



Field birders at the Rondeau Provincial Park Interpretive Centre feeders on 4 May 2008. *Photo: Gavan Watson*

Ontario birding: a qualitative study on its practice in the field

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In this paper, I describe the partial findings from my doctoral research (Watson 2010), with an emphasis on reporting how field birders I interviewed in Ontario were drawn to birding and socialized into its practices. Birding, as I mean it here, is the act of observing and (attempting to) identify wild birds. For the project, I investigated, in part, a particular subset of bird watching practices which others have called “field birding” (Bergin 2008): the activity of leaving the house, travelling to a location and identifying as many species of birds as possible. While the positive impact that Ontario birders have had on

efforts to track bird populations had been recognized in the scientific scholarly literature (see, for example, Lepage and Francis 2002), when I began my research little work had been completed on exploring the characteristics of birding as a human activity and as a kind of environmental education. This was the gap in understanding that I attempted to address.

What followed was a qualitative study of birders and their relationship with and connection to the birds they watch. Beginning with spring migration in 2008, I visited Rondeau Provincial Park, then returned to Toronto and continued interviews, completing my data collection in December 2008. My research methods included collecting recorded interviews (n=25) from birders in the field conducted at Rondeau Provincial Park and locations within the Greater Toronto Area (see Table 1 for participant data). While at Rondeau, I sought research participants *in situ*, meaning that I approached birders as they were birding and asked them to participate in the project. In Toronto, I asked for participants from the Toronto Ornithological Club in addition to approaching birders in the field. The birders I interviewed had a wide variety of experience and included those new to birding as well as those with decades of experience. In this project, approved by my university's Ethics Review Board, informed consent was sought from all human interview participants and I had permission from the Ministry of Natural Resources to conduct research within Rondeau Provincial Park. Growing up

in a family of birders, and a birder myself, I also included components of participant observation and field journals to my methods, including data collected as I went birding myself during this period of time.

This project was qualitative in nature, meaning that the research methods employed were not intended to lay bare a single "truth" about the activity of birding in Ontario. All participants' names were changed. Transcribed interviews were analysed using a modified grounded theory approach (after Clarke 2003) and field journals were analyzed with a naturalist auto-ethnographic lens (a novel method). While a methodological departure from more quantitative approaches to research, this project was designed and undertaken so that the findings are valid when understood to be dependent on the larger context of the project. Using these systematic approaches to look for emergent themes, I have gone on to make claims from the research for the broader practice of birding (Watson 2010, 2011). In the following work, I highlight components of this research I believe to be of interest to Ontario birders: the joy that draws people to the activity, the role of the environment in the act of bird identification and the tension in the activity of collecting and listing bird observations. I close with the contention that at its best, field birding opens birders up to the agency and subjectivity of the natural world around them.

On the joy of watching birds

When I asked birders what first drew their interest to bird watching, many described simply noticing or becoming aware of birds for the first time. Barbara, when reflecting on peering through binoculars at a Cedar Waxwing (*Bombus cedororum*) on one of her first birding outings simply said, “I can’t believe I spent my whole life not noticing.” Given the central nature of sight in the suite of human senses, birders often describe birding primarily as a visual activity. She described how she was introduced to field birding by her current partner:

“And of course he gave me the binoculars and I looked up. My first bird was the Cedar Waxwing and I was hooked. I couldn’t breathe. I was like, ‘My gosh look at that thing. Look at that thing.’

So that was it. I had to know all of them from then on. I had to start my journey of getting to know. Not realizing the opportunity. What a variety. In fact the first time I saw a bird book [1] almost fell over. I thought, ‘Is there that many birds? Oh my God.’ I had no idea.”

This experience encapsulates the obvious activities of field birding: first noticing, then watching and finally, identifying birds. Yet, there is something about Barbara’s first time birding that suggests there is more to the activity than just that trio. There is an enthusiasm and excitement in Barbara’s story that speaks to the quality of her first encounter with the waxwing. The moment when she first looked at the bird was literally breathtaking and her act of watching was as much emotional as it was sensory.

“My first bird was the Cedar Waxwing and I was hooked.”



Cedar Waxwing.
Photo: Ann Brokelman

Table 1: Field birder interview participant data, Rondeau and Toronto, 2008.

