

# AMATEUR BIRDING

FRIENDS OF THE ASHLEY SCHIFF PRESERVE  
SPECIAL WRITING SERIES



*A Wild Turkey at Elizabeth A. Morton National Wildlife Refuge.*

## Part 2: What it Takes to be a Birder

TEXT AND PHOTOS BY TRAVIS CUTTER

Nothing. To be a birder is to simply go outside, look at a bird and say "hey, that's neat." Anything else is just a bonus. That said, some of these bonuses can make the hobby a great deal more enjoyable, so I want to draw attention to two things that might not seem like obvious boons, but nevertheless elevate the hobby to something that you can easily commit yourself to.

Having a regular birding location, or a few regular birding locations, that you visit regularly can allow you to build a connection to these locales. Going birding is thus akin to visiting a friend's house, except your friends can fly and you never know exactly which ones you'll see!



*A Downy Woodpecker on a suet feeder.*



The other thing that can make birding a more fulfilling hobby is having other people to bird with. This might sound counterintuitive, since you might expect that the peace and quiet of solitude would be an asset, but this isn't necessarily the case. Whether it's with friends, family, or fellow enthusiasts you meet on guided walks, birding within a group can increase the amount of things that you see, as everyone has their own perspective. Of course, if you meet new people who share a common interest, you could also gain some newfound friends. Either way, birding with people is a much richer and more fulfilling experience than birding alone.

## Part 2: Woodpeckers, Wrens and Blackbirds

Suffolk County is home to a wide variety of woodpecker species, and while I'll mention most of them, I'm going to focus on the most common few.

Downy Woodpeckers are, in my experience, the most common species of woodpecker in this area. It's very close with another species I'll talk about, but the Downy Woodpecker is much more prone to visit my yard than other varieties of woodpecker, in addition to being common in the woods. They're small, about six inches from head to tail, with black and white stripes and small red spots on the tops of their heads. The Hairy Woodpecker is a less common species that looks like a larger variant of the Downy, being a few inches larger, and having a much longer beak. The Yellow-Bellied Sapsucker also looks similar, but has a yellow belly, and is a bit larger.



*A Carolina Wren sitting on my fence. The bright white eyebrow, absent on other wren species, is clearly visible.*

The Red-Bellied Woodpecker is the other exceedingly common species of woodpecker. They're quite large, have a black and white back, reddish bellies, and bright red feathers from the tops of their skulls to the base of their head, sort of like a mullet. These shouldn't be confused with the much rarer Red-Headed Woodpeckers, which have completely red heads.

The Northern Flicker is about the same size as the Red-Bellied Woodpecker, but they have spots on their back instead of the black and white striping of the Red-Bellies.

When it comes to wrens, they all are about the same size as a sparrow, and they all have the long, curved beaks and long tails. The Carolina Wren is present year-round and is a much lighter brown than the House or Winter Wrens, in addition to possessing white feathers that look like eyebrows.



*A Red-Bellied Woodpecker obscured by branches at Elizabeth A. Morton National Wildlife Refuge.*



The House and Winter Wrens are each a darker brown, with no eyebrows, and they are each only present for a portion of the year. Winter Wrens, as the name implies, are present in the colder months, while House Wrens are present in the warmer months.

The most common type of blackbird in residential areas are Common Grackles. These large birds travel in sizable flocks, and are not actually black. They have dark blue heads and dark brown bodies, which appear black in bright light. These birds leave during the winter but are present in great numbers for the rest of the year. The much rarer Boat-Tailed Grackle has a larger tail that they hold in a V shape while walking, and the only one I've ever seen was on a beach on the Peconic Bay.

Much more common out in the woods and marshes are the Red-Winged Blackbirds. These birds are about the same size as the Grackles, but the males have bright red feathers on their wings, hence the name. The females are about the same size as the males but are brown in color.

Brown-Headed Cowbirds are slightly larger than sparrows, and are either black with brown heads, if they're male, or varying shades of brown, if they're female. In my experience, these birds are always in pairs, usually with one male and one female.



*A Red-Winged Blackbird at Cupsogue Beach.  
Not all males have such large red patches.*

That's all for today. In about a week, I'll be back talking about chickadees, titmice, nuthatches and mockingbirds, as well as more tips on how to get more immersed into the hobby. *TJC*



*A Common Grackle on the Suet feeder..*





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