, leading to overflow. Try to maintain a light stream and note how quickly you fill a reservoir.

• Avoid Waiting Until The Last Minute. Don’t wait until you can’t hold it anymore. You might think that would make things easier, but it is then harder to control the flow, and that could affect your aim.

• Wind Direction. Keep the wind to your back to avoid any backspray.

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Depend sample packs can be ordered for free online, or run about $12–$15 at the store.

full bathroom stop or one-and-three-quarter cups of liquid. Though the absorbent material is supposed to minimize odor and keep things sanitary, it feels slightly warm and wet after use. But it works in a pinch, especially if you are layered up for deep winter birding.

Tips

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Most of these products can be purchased at outdoor retail stores. If you are uncomfortable buying them in a store or asking someone about them face to face, all are available online, with helpful FAQs and sometimes telephone chat lines to help you navigate your purchase. Don’t let your worry of using the restroom outside deter you from enjoying great birds. You have many options.
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I strained to keep my binocular steady, my feet shifting on soft moss and tussocks of grass fringing a small wetland. An interesting hummingbird made repeated visits to the tops of massive, non-native eucalyptus. I watched it sneak in among a dozen Sparkling Violetears, which were busy chasing each other. I had a suspicion and at this point maybe wished for a scope, but patience paid off. Tracking the hummingbird for nearly 30 minutes, I eventually followed it to a perch on the edge of dense vegetation right at eye level. I approached within six feet, and its gorget flashed brilliant gold-green against a black back and dark gray underparts. It was a male Black-backed Thornbill, a rare hummingbird endemic to the high elevations of the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta in northeastern Colombia.

As the bird used its short bill to preen right in front of my nose, I felt a twinge of regret for traveling ultralight and leaving my camera at home. Yet, thinking about the tiring hike up and the inevitable walk back down, I was glad my backpack was negligible. On this particular trip, I had traveled especially light because I knew it would be quite an undertaking to reach the endemic-rich high elevations of these mountains. From the coastal town of Santa Marta, I took a taxi to the small town of Minca, where the road leading up the mountain deteriorated rapidly. The cheapest option was by motorcycle taxi. I had perched precariously on the back seat while a young local, wearing flip-flops, raced up the mountain on a dirt bike. I was glad my backpack weighed less than 20 pounds.

Keep It to a Minimum!

I have always been an advocate for traveling extremely light, especially because most of my birding trips are independent and often rely on public transportation. In general, international travel on a limited budget does not leave much room for luggage. Jumping on and off buses, cramming into minivans, being sardined inside taxis, or sometimes hoofing it to the next destination precludes heavy bags and
extra changes of clothes. Over the years, I have whittled down the amount of birding equipment and minimized the size and weight of the basics I carry.

Alan Knue provided a great primer in his excellent article, “Packing 411 for Birders” (Birder’s Guide to Travel, August 2013), offering general tips on what to leave at home and what to store in carry-on luggage and checked baggage. He added a useful packing list. In this article, I will share what I have learned during the past 10 years of traveling on a tight budget and sometimes in tight quarters. My goal is to help readers shave a few extra pounds off their birding equipment.

I realize that jumping on and off Central American “chicken” buses, riding tuk-tuks in Southeast Asia, or taking unreliable local ferries in the Galápagos is not everybody’s cup of tea. But I think my tips on equipment, including a few specific examples of brands and models I use, can apply to any trip. This is not an exhaustive product review or comparison, but it’s a good start. I encourage you to research products to find the best fit in terms of price and personal preference.

Essential birding gear is surprisingly spartan, including only a quality binocular, a field guide, playback equipment, and a flashlight. Spotting scope and camera are optional. The rest of my backpack is filled with clothes, depending on destination, and a few extras. If something does not pack, I can wear it or worry about it on arrival.

