

# PETE'S TIPS: Jes Walkin'

BY PETE DUNNE

It seems silly to commit ink and paper to a subject as basic as walking. But the fact and truth is that I sometimes find myself with birders who seem unpracticed in the art of walking and birding at the same time.

For example, when leading birding groups, I am always a bit amazed by birders who casually and unnecessarily stride through dry leaves or along gravelly roadsides when quieter footing is to be had in the middle of the trail. Noise is generally less disturbing to birds than motion, but that's not the issue or the point. The crunch of leaves or gravel underfoot makes it harder to hear birds, and vocalizations are often a birder's first clue that there is a bird in the offing.

This goes for standing, too. I don't care to recount the number of times I've done Big Days with teammates who seem unable to keep both feet planted while we're straining to hear nocturnal birds. Maybe it's nervous energy. Maybe it's fatigue. For whatever reason, at precisely the moment the distance-muffled chortle of a Least Bittern brushes my tympanic membrane, a motion-challenged member of my team shuffles his or her feet.

Even if you can convince yourself that you did indeed hear the bird, it is almost certain that your teammate did not—a real concern when you're playing by World Series of Birding rules, where 95% of all birds must be recorded by all team members and no single-observer identifications count.

Actually, the very act of walking is something of an antipathetic exercise when it comes to finding birds. Your own motion tends to mask the motion of birds in foliage whose proximity is often heralded by no more than a vibrating leaf or branch. You'll find more birds if you pause every few yards and take a penetrating look around.

Walk. Don't creep. Don't stalk. Just walk. Slowly and evenly

with head level and moving, slowly, side to side. Stop when you see motion or hear a telltale sound. Pause and be particularly attentive when you approach a blind corner or break into the open.

Consider. Many birds forage on or near the ground—that is, at about the elevation of your feet, which will appear a split second before your eyes acquire a clear line of sight. Most birds, as you have undoubtedly noticed, have amazingly quick reflexes (and nothing seems to make them move faster than the sudden appearance of a white running shoe flashing into view).

On more than one occasion I've watched birds feeding on or beside a woodland trail and had them flush a split second before an approaching birder strides into view.

"See anything?" approaching birder invites.

"Yep. Connecticut Warbler. You just flushed it."

"Where? Here? I didn't see anything."

Exactly right. Sometimes I wonder how many great birds I've flushed that went unseen. But it's probably better not to know.

One last pointer. An important one. It has to do with stopping.

There is a strong temptation to just *freeze* when you see motion or hear a vocalization, and often you are caught mid-stride—off balance, one foot in front of the other. You're better off planting your feet firmly, comfortably spaced, side to side. Thus anchored and balanced, you'll be able to bring your binoculars to bear more quickly and with greater accuracy.

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## New Birding Trail Guides

A new and welcome feature in many parts of the US is the birding trail, a route carefully designed to lead visiting birders to the best habitats and the best birds of a region. Directions and descriptions for many trails are conveniently available online (see [americanbirding.org/resources/birdingtrails.html](http://americanbirding.org/resources/birdingtrails.html)), while others are accompanied by inexpensive or free printed booklets, maps, and descriptive guides.

One of the handsomest is the newly revised map for the **South-eastern Arizona Birding Trail** ([www.seazbirdingtrail.com/](http://www.seazbirdingtrail.com/)), evocatively illustrated by Narca Moore-Craig. Clear, large-format maps show geographic features and major roads, and each of the 46 sites is described briefly but informatively as to habitat, seasonality, location, and access. On the same model is the new map introducing the **White Mountains Wildlife Trails** (928/367-4281), offering a surprising amount of information on this beautiful and under-birded northeast Arizona range. New York's Adirondacks also benefit from a new **North Country Scenic Byways and Birding Guide** (518/891-6200), a folding map with directions and very basic birding information for 70-some sites in northern New York.

Geographically more ambitious is the guide to the **Idaho Birding**

**Trail** ([IdahoBirdingTrail.org](http://IdahoBirdingTrail.org)), which covers the entire state and a total of 175 sites. The 135-page booklet is richly illustrated with photos of birds and habitats, and includes a complete checklist with status and distribution codes, making this virtually a full-fledged bird-finding guide to a fascinating state.

The new **South Dakota Birding Trails** ([travelsd.com/thingstodo/birding.asp](http://travelsd.com/thingstodo/birding.asp)) will also cover that entire state, but with a separate, easily portable brochure devoted to each regional trail. The first two to appear, *Glacial Lakes and Prairies* and *Southeast South Dakota* (with consultant Rosemary Draeger), describe a total of 70 sites in the eastern half of the state. Clear and simple maps are annotated with extensive information on habitat, timing, and notes on specialties; each booklet is illustrated with attractive photographs, sometimes a little distracting in their abundance on the page.

Thanks to the efforts of government agencies, conservation and birding organizations, and dedicated volunteer birders, birding trails are likely to become an ever more familiar fixture of the American birding landscape, and the maps and books that accompany them increasingly valuable resources to the traveling birder.