Location	Name (as appears in research)	Date of Interview	Age (decade)	Sex	Length of Interview
Rondeau	David	April 28-08	70	M	01:02:34
Rondeau	Sonya	April 29-08	60	F	00:56:07
Rondeau	Darren		60	M	
Rondeau	Fred	April 30-08	60	M	00:32:02
Rondeau	Janette		60	F	
Rondeau	Don	April 30-08	70	M	01:33:53
Rondeau	Cynthia		70	F	
Rondeau	Chester	May 01-08	70	M	00:48:05
Rondeau	Helena	May 02-08	60	F	01:10:45
Rondeau	Gary		70	M	
Rondeau	Margret	May 02-08	50	F	00:53:06
Rondeau	Judy	May 03-08	50	F	01:11:44
Rondeau	Bill		50	M	
Rondeau	Pamela	May 03-08	60	F	01:39:45
Rondeau	Roger		60	M	
Rondeau	Barbara	May 04-08	60	F	00:40:00
Rondeau	Paul		40	M	
Rondeau	Jim	May 04-08	50	M	00:38:32
Rondeau	Melinda		50	F	
Rondeau	Jordan	May 05-08	30	M	01:09:03
Rondeau	Serena		20	F	
Rondeau	Raymond	May 05-08	60	M	00:55:42
Rondeau	Elizabeth		60	F	
Rondeau	Roland	May 06-08	40	M	00:27:47
Rondeau	Cameron	May 07-08	50	M	00:35:27
Rondeau	Niles	May 07-08	70	M	00:45:50
Greater Toronto Area (GTA)	Daniel	Sep 11-08	60	M	00:42:26
GTA	Mara	Sep 13-08	50	F	00:29:25
GTA	Shannon	Sep 13-08	60	F	00:32:32
GTA	Danny	Sep 14-08	30	M	00:23:30
GTA	Michelle	Sep 23-08	70	F	00:49:20
GTA	Josh		70	M	
GTA	Norman	Sep 23-08	80	M	00:56:09
GTA	Sheri	Sep 23-08	60	F	00:59:45
GTA	Amber	Sep 24-08	50	F	00:49:52
GTA	Chad	Dec-22-08	40	M	01:51:16

Another birder, Danny, replied to my questions about his feelings of excitement while watching birds:

“Gavan: Right. So do you find that you do get excited when you see [birds]?”

D: Oh, yeah.

G: Can you describe that feeling?

D: I end up most of the time focusing all my energy on trying to make the most of the sighting and I’m sort of holding back on the excitement, and it’s sort of after the sighting is over and I’m sort off on the trail walking away from the experience. That’s when I’m excited and [if] I’m with someone, I can be talking to them. I don’t know, it makes me conversational.”

Birders want to know what it is that they are seeing and this curiosity leads them to the act of identification. Chad described a moment in his personal transition to becoming a birder when he needed to know the name of an unknown bird he later identified as a Black-throated Blue Warbler (*Setophaga caerulescens*):

“I can distinctly remember seeing the Black-throated Blue Warbler and I was 14 or 15 and thinking, Okay, why... and it’s so distinctive right? It’s such a distinctive looking bird and I remember completely thinking...why the heck have I never seen that before? and looking it up in a bird book and talking to my parents about it. My parents didn’t really know anything but they were really encouraging about all this stuff.”

This act of naming works to fix a common identity to the observed bird, but, as in this case, also creates the opportunity to share what he has learned with others. This makes the act of identification an

entry to knowing more about the natural world and an opportunity to share what birders have learned with others.

Beyond watching: identification in an ecological context

Beyond the sensations of seeing or hearing birds, it is clear that the larger ecological context in which a bird is found can play a role in identification. After spending an evening with local birders watching shorebirds at the Blenheim sewage lagoons, the notes in my field journal reflect on the act of identification:

“Shorebirds are a confusing bunch for me. We could have spent more time identifying the different shorebirds, but Iris had left her scope in her car and David didn’t have his with him. So, we had to be content with our binocular (8-10x) assisted-vision. As we drove back to Rondeau, we talked a little bit about identifying shorebirds. What struck me was that the identification was a combination of visual cues (e.g., Iris said that a Pectoral Sandpiper has a streaky breast that looks like they “took a ruler and decided the streaks should end just there”) and observed behaviour (e.g., David suggested that Baird Sandpipers prefer to be further back from the water’s edge rather than right in it); that identification was often the synergy between the two rather than just one or the other.”

Identification, rather than simply an attempt to match an impression of a bird to an image in a book, appears to become a more complex act with experience. In birding, this larger context is a combination of many things: habitat, previous

experiences, bird behaviour and even time of year. Awareness of these factors is awareness of an ecological context. Importantly, by ecology I mean “the relations of organisms to each other and their surroundings” (Ricklefs 1997) which does not exclude human and built environments and focuses on the relationships between the various components.

It is significant to notice that there is something about the Baird Sandpiper (*Calidris bairdii*) behaviour, shaped and supported by its environment, which causes the species to forage in drier places than some other shorebirds. It speaks to a kind of knowledge about birds that is integrated with the larger world and counters characterizations of birding as a narrowing of perspective (see Karnicky 2004 for an example of this kind of argument) and identification as an act driven more by the plates and range maps found in bird books than in the first-hand experience of birding (Wilkinson *et al.* 2014). While a bird cannot be identified to species by understanding this larger ecological context alone, it can firmly guide the act of identification.