**The Essential Binocular**

A good binocular is the most basic tool for every birder. Although I travel light, I don’t scrimp on weight and size here. See Ben Lizdas’s “Binocular 101” article (Birder’s Guide to Gear, December 2013) for a solid summary of binocular features. I prefer 10x42 models, as these offer maximum usable magnification, light, and—most important—versatility. The extra bit of magnification compared to 8x may be just enough to spy that critical field mark. You may be caught out on a mudflat or doing some unexpected seabirding, and a scope may not be available.

Good-quality 10x42 binoculars allow enough light and close focus even for close-quarter birding in South American and Asian rainforests. Nearly every binocular brand offers a versatile 10x42 model; it just comes down to price and preference. At the high end, birders cannot go wrong with Swarovski, Zeiss, or Leica. More-affordable quality brands include Eagle Optics, Vortex, Minox, and Celestron; the latter offers excellent lightweight models.

**The Scope. Yes or No?**

To scope or not to scope: That is the question. Some may be shocked, but I have left the scope at home on more than one trip. Lack of a scope negate several possibilities, like digiscoping and getting that feather-by-feather view of a long-awaited lifer, but it has often been worth saving space and weight. If I expect to use the scope rarely, I have found an odd middle ground and just packed the scope without a tripod. Yes, with some practice it is possible to hand-hold a scope (easier with a fixed wide-angle lens) or to prop it against something stable. That often works just enough to verify identification of distant birds. If a scope is absolutely necessary, I recommend a compact to mid-size model with a carbon-fiber travel tripod. This combination can be surprisingly lightweight and packs down small.

**Calls and Songs?**

Another essential tool, especially if birders are seeking secretive species, is basic playback equipment. Opinions on the use of playback vary widely, and I am neither condoning nor condemning it, but certain species of birds are next to impossible to see without judicious use of playback. Tapaculos, those feather sprites of bamboo-choked cloudforest, are a great example. Broadcasting a few snippets of song while I stood at the road verge high in the Santa Marta Mountains, an endemic Brown-rumped Tapaculo emerged just long enough for a good view before it slipped back into dense bamboo.

Playback equipment has become very small, with thumb-sized MP3 players having more memory than needed. I prefer SanDisk, which has proven reliable, but many birders prefer iPods and any of the smaller models will work. The most im-
portant feature on small MP3 players or iPods is the size of the screen, which must be large enough to read titles of recordings.

Portable speakers to complement the playback device are a bit more cumbersome; after experimenting with many over the years, I have found extremely small speakers that are loud enough to work and compact enough to fit anywhere. Most speakers have durability issues and many get worn out over months of birding. The connecting cord is the Achilles’ heel of most speakers. I recommend fortifying the chord and audio plug with electrical tape before extended use.

I prefer the X-Mini II XAM4-B or the newer model X-Mini UNO XAM14-GM portable capsule speaker. These models have rechargeable batteries and USB connections for easy recharging, even though I rarely have to charge them. The whole setup, MP3 player and speaker, fits into the palm of my hand or my pants pocket.

**Picture This!**

Whether essential or not can be debated, but DSLR cameras and zoom lenses, no matter how one wedges them, take up considerable space in a bag. On extreme trips, like backpacking into the Darién Gap, I have even left the camera at home. I now happily carry a compact camera, which has enough flexibility to capture landscapes, companions, and a few memory shots of the birds.

Features on compact cameras are constantly improving, with many boasting 20x optical zoom or more—enough to get at least decent pictures of some of the birds along the way (photo, right). If conditions are not ideal for pictures, the video functions of many of the smaller models are superb and often allow captures clear enough to work out tricky identifications later. Canon PowerShot gives good results for the price and size, plus it works well with handheld digiscoping.

**Digital Devices for Field Guides and Notes**

My opinion on tablets changed dramatically during a recent three-month trip involving several countries. The three field guides and two site guides I carried weighed as much as all the other gear combined. I now consider a tablet or smartphone essential, and both of these also work as a basic field guide, but also have recordings of the birds. If no app is available or if only a few chapters from a site guide are needed, it is possible to scan a few pages and upload these onto the device.

