

Staying Connected

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Keeping active outdoors while stuck at home
is not as hard as it sounds



Who me, a birder? How could that be? I hardly fit the bill, even by the loosest definition of the term for those who observe birds in the wild. After all, I do not own a field guide, the only binoculars I ever purchased were for watching Baltimore Orioles (the baseball variety) and I certainly could not differentiate a thrush from a thrasher.

Yet here I am, now in the second month of the stay-at-home order in North Carolina, ready to check the box for birder on the 2020 Census. As I described in last issue's Editor's Note, my newfound interest in birding began in my backyard as a way for my daughter and me to stay active outdoors while practicing social distancing. It has since become part of my daily life.

I was quite pleased with this new routine until I realized I was missing out on a better backyard birding experience. I discovered this reality during a virtual backyard birding discussion hosted by N.C. Wildlife Resources Commission biologists and educators. Toward the end of the session, I innocently asked about the best time of day to view birds.

"The earlier the better," said Scott Anderson, the Commission's bird biologist. "When we do bird surveys, we're out before 6 and we finish by 10. They are more active early in the morning."





Um, what? My daughter and I are rarely out before 8 for our backyard bird walks, much less 5:30 or 6! While this should not have been a revelation for me, I was taken aback. I'm more of a night owl than an early bird.

I decided to do it right and set my alarm for 5:30 on a late-April morning (my 12-year-old daughter and 11-year-old dog declined to join me). I fixed my coffee and headed to my back porch a few minutes before 6. I was greeted by a racket of bird calls. The sporadic calls and whistles I was accustomed to hearing at 8 could not compare to the roar of predawn bird activity.

I had so much fun that I set my alarm early again the next morning and expanded my walk to different areas of the neighborhood, as Commission educator Sydney Brown suggested. She correctly predicted that I would find different species in locations just a short distance from my house. According to my eBird statistics, I identified more than two dozen species during

my early morning walks that week. Not bad for a rookie.

The point of this tale is not to brag about what a wonderful birder I have become (I haven't), but to show that opportunities to connect with nature close to home exist even in these trying times. This holds true whether you live in the country, suburbs or city, and extend beyond birding. We're here to share a few ideas that kids and adults might enjoy.

"Getting outdoors helps with your psyche," said Commission biologist Jeff Hall, who has noticed an uptick in neighborhood walkers. "I have a feeling that getting outdoors is at least something that lifts them up a little bit during these difficult times."

Backyard Birding Bonanza

Brown is one of those people who has regularly found her way outdoors while adhering to social distancing guidelines. No longer in the field for work, "birding has become a favorite activity for me," Brown said.

Even in this period of social distancing, Brown has stayed in touch with her birding buddies by setting up a competition to see who can spot the most birds by tracking species on the eBird smartphone app.

"For 2020, we are all trying for 220 bird species. I am up to 78 different species," Brown said in early April after adding a brown-headed cowbird to her list. "I'm exploring different areas around my neighborhood. People who normally go into work and commute don't realize they have so many treasures near their house."

Brown encourages new and young birders to learn how to identify species by sound. Challenge yourself to learn different calls while sitting on your porch or opening a window. Common yard birds with distinct calls in North Carolina include the bluebird, cardinal, Carolina wren, house finch and tufted titmouse. Get involved in citizen science (we'll cover that shortly) and contribute your birdwatching results to large studies.

"The whole purpose of this is to get out and discover," Brown said.

There's an App for That

There are plenty of resources to assist in your discovery, from field guides to smartphone apps to websites that track what birds are nearby. These are helpful for beginners and experts alike. A few worth checking out include:

Merlin Bird ID: Perfect for when you see a bird you do not recognize, the Cornell Lab of Ornithology's app takes you through a series of five questions to help identify the species.

Audubon Field Guide: Similar to the Merlin Bird ID, this app helps identify birds you do not recognize and narrows its results as you add descriptions of the bird.

BirdNET: This app allows you to record bird calls and submit them to the Cornell Lab of Ornithology for identification. Within seconds it identifies possible sources of the call.

eBird: This app tracks the species you spot and allows you to submit your results to the largest citizen science project in the world. The data are put to use in a variety of ways, including bird migration maps that can be found online at ebird.org.

NCbirdingtrail.org: The official website of the N.C. Birding Trail, which links birders and nature-based tourists with birding sites across the state, includes great features like a map that details each of the trail's 330-plus sites and includes recently spotted species.

Commission educator Mike Campbell recommends field guides with up-to-date range maps for species, like "Peterson's Guide to Eastern Birds" (which is what he carries in the field) and "The Sibley Field Guide to Birds" (which is among the most user-friendly). Campbell advises birders to take note of a bird's field marks, like the shape of its beak or marks on its wings, before turning to the guide.

"People will try to identify a bird and immediately go to the field guide," Campbell said, "and once they look back up the bird is gone. The dang things don't sit there for very long."

Binoculars can certainly enhance your birding experience but are not essential, particularly in backyards. Anderson recommends sitting still on your back porch for about 10 minutes. "A lot of birds will come into close view, so you don't even need your binoculars," he said. "Be patient and sit still with a cup of coffee or tea."

