

The Future Unfolds: A new day for science

Bird is the word

Practical Advice: How to begin bird-watching like a pro

Science plays a significant part in all our daily lives, from the time we wake up until we fall asleep at night. If your morning routine begins with waking up to an alarm clock, that's science. Whether that clock is powered by electricity or battery, someone created the technology behind its time-keeping mechanism and annoying buzz. Ditto for your morning shower; someone developed how water gets delivered from a complex public system into your private bathroom. Those traffic lights you encounter during your morning commute to work are another example of science at work before your eyes.

To make science more meaningful to you, we're introducing a "how-to" series providing tips on scientific topics that can help make your life more informed, meaningful, creative or just plain fun.

PHOTOS BY AMY (KEAN) VERSTEEG '96



Biology professor Ben O'Neal alternates between binoculars and a spotting scope to maximize his bird-watching opportunities.

We're pleased to share practical advice on bird-watching from biology professor Ben O'Neal. He holds a bachelor's degree in biology from Anderson University and master's and doctoral degrees from the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign. He joined the Franklin College Biology Department in 2010, where he teaches ecology, animal behavior, field biology, invertebrate biology and ornithology. During his short time on the faculty, O'Neal already has engaged students in several avian research projects, including investigation of waterfowl migration using weather radar, a study of American golden-plover habitat and its relevance to wind energy facilities and an investigation of bird use on newly restored habitat in the Wabash River Valley. O'Neal currently is a member of The Wildlife Society, the Indiana Academy of Science, the North American Colleges and Teachers of Agriculture, Delta Waterfowl, Ducks Unlimited and the Clinton Lake Waterfowl Association. Read O'Neal's bird-watching tips below.

What do people do when they go "birding"?

"Generally, bird-watchers simply go to an area that has quality habitat for a particular suite of species like forest songbirds, waterfowl, wading birds or grassland birds and spend a few hours walking around with binoculars to try to find as many different species of birds as possible. Some bird-watchers like the challenge of documenting as many species as they can while others simply enjoy observing the beauty of the birds' plumage and behavior and soaking in the



A variety of taxidermied birds are stored in the Barnes Science Hall “museum room.” Here, biology Professor Ben O’Neal holds a few of the species he brings into his classes to help familiarize students with a bird’s common characteristics.

wonder of the outdoors. It becomes a fun lifelong challenge to try to see as many new species as possible. A trip to a new state or region always brings the exciting possibility of seeing a species that you haven’t yet seen and checking it off on your ‘life list.’”

Where are the best places to go birding?

“Some of the best places to go locally are properties managed by the Indiana DNR like Brown County State Park and Atterbury Fish and Wildlife Area, nature preserves owned by the Central Indiana Land Trust or Franklin College’s own Hougham Woods. During spring migration (April–May) a person can even find dozens of beautiful species in wooded city parks and yards.”

What resources should a beginner consult to learn more about bird-watching?

“The best resource for a beginning bird-watcher is an experienced guide; several local and state parks offer eco-tours with experienced guides who can give beginners some helpful pointers. I’d also recommend purchasing a good field guide (approximately \$20), but there are great free resources, like websites hosted by The Cornell Lab of Ornithology www.birds.cornell.edu and The Audubon

Society www.audubon.org. There are even a number of apps for mobile devices like ‘Chirp! Bird Songs USA,’ which are great for learning how to identify birds based on plumage and song.”

What gear should a bird-watcher take along?

“A good pair of binoculars, a bird guide, clothes that enable you to walk through weeds and bug spray.”

What determines a successful day of birding?

“The ultimate measure of a successful day of birding is whether you enjoyed the beauty of nature.”

For you personally, why the interest in birds?

“As a boy I grew up hunting pheasants, quail, ducks, geese and doves. That hobby grew into a desire to better understand birds and to conserve their habitat so that their populations would persist and so that others could experience and enjoy the wonders of birds that I have.”

What’s your most memorable birding experience?

“When I was a college student, I spent a summer at the Au Sable Environmental

Institute in northern Michigan. It was during that summer that I first took the time to stop and truly listen to birds singing. I’ll never forget stepping foot into an old growth forest one morning and hearing dozens of different species singing beautiful, distinct songs.”

What type of birds do you most enjoy watching/studying and why?

“My favorite birds to watch and study are definitely waterfowl. I’m absolutely blown away by their beauty and their migratory behavior.”

What do you do with those “fresh dead birds” you request via campus e-mail?

“Every year thousands of birds die when they collide with cell phone towers and office building windows. Whenever someone finds one on campus they can now bring it to my ornithology lab where a student or I will skin it and stuff it. It then becomes part of the Franklin College teaching collection, which is used to teach future scientists about the birds of Indiana.”

Who’s your favorite famous bird?

“It would have to be Woody Woodpecker.”