In addition, a digital device allows travelers to download a wealth of trip reports provided by fellow birders, plus collate other information into easy documents without carrying stacks of paper. Basic country travel guides are also available digitally.

**Nocturnal Birding**

Flashlights are necessary if you plan to camp or stay in remote lodges, and they allow you to seek nocturnal birds. Searching for owls or nightjars is always exciting, and catching a glimpse of a Santa Marta Screech-Owl was one of the highlights for me in Colombia.

Several brands of powerful-but-small LED spotlights are now available. The cost varies and depends on output. For spotlighting animals at night, I recommend at least 100 lumens, preferably more. Brands such as Black Diamond, Petzl, and Princeton Tec have headlamp models with plenty of lumens for spotlighting and are versatile for other activities. I prefer small handheld spotlights and like Surefire, which is dependable. LED Lenser is another popular brand that offers small flashlights, which use more conventional batteries that are easier to buy overseas. To keep it all powered, I use a universal charger with a USB connection.

**How to Pack It All?**

The pack itself can add considerable weight to the overall gear. Fortunately, lightweight and durable materials make luggage much lighter. The Osprey brand makes excellent bags; for maximum versatility, I use luggage that converts from wheeled baggage to a backpack. The bag is big enough to fit all my gear plus clothes, but small enough to carry on the airplane. Take some weight off your back and enjoy a little more freedom to bird. Safe travels!
Getting the Most out of Your Camera

Many discussions of improving one's bird photography center on equipment upgrades. I'd like to address what I believe is equally important: Making the most out of whatever rig you have. There is an ever-increasing array of photographic options suitable for bird photography ranging from five-figure DSLR + big-glass rigs to smartphones held up to a spotting scope's eyepiece. More-modest (in heft and price) DSLR rigs are even more common to see slung opposite someone's bins, and super-zoom all-in-one cameras are making major inroads in quality bird photography.

Whatever the weapon of choice, the modern ease of ripping a burst of digital pics doesn't change the fundamentals of great photography, which go back to the days of pricey film and patience-trying waits for developing. I once heard someone say, "Nobody ever asked Picasso what brushes he used...", and that statement still resonates with me. After all, it isn't the camera that takes the picture but the photographer. Like brushes and paints, a camera is a tool for artistic expression, and even if everyone had the same gear, the results would still be amazingly and pleasingly diverse.

There's nothing wrong with comparing rigs and dreaming of the next camera lens or body upgrade, but even the best professional rigs can take crummy pics while a modest setup in the hands of someone who makes the most of it can produce stunning images. Whatever you are shooting with, I propose a few considerations to get results that will please you.

Purpose

Having a purpose in mind for your photography—or for a particular photo session—focuses your attention and can produce better results. Years ago, I noticed a phenomenon affecting my bird photos: I often had better pictures of scarce and
Getting the Most out of Your Camera

Modern cameras are amazing in their ability to measure conditions and automatically adjust settings for great results. However, having a basic understanding of the factors that affect any given exposure can save difficult situations when the camera just isn't delivering what you want and/or turn an ordinary exposure into something you're proud of.

My first rangefinder camera required manually setting the focus, aperture, and shutter speed (this of course after selecting which film to use). Exposure decisions were informed by use of a separate light meter, so the whole process was not exactly blazingly quick. Then the results weren't apparent until the developed film was returned (sometimes days and often weeks later). When something worked or didn't work, either memory or notes had to be relied on to figure out why. I have fond recollections of that time, but I love the nearly instant ability of today’s cameras to make the same calculations and adjustments, with instant feedback available via playback and histogram displays.