The act of listing and collecting observations

Birds can elicit emotional responses in birders, with sightings and the subsequent feelings propelling the birder forward. While these emotional states may be an intrinsic motivation for birding, extrinsic motivation can come from a sense of (often implicit) competition that many field birders feel. As Raymond, a beginner, suggests:

“It’s just there are so many people and so many people trying to outdo other

people. One thing I would never get into is the competitive aspect of birding. I’m not, like I wouldn’t go out on a birdathon or anything like that. Because I’m not really a competitive type person.”

Although birdathons are mostly characterized as a fund-raising event in a jovial atmosphere, counting the number of species seen is a key activity. More broadly for field birding, counting the number of species observed is a benchmark to compare your success to others. Field birding can be, in part, an activity that focuses on seeing the most number of bird species over a given unit of time: think of a “big year” or a “big day”.

This act of counting often becomes an act of listing. Raymond and Elizabeth, both beginning field birders, describe what their listing looks like:

E: We have a couple of different lists. We have a life list and we have a little notebook that we keep as a daily thing if we’re out somewhere.

R: Our life list is really not – well, we have it in multiple forms. I kind of tick them off in our guide, but I also keep a photo list. Not necessarily all my own photos, in fact, very few of them are my own photos.”

But numbers of identified birds do count — on a birding trip, for example, where field birders spend many days looking for birds, the best day is often the one where the highest number of species was seen. This focus on numbers, however, is not everyone’s practice. For Cameron, it is not the quantity of bird species seen, but rather the quality:

“G: Now, you said that you just started keeping a list of birds over the last couple of years?”

C: Yeah, and it’s something that we just happened [unintelligible] but I don’t keep a life list. I don’t care about the numbers. Like, I don’t push myself that I have to have this. And I’m not going to not look at a bird that looks nice [and say] ‘Oh, I’ve seen that already.’ I’m not doing that. If it’s a pretty bird, I will — like I’m not into where I have to have the numbers. And I’m rushing around, and not getting a good look at one bird just to see something else. Maybe at some point I will, I don’t know. I’d rather not. I’d rather just enjoy it as I go.

G: Do you think that in that movement of collecting bird observations, you kind of lose some of the original [interest]?

C: That’s what I think. If the bird looks pretty and looks nice, I will sit there and look at it. I would just as soon be like that. Then if I miss a couple of birds, so be it. I’m not going to rush around to get a huge list. Like we keep it for our own but it doesn’t matter. I am not keeping a life list or none of that stuff.”

Significantly while he does not keep a life list, Cameron still lists. His particular practice of birding is directed more towards watching birds than collecting observations and, as a consequence, systematically keeping a list of all species seen does not match his beliefs about what birding is. It does, however, reinforce the underlying visual appeal to birding; Cameron is interested in getting good looks at pretty birds.

Amber, a Toronto field birder for less than ten years, “only casually” lists the birds she sees:

“I like to look at, like at the end of the year, maybe. Go through the list. But like I am not a bird chaser. I’m not going to watch OntBirds and see that something somewhere that’s a four-hour drive and hop in my car and go. So I am not that kind of a list keeper. But I am a list keeper in that I think it’s helpful in terms of making things stay in my memory. And to have an idea of what I’ve seen and try and remind myself of the features and that.”

Roland understands how the act of listing can appear to become a competition: “I come across people like that. They act like it is a competition and see how many birds they can get.” Chasing after a bird, a particular narrow practice of field birding, becomes synonymous with keeping a particular kind of list. Birders’ use of lists, whether a record of all birds seen or a casual tool to augment memory, appear as a proxy, acting as a representation of each individual birder’s particular practice of watching birds.

The kind of birding that becomes a competition to “get” the most number of species is a particular political and ethical act. Birders’ relationships with listing is varied and of those I interviewed, their listing rarely existed at an extreme of the behaviour. Yet, at its worst, listing can drive a kind of birding where the individual birds become inconsequential to a tick on a list. I asked Daniel if, while birding, he kept a list of birds he saw. He replied that he did not care for the act of list-keeping as it over-emphasizes the act of collection:

“G: So why don’t you care about that kind of stuff?”

D: Because it's like stamp collecting. I thought that if you're collecting stamps it's the everyday stamps [that] are the interesting ones. I am much more interested in — I actually have quite a lot of fun watching House Sparrows (even though they are not a sparrow). Just because there are so many of them and they're highly successful which is really interesting. Why is that bird so successful? Why does it like human beings? And so on.”

