

HOW TO HELP OTHERS FIND A BIRD

“We’re sorry sir, your plane just left...” Those few words strike fear and panic in the heart of any traveler..

For birders, the same effect can be caused by this sentence: “Don’t you see it; it’s over there, right in that tree...oops, it just flew.” In fact, statements like that, especially when involving potential life birds, have undoubtedly broken up friendships, caused nice, friendly, people to turn into maniacs; and no doubt even precipitated a divorce or two. In the old days, it wasn’t such a big deal. You just shot the bird and passed it around. But today things are different.

Why is it that some people just can’t seem to get you “on” a bird no matter how hard they try, and others can magically help a whole group instantly find an otherwise invisible avian treasure? This article offers answers to this question, along with some basic tips on how to help your fellow birders find a bird as quickly as possible...and keep your friendships and marriages intact!

First of all, let’s start with a short list of what NOT to do when trying to help someone find a bird you have spotted.

At the top of the list is this suggestion: don’t repeatedly state: “Can’t you see it, it’s over there!” This is like shouting to your birding mates: “Are you blind, or just idiots?” It’s a bit like throwing gasoline on a fire. Trust me, it never produces any positive results.

Avoid phrases like: “It’s right in the *Eustacia eruditia*, behind the *Rosacea pontificum*.” Unless you are traveling with the chief gardener of the Queen’s estates, don’t assume anyone knows the scientific or even common names of the trees and shrubs of the local area. Find some other way to enhance your reputation. Showing others you know what the names of the local plants are won’t keep you from getting tossed off the cliff if they can’t find the bird!

Don’t hog the “window”. If you are looking at a thrush or a warbler through a small gap in the foliage, you may have to relinquish your spot so others can see the bird. And no directions, no matter how accurate, will help them see it if they are blocked from the only good viewpoint.

Don’t scrutinize a possibly rare species for a long time, check your book, and call the local bird club president from your cell phone just to be sure you won’t be embarrassed when you call out a bird. If it has even the most remote possibility of being a good species, let everybody know. They will forgive you if it’s only a European Starling, but could easily tie you up and leave you in the woods for the ants if it turns out to be a really good bird and you waited too long to tell everybody.

Don't assume that just because you have seen a bird many times others in your group have also seen it. Saying, after the fact, "Let's head on over there where the Sage Sparrow was sitting" might be just as inflammatory as any of the other scenario above if Sage Sparrow is a special bird to one of your travel mates.

Don't say: "It's flying over there, above the Turkey Vulture." This won't do any good unless everybody else knows where the TV was last seen.

Don't flap your arms, scream mightily, or throw things in the general direction of the bird. You are trying to find the bird for your friend, not reveal your friend to the bird. Frustration on your part because someone else can't find a bird is like blaming your car for running out of gas. You know where the bird is. The other people don't. It's up to you to figure out how to show it to them. They are already frustrated, and adding your frustration to the mess will only add to the pain and waste time and energy.

If a bird is flying, don't say "In the clouds". Unless there is only one tiny cloud in the sky, saying it is in the clouds is about as good as saying "It's in the trees."

Don't use feet, meters, yards or other standard units of measure unless the distances are very small and will be clear to everyone. Unless everybody in your group is a surveyor, saying a hawk is perched 300 meters away is next to useless. One person's meter is another person's foot. And that foot might be coming in your direction. Trust me...

So what can you do to really help people get on a bird quickly? Here are several tips that, when used properly, should really help you become that "magic" person who can quickly help other birders find a bird.

Tip number one: Begin your directions with a point everybody can definitely locate. It must be something so obvious and unique that there can be no confusion at all about what the starting point is for your directions. Whereas this might seem obvious, this is very important step is probably the most neglected when helping someone else find a bird.

For example, let's assume you are looking at a rare sparrow perched in the middle of a group of yellow flowers. It might be tempting to say: "Right there in the middle of that group of yellow flowers." However, if there are several other groups of yellow flowers around, and you might not even see them if you are just focusing on the bird, then others may not find the right spot. [See Figure #1]

It will be much more effective for you to say: "The group of yellow flowers just above the stop sign." Now there is no chance for confusion.

In fact, it is often best to start with something ridiculously close to the viewers and working out from there. This is particularly true if there are members of your party who really have a tough time finding birds. Once someone is looking for the bird in the wrong group of yellow flowers, they will never find the bird.

If you can start from an object that is very obvious to them, and then work your way out to the bird using objects equally clear, you will almost always have success.

[See Figure 2.]

Tip number two: Let people know right away if the bird is flying or perched. Although obvious to you, it might not be so obvious to others. A hawk or a hummingbird could easily be either perched or moving around. And especially for a seasoned birder, the techniques and instincts for finding a perched bird are quite different than those for finding a flying bird.