To evaluate your photographs, make on-the-spot adjustments for tricky situations, and achieve different effects, it is important to understand how the trio of ISO (the sensitivity of the image sensor), shutter speed, and aperture (f/stop) interact and affect exposure. Experiment with how manipulating each variable in this creative triangle affects the others and the results of the shot. The other on-camera adjustment I pay the most attention to in my bird photography is exposure compensation. This is usually indicated by a little +/- symbol, and there is usually a dedicated button on DSLRs (other cameras may have this feature accessible through a menu). Often, this is the fastest way to brighten or darken an exposure on the fly, as birds usually won’t wait around for long if you are twiddling with other exposure settings.

Lots of resources about camera settings are documentation of birds is another major purpose of my photography. Artistic quality is not the main purpose when I just want to photograph details of a bird to review at home and potentially append to eBird or records committee reports, or just learn more about nuances I may have missed in the field. Another purpose may be to take photographs for a specific listing category. I freely admit I prioritize my photo list only one strake below my life list. Supporting and inspiring photos can also elevate the content of your articles, talks, or blog posts. It’s fine to head out with a camera and no particular reason in mind (and I often do), but identifying opportunities that support a purpose when they arise can help to deliver brilliant results.

**Fundamentals**

Modest camera rigs can produce very satisfying results for bird photographers. This splendid breeding-plumaged Pacific Loon was photographed with a small mirrorless SLR (Panasonic DMC-G3) and a 200mm zoom. Patience and fieldcraft were keys to getting the shot. Barrow, Alaska, September 2010. Photo © Bill Schmoker

Freezing the water’s motion as this American Dipper emerged from Boulder Creek required a fast shutter speed, a wide-open aperture, and the use of flash. Learning to control the fundamentals of exposure can translate into images that reflect your photographic vision. Boulder County, Colorado, November 2005. Photo © Bill Schmoker

rare birds than of common ones. I realized that, when there was a “good” bird, I’d really invest time and energy on it and often get a picture I was happy with. The same attention paid to “regular” birds can also yield really pleasing results. After all, making a stunning image of a robin in your backyard or a goose in the park is excellent preparation for the next crippler that turns up in your viewfinder.

Focusing on a particular species you’d like to do justice to is just one example of a purpose, but there are scores of other possibilities. For me, the study and documentation of birds is another major purpose of my photography. Artistic quality is not the main purpose when I just want to photograph details of a bird to review at home and potentially append to eBird or records committee reports, or just learn more about nuances I may have missed in the field. Another purpose may be to take photographs for a specific listing category. I freely admit I prioritize my photo list only one strake below my life list. Supporting and inspiring photos can also elevate the content of your articles, talks, or blog posts. It’s fine to head out with a camera and no particular reason in mind (and I often do), but identifying opportunities that support a purpose when they arise can help to deliver brilliant results.

**Fundamentals**

Modern cameras are amazing in their ability to measure conditions and automatically adjust settings for great results. However, having a basic understanding of the factors that affect any given exposure can save difficult situations when the camera just isn't delivering what you want and/or turn an ordinary exposure into something you're proud of.

My first rangefinder camera required manually setting the focus, aperture, and shutter speed (this of course after selecting which film to use). Exposure decisions were informed by use of a separate light meter, so the whole process was not exactly blazingly quick. Then the results weren't apparent until the developed film was returned (sometimes days and often weeks later). When something worked or didn't work, either memory or notes had to be relied on to figure out why. I have fond recollections of that time, but I love the nearly instant ability of today’s cameras to make the same calculations and adjustments, with instant feedback available via playback and histogram displays.

