

PETE'S TIPS

Revealed At Last: The Secret to Becoming a Great Birder

This is the revelation you've been waiting for. The informational haymaker; the nuclear option of all disclosures. If you want to become a great birder, you are sixteen words and one punctuation mark from the wisdom that will transform your life.

Watch birds.

That's it? That's all?

Yep, that's it and all. Watch birds, but (there's always a but) *really* watch them.

Don't just look at them. Don't just identify them. *Watch* them, *study* them, *learn* what they look like at different angles and different postures. Note how they move and behave. See what habitats they prefer and how this differs from other species that may be nearby.

This is how the experts got to be experts, and while there's no shortcut, there is also no limit to the amount of pleasure and gratification that awaits you.

Me? I'm not an expert (but I've birded with one or two). I'll never forget finding myself on a panel with Kenn Kaufman on improving birding skills. The question was asked: "What is it about the way you bird that distinguishes you from other birders?" Kenn's answer stuck with me.

Said the author of the *Kaufman Field Guide to Birds of North America*: "I find that when I'm with other birders and I lower my binoculars after studying a bird, everyone else is waiting for me."

I'm paraphrasing a bit, but you get the idea. Kenn truly studies birds. I don't know whether he has a regimented technique. I don't know if his method is better described as a critical analysis or an open-minded appraisal. All I know is that he spends time really watching the bird that is the object of his attention.

OK. That's one famous field guide author. How about...

I once saw David Sibley misidentify a bird. I'll wait for you to collect yourself before continuing.

He was in his teens. He was looking at a perched young night-heron. He called it Black-crowned, it turned out to be Yellow-crowned. *His* exclamation I can quote verbatim. It was...

"HmMMMM." Then he brought his binoculars to bear and studied the bird for a long, long time.

Not "Hmph," not "What?!", not "How could I have been...", not "the angle was bad and I...", or "Yep, always go with your first impression and my first impression was..."

Nope. Just "hmMMM," and "hmMMM" is the sound of a mind focused on a matter of interest and fascination.

All the books in your birding library, all the helpful columns you will ever read, will never serve you as well as watching real birds in real time and spending lots and lots of time doing it.

Having said this, let me add one hint that I've found helpful. After seeing any new species, I go to my library and read everything I can find about it; put some biological and biographical flesh on the bare outline of an identification. Maybe some people can do this in advance of their encounter, but I find that birds I have never seen are something of an abstraction, and it's difficult for me to assimilate information about an abstraction. But after I've seen a species, it becomes real, and I am many times more receptive to and retentive of information relating to that species.

And while being an informed birder is not quite the same as being a great birder, it's not a bad thing to be, either.

Pete Dunne is the Director of New Jersey Audubon's Cape May Bird Observatory and the author of numerous books, including Pete Dunne on Bird Watching. His evening program at the Bangor Convention in June, "A Guide in Real Time," will take us behind the scenes of writing his newest book, Pete Dunne's Essential Field Guide Companion, scheduled for publication this month.

2006 ABA/Leica Tropicbirds Teams Named!

The American Birding Association is pleased to announce the 2006 ABA/Leica Tropicbirds! The teams will compete in the Great Texas Birding Classic and New Jersey Audubon's World Series of Birding. Please join us in congratulating these stellar young birders—and then help us cheer them on! Both teams will be accompanied by Michael O'Brien and Louise Zemaitis, who will act as coaches, chaperones, and mentors.

The members of the Great Texas Birding Classic team are Oliver James (Berkeley, CA), Thomas Reed (Cape May Court House, NJ), Jordan Rutter (Silver Spring, MD), and

captain Jim Wilson (Queenstown, MD). Participating in the World Series of Birding will be Ethan Kistler (Newton Falls, OH), captain Jesse Pakkala (St. Thomas, ON), Kai Reed (North Egremont, MA), and Chris West (Richland Center, WI). Biographies and photos of all these exceptional young birders are on line at americanbirding.org/yb/tropicbirds/photos.html.

For more information about the ABA young birder education program and how you can help support it, visit www.americanbirding.org, or call Lori Fujimoto at 719/578-9703, ext. 237.