

Birding takes flight in South Bay

What was once a scant hobby has now become a serious sport

**By Kristen Munson
Los Gatos Weekender**

Article Launched: 12/28/2007 09:09:21 AM PST

Birders: Some might call them a strange breed.

They organize at the break of dawn in small groups, binoculars in one hand and guide books in the other. Then they spend the next several hours quietly stalking their prey - traipsing through the brush and wild lands with one goal: To appreciate its existence. Then they watch it fly away.

Birders are a fast growing population of outdoor sportsmen - there are more than 3,500 registered in the local chapter of the Audubon Society - and they're hoping more people will join the ranks.

"It used to be you were looked at as a freak. But I've noticed a difference now," says Nanci Adams, a member of the Santa Cruz Bird Club. "It's really taken off. In fact, I think it's the fastest growing hobby in the U.S."

Adams began bird watching at 16 with her mother and recently became "heavy duty" about the sport.

Heavy duty might be an understatement. Since 2002, Adams has traveled around the world to go birding. This week she began packing for a trip to the Galapagos and Quito, Ecuador, where there is

some of the best birding in the world. She hopes to track the illusive species of Andean condors and the Harpy eagle.

"I'd love to see either of those birds before I die," she says.

A common practice among birders is to catalog each species they identify. Some people keep multiple running lists, including a life list, a list by county or country, or a list tracking the month or year.

"It runs the gamut as far as birders are concerned," Adams says. "Some people don't keep any lists. It can get very competitive ... Things can get ugly."

Tallying lists is based on the honor system and sometimes just like in professional sports, the competitiveness drives a few birders to cheat.

"Nowadays, especially with the advent of digital photos, you pretty much have to have a photo in order to list a really rare bird - especially if it hasn't been seen in awhile," Adams says.

Adams performs outreach for the club and she hopes more minority groups and young people get involved. She leads tours for women and handicapped individuals and insists that birding is something anyone can do - just need a guide book and a pair of old binoculars.

"A lot of it is just learning by doing," says Freddy Howell, co-owner of the Wild Bird Center in Los Gatos.

Every Saturday morning she and a group of about 15 head out to one of dozens of local hot spots to go birding.

"It's increasing in its popularity because you

Advertisement

TARGET COUPON

EXPIRES 3/8/08

FREE Twenty 4x6" basic prints

Offer available at Target One-hour Photo Labs. Go to Target.com/photo for the location nearest you. One-hour service limited to machine capacity. Limit one item or offer per coupon. Offer not available for prints made on the Kodak Picture Kiosk. Void if copied, transferred, purchased, sold or prohibited by law. No cash value. Maximum retail value \$4.40 for combined free offer.



9856-0113-2647-5849-0376-5806-89

Print Powered By FormatDynamics™

can do it anywhere. If you go on vacation or go on a business trip you will always see something. It's just a wonderful way to start the morning."

During the tours, the group will typically identify anywhere from 25 to 40 different species.

"That's sort of the challenge and excitement of it - to see how many you can find," Howell says. "The real diehards are the ones that have real strong life lists."

Bob Power, executive director of the Santa Clara Valley Audubon Society, was introduced to birding by a professor about 10 years ago.

"Every season brings something really unique," he says.

Migratory birds visit the county from around the world, and every season there is a new species to observe.

Power recommends beginners go to a location close to home and with a guide to ease themselves into the sport.

"All of the Bayland parks (in Sunnyvale) are just teeming with wildlife," he says.

The Los Gatos Creek Trail is also a great local site for spotting some of the county's 177 different bird species.

Each winter since 1900, beginner and expert birders are relied upon to count species for the Audubon Society's various Christmas bird counts across the country. Many are currently under way through January, and the data provides scientists with information about population fluctuations.

Power says that birders have begun witnessing some significant changes, such as species vacating the area and nesting earlier in the season.

A recently released study by Stanford University indicates that by 2100, the climate change could cause up to 30 percent of land-bird species to go extinct worldwide, in a worst-case scenario.

Howell, of the Wild Bird Center, has already noticed changes, particularly within the insect-eating species. She brings food along on trips to do her part.

"I personally feel it is important to feed birds because we've done such a thorough job of decimating their habitat," Howell says.

Adams, of the Santa Cruz Bird Club, is hoping that as more people become birders they will become personally invested in preserving their habitats.

"I'm extremely concerned about global warming and I think that birds are a real indication about what's going on with the world," Adams says. "We just had our Christmas count [in Santa Cruz.] This was the lowest number of species we've seen since 1982 and a lot of that does have to do with habitat loss. Birding is one of those activities that really makes you aware of a planet in trouble."

Lisa Meyers began birding nearly a decade ago after taking several adult education courses in Palo Alto. What began as a hobby has now blossomed into a side business, Let's Go Birding, in Campbell. She hosts birding tours within a 250-mile radius of the Bay Area.

Meyers has counted more than 1,100 species of birds in her lifetime. She co-leads annual trips to Costa Rica and is heading there in March.

Advertisement

TARGET COUPON

EXPIRES 3/8/08

FREE Twenty 4x6" basic prints

Offer available at Target One-hour Photo Labs. Go to Target.com/photo for the location nearest you. One-hour service limited to machine capacity. Limit one item or offer per coupon. Offer not available for prints made on the Kodak Picture Kiosk. Void if copied, transferred, purchased, sold or prohibited by law. No cash value. Maximum retail value \$4.40 for combined free offer.



9856-0113-2647-5849-0376-5806-89

Print Powered By FormatDynamics™

"My niche is beginning birders," Meyers says. "I try to create a safe place for people to learn. Tomorrow I'm a birthday gift for one woman who's coming from England."

But birding is not just a job; it's still a passion, Meyers says, reflecting on the exhilaration of standing in a field amid 20,000 snow geese.

In addition to leading tours, Meyers teaches local courses on birding at the Audubon Society. Her goal is to keep introducing more and more people to the beauty and peace of the sport.

"It's kind of like a treasure hunt - you're always looking," she says. "It's just you and nature ... it was here before we were; embrace it. I say look up every now and then. Just look up. It's amazing what you can see."

For more information on birding, visit www.wildbirdcenter.com, www.scvas.org, www.letsjobirding.com, or www.santacruzbirdclub.org

Advertisement

TARGET COUPON

EXPIRES 3/8/08

FREE Twenty 4x6" basic prints

Offer available at Target One-hour Photo Labs. Go to Target.com/photo for the location nearest you. One-hour service limited to machine capacity. Limit one item or offer per coupon. Offer not available for prints made on the Kodak Picture Kiosk. Void if copied, transferred, purchased, sold or prohibited by law. No cash value. Maximum retail value \$4.40 for combined free offer.



9856-0113-2647-5849-0376-5806-89

Print Powered By FormatDynamics™