To evaluate your photographs, make on-the-spot adjustments for tricky situations, and achieve different effects, it is important to understand how the trio of ISO (the sensitivity of the image sensor), shutter speed, and aperture (f/stop) interact and affect exposure. Experiment with how manipulating each variable in this creative triangle affects the others and the results of the shot. The other on-camera adjustment I pay the most attention to in my bird photography is exposure compensation. This is usually indicated by a little +/- symbol, and there is usually a dedicated button for it on DSLRs (other cameras may have this feature accessible through a menu). Often, this is the fastest way to brighten or darken an exposure on the fly, as birds usually won’t wait around for long if you are twiddling with other exposure settings. Lots of resources about camera settings are
available, and a good one to start with is Sherrie Duris’s treatment in the December 2013 issue of Birder’s Guide to Gear. I also really like Photoventure’s “13 Camera Settings New Photographers Should Know” (bit.ly/13settings). The short version is: Learn Thy Camera. The camera manual is a good place to start, and online resources are abundant. Find what mode and settings work best for you, and explore how using different settings in different situations can deliver the image you see in your mind as you frame it.

Composition

It isn’t enough to just point your camera, snap away, and hope for the best every time you see a bird that interests you. Yes, I’ll usually start that way for an initial take (better to get something rather than nothing on a bird I’d like to document, study, or add to my list), but even if I have just a few more seconds of opportunity I’ll be thinking of a better angle to try. It takes practice to see the whole frame instead of just the bird, especially when your target is small, actively moving, and in heavy cover—in other words, most of the time! But practice watching for distracting elements, such as twigs or branches, that may be blocking part of the bird.

Give thought to the background; look for items that detract from your subject, such as sticks that seem to emerge from the bird’s head. Perhaps moving just a bit to the side creates a pleasingly clear shooting lane instead of a twiggy mess with a bird in it. Would that circling hawk look better as it crosses from clouds into a panel of blue sky and banks its wings a bit? Does the kingfisher look more pleasing with extra room in front of it in the frame rather than dead-centered? In many cases, going from standing to crouching, sitting, or even lying down to get eye level with your subject can make worlds of difference.

Watching what the light is doing also greatly affects your composition. Changing your perspective relative to the sun...
Getting the Most out of Your Camera

Getting the lighting right on this backlit juvenile Curlew Sandpiper required positive exposure compensation and fill flash. A few composition elements to note include the low perspective, a sense of motion, and a bit of room in the frame in front of the bird. Gray's Harbor County, Washington, September 2005. Photo © Bill Schmoker

Here we have an American Woodcock caught mid-peent. In addition to a behavioral element, the bird is placed roughly along the right third divider in the frame and appears at eye-level. An imaginative viewer might interpret the unopened dandelion bud as a stand-in microphone for the performing woodcock. Lucas County, Ohio, May 2014. Photo © Bill Schmoker

can vastly improve your final image, so don’t be shy to experiment with this, too. In other words, work the shot as long as the bird will let you. If you are hoping for a one-in-a-thousand shot, the best way to get it is to shoot 1,000 frames!

As with the fundamentals of exposure and camera settings, there are many resources available in print and online with ideas for improving composition. One resource I’ve used in photo workshops is Cub Kahn’s Beginner’s Guide To Nature Photography. A nice excerpt on composition from the book is online here: bit.ly/Cub_Kahn.

My final piece of advice on composition is to look critically at bird photos, both yours and others’. If you see something you like, ask yourself why it works for you. Conversely, brainstorming ways to improve a shot (yours or others’) can be a worthwhile exercise. Seeking constructive critiques from other photographers can also give you ideas to try the next time photographic opportunities present themselves.

Editing

The picture you want isn’t done when you push the trigger. Editing a bit can really bring out what you saw in the field. I’m not talking about significant content-changing manipulation, such as adding or subtracting elements (though what you do with your pics is up to you), but rather about quick and easy tweaks to improve your results. I’d much rather look at birds than at a computer, but it’s worth spending a minute to edit a photo. It might make all the difference.