Tip number three: Clock analogies can be useful if employed carefully. Of course on a pelagic trip, using the “hands” of a clock to indicate which part of the boat to look out from is very natural. There is no mistaking 3:00. It’s midship on the starboard side, right off the beam. (See Figure 3.)

But saying a bird is 3:00 in a wooded setting can be confusing unless everybody knows where the center of the clock is. If you are looking at a single, large oak tree, for example, 3:00 might make sense. But if there are several trees around, you must first be sure that everyone is looking at the same tree. And of course let everybody know if the bird is on the circumference of the clock, or in from the edge. Those clock hands can seem mighty long or short, depending on the individual’s perspective.

Tip number four: Set up landmarks in advance if you are going to be birding in one spot for a while. Everybody who has manned a hawk watch knows the tried and true method for referring to any incoming bird by the names of familiar landmarks. By the way, if you are at a hawk watch or using this tip, be sure everybody knows where “bent towers” or “Gumpy’s Meadow” are located. Otherwise those not in the know may be too embarrassed to ask, but will undoubtedly miss some birds.

If you are setting up to look at birds in a group of flowering trees, it might be very useful to quickly set some reference points so that as people find birds they can refer to them by these predetermined locations. The same is true for shorebird watching or other forms of stationary birding. Identify portions of the shore by houses opposite, pieces of driftwood, or other very obvious markers. This can really help later as you find interesting birds.

If you are looking for a skulker, like a Swainson’s warbler, it’s important not to make any noise. Try using your fingers to indicate three or four pre-determined locations to get people on a bird. Holding up one or two fingers can be done very discretely, without flushing the bird when speaking is not possible.

Tip number five: If you are sure you can find the bird again, put your binocs down before you try and tell someone where it is. You will have a better perspective on how to describe its location, and you can avoid

the problem that occurs when people starting looking in the wrong place, which can be hard to “undo”. It also helps you see if the other person is blocked from view.

Tip number six: If you are afraid you won't be able to find the bird again then use the “bobbing” binocs technique for finding a landmark to help others locate it. Here's how: Move your binocs one field down, and then back to the bird, making sure that you can find it again. Then do this movement of one binoc field up, down, right and left. You may find a landmark you can describe without having to put your binocs down. You can expand to two or three fields if necessary and you're fast.

Tip number seven: Watch out for obstructions that might keep another person from seeing the bird you can see from your position. If a person is blocked from view of the bird, no amount of description will get them on the bird. See tip eight.

Tip number eight: If you are working with only one or two people, bring them right in front of you. It actually can be a very effective way to get them on the bird. (And you might even be able to use your finger to point the bird out!)

Tip number nine: You will need special care to help others find a flying bird. The sky is a very amorphous space! As mentioned before, first of all let everybody know the bird is flying. “I think I might have a Swainson's Hawk” is too vague. Swainson's Hawks very often hang out on the ground, so it would be reasonable to start searching the field for this bird. Let everybody know that the bird is flying. Also be sure to mention which direction it is moving. “Flying right to left” can be very helpful, as your friends can move their binocs to the far left and then scan back to the right, hopefully running into the bird. Try pinpointing some obvious landmark that is below it. Bobbing your binoculars can help with this, as mentioned above. With a flying bird you may have to “bob” your binoculars a field or two before you find a good landmark. But if you do it quickly this can be a very effective technique. Also, if the bird is flying fairly quickly, then “bob” ahead of the bird. If you find a boat or building, then you can tell everybody that it is approaching that object. You can also use the horizon as one coordinate, letting everyone know if it is below or above the treeline or ocean.

You can use the size of your binocular field as a rough gauge of distance. One field of your binoculars is the distance covered by the whole visible area you see in your binocs. So if you were looking at a distant yardstick, and could see the numbers 1-6 in your binoculars, then lowering the binocs so that you could see 7-12 would put them exactly one field down. “Mississippi kite, flying left to right, one field over the red barn” can help get someone on a flying bird very quickly.

And finally, it is possible to use various optical devices to help others find a bird. Small hand mirrors can be used to reflect light so a beam falls in the location of a sought after bird. Likewise, especially in dark locations such as deep forests, a laser pointer can be quite useful, as long as its beam isn't blocked by leaves. New 50 milliwatt green lasers are very powerful. And even if they can't reach the bird you can use

them to define your reference point and then use other methods to find the bird. Just be careful, because shining a laser right in front of a bird can scare it!

In summary, developing your ability to help others locate a good bird can make your group birding experiences much more fun. And those skills will ensure that everybody returns home with marriages and friendships intact!

© Tom Stephenson 2007