In Daniel's case, I interviewed him under the shade of a tree in High Park, Toronto. We met at Hawk Hill, where we were both spending a sunny and warm September afternoon watching for migrating raptors. Earlier in the day, we had sat in chairs watching the sky overhead, scanning with binoculars above the tree tops surrounding us for a speck that would slowly grow and “become” some species of hawk, vulture, eagle or falcon (or, more often a Ring-billed Gull, *Larus delawarensis*). Each raptor would be identified to the best of our collective abilities and marked down. On the hour, we would collate our species sightings for later submission to the Hawk Migration Association of North America, a citizen science organization which monitors raptor populations.

Birders engage with birds' immediate environments, and a bird's presence appears to be a catalyst for making the rest of the outdoors more meaningful.

I point this out to show the tension that exists within each birder's practice of birding. While he does not keep a list of birds in his personal practice, Daniel is involved with the monitoring of raptor migration, which as part of its practice involves, though standardized, list-keeping. Importantly, Daniel shows what birding is outside the collection of observations: it is watching birds for a purpose beyond identification. He is curious about behaviour, asks questions about the lives of the birds and is still interested when the species of bird, in this case the House Sparrow (*Passer domesticus*), is ubiquitous.

Beyond collecting observations: how birding can educate about the environment

Birders can collect more than just observations, in part, because they move through habitats and make observations, over days and years, on an ecosystem level, of the connections that matter significantly to the lives of birds. Birders engage with birds' immediate environments, and a bird's presence appears to be a catalyst for making the rest of the outdoors more meaningful. Knowledge about birds is always generated in-place, in relationship to the other living and non-living parts of the environment. Sonya told me that as she began to bird, she would look for:

“...photographs because I thought that I would go into the woods and see, um, a picture of a bird. But then, your first stage, moving from abject beginner you realize that there is a strata in the forest. You've got to [know] where to look for

which bird. So you look for a Louisiana Waterthrush at the edge of the water or wherever, and you look for a woodpecker on the side of a tree.”

Birding also changes personal perspectives. Jordan describes how the act of birding changed what he valued:

“Because I took geology option in school and I was working exploration with a mining company for few years and I think if I hadn’t...not sure how I stepped back from it, if I would have been obsessed with the marriage, the kids, the house, the things like that. I would have been working for one of these giants instead of...

I could never work for [companies like] that any more, like we talked about the tar sands and talked about employment with that and now seeing that, I could have been involved with that as opposed to someone who is disgusted by it.

In a way birding sort of saves you. Just having something to be attached to. That shows your appreciation or shows how precious the outdoor life is.”

This suggests that birding is a practice that is deeply embedded in the living world around it. The kind of knowledge that comes through sustained observations is often called natural history. I am offering the term to describe contemporary practices that create the possibility for more meaningful relationships between the human and the natural. The larger ecological context is deeply implicated in the practice of field birding. To be a successful field birder requires an understanding of the lives of the bird species in which a particular birder is interested. Ecological context is key: simply put, a birder does

not go to the woods when they want to see waterfowl. As a consequence, it can be said that birding is a practice that is deeply embedded in the living world around it. Bird watching, then, is a method of acquiring natural history knowledge. This understanding is created in the specific context of time and place, creating a personal space of engagement between humans, birds and the environment.

Attentiveness to the agency and subjectivity of the world beyond ourselves is an exceedingly important skill to cultivate. Acts of first noticing, then identifying birds can allow for experiences that open field birders to the agency of the natural world around them. A birder’s experience with birds, and the birds’ larger ecological context, offers birders the possibility to see beyond strict human-centred frames of reference.

Birders connecting to the greater world on behalf of birds

Nearly one third of North American adults consider themselves birdwatchers (Scott 2004). My research supports the contention that birders believe that their actions foster a connection to the birds they see and to the greater context in which the birds dwell and that this connection matters to both the bird species and the Ontario environments in which field birders find them. Birding can be more than recreation; it can be an act of education and conservation that reflects birders’ own values of the natural world.

Many Ontario birders support the work by conservation organizations to protect habitat and argue for political change on behalf of birds. I would suggest that, in addition to these larger-scale

efforts, birders should engage in personal actions that take an individual bird's well-being in mind. Expanding our imagination outward and thinking of other places, we can try to imagine what it like to be a Cerulean Warbler (*Setophaga cerulea*) overwintering in Venezuela and ask, "How are our own lives linked to these places?" One way is through the choices we make away from the field: our consumption of items like coffee and toilet paper connects our daily lived experience to Central and South America and the Boreal Forest (Stutchbury 2007). Keeping bird lives in mind when away from the field is an opening to a larger effort to lay bare these links, but also demonstrates that those interested in birds can be involved in making daily decisions that arguably have an impact on the lives of birds beyond the places we go to bird.

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