Always edit only copies; keep unaltered archives and backup(s) of your originals that you can access if you need them. Scads of software choices exist, from free to very pricey; whichever you choose, you should be comfortable cropping, adjusting exposure levels, and resizing your image. For example, I’ll often center a bird in the original frame to keep it focused and well-metered, particularly if it is being difficult to stay with as it flies or bounces around. Cropping the image to compose the frame can look really nice, and newer-generation cameras offer greater cropping flexibility in situations where a bird such as this juvenile Rough-legged Hawk is a bit more distant than ideal and/or if there are undesirable elements in the frame, a hard crop can often successfully rescue the shot. The remaining pixel count may be too low for a large print or magazine cover, but for use in emails, blog posts, presentations, and articles, the resulting image may have plenty of resolution. Note also the lighting level adjustment between the original (left) and final (right) versions that helped to restore some blueness to the sky. Boulder County, Colorado, February 2011. Photo © Bill Schmoker
with their higher pixel counts. A quick check and adjustment of levels can bring the exposure into nice range if you missed it a bit in the field (and I often do). Sizing the picture to match the audience is ideal. Your friends will thank you for not emailing them giant high-resolution files unless they specifically need publication-quality pictures. With minimal practice, you can run through these three steps (Crop, Balance, Resize) in well under a minute.

A few other simple but helpful editing tools often find their way into my processing, depending on the situation: Brighten Shadows/Darken Highlights, Noise Reduction, Straightening (if I shoot a frame a bit off-kilter), and Sharpening. If my white balance seems bonkers or was mis-set, I’ll use Color Correction (often just using auto-correction). If I’ve got a dirty spot on my sensor that is distracting, I’ll use a healing brush or clone it out, but that’s about it.

There is a seemingly endless selection of editing tips and tutorials out there if you’d like to learn more about any of the editing tools I mentioned or if you want go beyond simple editing tips. The bottom line is that editing your photo, without overdoing it, will help you more closely approach what your amazing eye and brain saw in the field.

Making great images depends more on getting the most out of the camera you have, whatever it may be, than owning the biggest lens or latest model. The best camera is the one you have at the ready and understand how to use. Know your gear, be creative, be persistent (within the guidelines of the ABA Code of Ethics; no photo is worth harming a bird to get), develop your eye for composition, and accept serendipity. Most important, have fun out there! 😊

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A BIRDER’S GUIDE REVIEW:

Lightweight Binoculars

As an aging birdwatcher, I have been searching for the perfect, lightweight, small binocular: one of high quality that is not as heavy as my trusty 8x42 Leica (which weighs close to 30 oz.). It should be light enough so that I can travel with it and stick it into my pocket for a trip to a concert or the ballpark. And now that I am getting older and have less upper-body strength, it should be lightweight enough to hold up to my eyes steadily for a long period. I’m not looking for a really small, feather-light, folding-type compact, but rather, a binocular with good optics and just enough heft to provide a steady hold. I’ll still use my big boppers when I go out on a boat looking for petrels and shearwaters, or when I’m birding with David Sibley, but I need something closer to one pound than two for travel and ordinary use. It seems to me that too many young, strong birders are doing binocular reviews and that they don’t worry about the weight and size of the glasses. (For more on this topic, check out Diana Doyle’s article in the Sep.-Oct. 2014 issue of Birding.)
## Lightweight Binoculars

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Brand and model</th>
<th>Size</th>
<th>Light gathering</th>
<th>Field of vision-ft.</th>
<th>Eye relief-mm</th>
<th>Close focus-ft.</th>
<th>Weight-oz.</th>
<th>Size-in.</th>
<th>Price</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Celestron Nature</td>
<td>8x32</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>388</td>
<td>17.5</td>
<td>6.5</td>
<td>18</td>
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<td>Eagle Optics Ranger</td>
<td>8x32</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>393</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>19.2</td>
<td>4.9x4.8</td>
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<td>16</td>
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<td>5</td>
<td>20</td>
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<td>21</td>
<td>5.6x4.4</td>
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<td>18.9</td>
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<td>Leupold Acadia</td>
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<td>408</td>
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<td>6.5</td>
<td>19.7</td>
<td>5.1x4.6</td>
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My approximate upper limits were 5” x 5” in size, 25 oz. in weight, and 8x in magnification. If price is no object, the 8x32 Zeiss Victory (about $1,800) or 8x32 Leica Ultravid (about $2,000) are the ones to get. The Zeiss Victory is half an inch longer but still small at 5.1”. The Leica Ultravid is smaller and an ounce lighter. I wish I were rich! The new 8x32 Nikon EDG (about $2,400) is also worth a look, but it is bigger and among the heaviest I tried. The price on these top-of-the-line brands is high, but you get
great optics and coatings, resulting in amazing clarity and brightness. Is that wonderful $100 cabernet sauvignon four times as good as its $25 brother? Probably not, but it is definitely more delicious.

For half the price of the above models, take a look at the 8x30 Swarovski Companion: smaller, lighter, and an extra millimeter for the objective lens diameter means increased light-gathering. It sells for about $1,200. Or consider the Zeiss Conquest 8x32, at about $1000, with a great field of vision and the shortest close focus in its price range. Another option is the 8x33 Minox HG, with excellent specs all around; this model is a bit bigger than the Swarovski Companion but has close focus nearly as short as the Zeiss Victory and sells for about $1,200. The 8x33 Kowa Genesis and 8x32 Nikon Premier are each about $1,200, but the Nikon Premier is among the heaviest of them all, at almost 25 oz.

At about half this price (around $600) are the Kowa BD 8x32 and the 8x32 Vortex Viper HD: smaller than 5” x 5”, amazing close focus of 5’ and 3’ (respectively), and a weight of around 20 oz.

In the lowest price range, check out Opticron. It makes a variety of 8x models, from about $150–$400, all at a pound or less and all with great close focus. I especially liked the Opticron Traveller 8x32 at around $400. Or, for about the same price, the 8x30 Nikon Monarch 7 has a wider field of view but still good close focus at just under 8’. Less expensive still is the $300 8x32 Eagle Optics Ranger. It weighs 19.2 oz., has a wider field of view, and sports an incredible 3’ close focus. The 8x32 Celestron Nature has roughly the same specs but is cheaper still (about $160). And there are also the 8x32 Leupold Mojave BX-3 ($350) and the 8x32 Leupold Acadia.
($140); both are small and around one pound in weight. The 9x32 Pentax DCF ($400) has an excellent close focus, but on the down side, this binocular is relatively heavy.

In a nutshell, here are some specific standouts. The lightest by far is the Opticron Discovery. Next, the Opticron Traveller, Nikon Monarch 7, and Leupold Mojave. The heaviest are Nikon’s Premier and EDG models. For short close-focus, you can’t beat the Eagle Optics Ranger and the Viper Vortex (3’); Opticron’s Traveller and Discovery models are 5’ or less. The Zeiss Conquest is close at 4.9’. The largest close-focus number comes from the Swarovski Companion (10’). Eyeglass wearers may be wondering about eye relief.

Most of the binoculars I sampled are 15mm or more—the accepted minimum distance for eye relief. But one, the Leica Ultravid, is below this minimum (13 mm). If you wear glasses, you might want to test these in person. As for field of view, most models come in at 400’ or more (at 1,000 yards), but the Opticron Travellers are noticeably deficient in this measure, at 300’. If money is no object, then spring for either the Leica Ultravid or the Zeiss Victory. At the next price level, I like the Swarovski Companion. And, at the next price level down, and among the smallest, lightest, and closest focus, I like the Opticron Traveller.

A final note: You really should go to a good binocular shop to find the model that’s best for you. You should judge in person how it feels in your hands and how it fits your eyes. And I suggest buying the bins there, rather than using the owner’s expertise to find the right model and buy it for a reduced price online. Speaking of which, I would like to thank One Good Tern which allowed me to look at many of these binoculars in its Alexandria, Virginia store.
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