Herps at Home

Reptiles and amphibians (collectively known as herps) can be found in yards and make for entertaining wildlife viewing. One of the easiest ways to attract and view herps is to set out pieces of wood or similar objects—like landscape timber, railroad ties or logs—in your yard.

"These can turn into good cover, especially for small snakes and sometimes salamanders," Hall said. "These can be good to flip over and look at what's underneath. There are all sorts of possibilities under landscaping like that."

Species of snakes often found under these types of cover include worm snakes, Northern brown snakes, ring-necks and possibly a copperhead. Spiders, insects and earthworms are also often found under here. Hall recommends placing boards in wild areas of your yard, like near a creek or woods.

When checking under a board, always be sure to roll it toward you so that the

board is between you and whatever is underneath. This will allow the critter an escape path away from you. Never wrap your fingers underneath the board to avoid getting them caught and possibly bitten by anything underneath.

Know how to identify different species of snakes, particularly copperheads, which are likely the only venomous snakes found under the coverings, at least in urban areas. In suburban and urban areas, there is a possibility of a black widow spider finding cover under boards, so know how to identify it as well.

Hall advises against handling wildlife. "Generally, I suggest that people look with their eyes and not their hands," he said. "It's easy to accidentally injure small animals like that." However, if you do choose to handle amphibians, it is best to have moist hands. Put your hands in wet grass or dirt, he said, so as to avoid drying out or raising the body temperature of these animals with your warm hands.

Treefrogs are common backyard visitors throughout the Coastal Plain and much of the Piedmont. A great way to get an up-close look at them is by setting up PVC pipes in your yard for the frogs to use as shelter. A variety of species, including gray treefrogs and green treefrogs, can be attracted to these pipes and could use them year-round. Here are two effective ways of setting up PVC pipes in your yard:

Use a rubber mallet to hammer a roughly 5-foot-long pipe into the ground so that at least 2 ½ feet of pipe is exposed above ground. Set this up within a foot of a tree. Or attach a piece of PVC pipe (roughly 2 to 3 feet long) to a tree trunk using rope or cord. Seal or cap the bottom of the PVC pipe and drill a hole into the pipe about 1 inch from the bottom. This allows moisture to build up in the pipe, but doesn't allow water to fill the pipe.

Pipes with a roughly 1- to 1 ½-inch opening are best for larger treefrogs while smaller frogs do well with quarter- to half-inch openings. The pipes re-create the natural humid environment treefrogs use between the bark of a tree. Hall's personal record for frogs in a single pipe is 43 in a 5-foot-long, 1 ½-inch-wide pipe he set up in a backyard outside New Bern.



Opposite: There are a plethora of resources to help identify species of birds like the yellow-rumped warbler (top) and flycatcher. Above: Wildlife-watching opportunities at home, or close to it, include ways to spot or attract animals like turtles and lizards.



Clockwise from top: Netting critters is one way to get an up-close look at what lives in ponds (be sure to return what you catch). It's best to look at animals like frogs with your eyes instead of your hands, but use moist hands if you decide to pick one up. Rabbits are easy to spot in your yard or nearby park; you might have to look a little closer to find an anole. Opposite: Getting outdoors to fish is great, but so is starting a new fly-tying hobby indoors.

Another easy way to attract wildlife to your property is creating a toad abode, a small ceramic house for toads. According to the National Wildlife Federation, toad abodes can be created by turning a ceramic flower pot upside down and propping it up with a rock so the toad can get in and out. It is better not to have a floor in your toad abode because toads like to dig. Place your toad abode in a shady spot under a plant and near a water source, such as a small pond or large saucer of water. For more information on toad abodes, visit nwf.org.

Survival Skills

Knowing how to read a map and use a compass are key skills for exploring the outdoors and easy to practice. "Get a map and a compass and try to hone those skills," said Chet Clark, the Commission's R3 manager. "A GPS makes it super easy, but it's a good idea to have a back-up plan. Everybody relies on that phone or GPS and it has made it super easy to know where you are and what boundaries are around. But what if you drop your phone in a creek?"

That's when knowing how to read a compass comes in handy. Learning compass skills is easy and fun, and there are a lot of great online resources to help develop those skills. Once you and your kids have the basics down, test those skills outdoors. Fortunately, that can be done as close to home as your backyard, a neighborhood park or a nearby game land. Set up a basic course to practice with a starting point, a bearing and distance, then see if your kids can find the destination ("50 yards at 265 degrees followed by 30 yards at 315 degrees"). From this you can work on orienting a map with your compass, triangulating, setting a bearing to a landmark and more.

Clark also recommends basic hunting skills that can be done in your yard or a nearby park or game land, like practicing your different calls. (Visit the N.C. Wildlife Resources Commission's YouTube channel for "Talking Turkey" videos with R3 Hunting Specialist Walter "Deet" James.)

"When I was a kid, I spent a ton of time in the living room or on the back deck with turkey calls and deer calls trying to perfect

them and still do," Clark said. "The more important part is learning what it is supposed to sound like. It's easy to go on the internet and find out what these calls are supposed to sound like, the different kinds of turkey calls and languages, and then go outside and mimic it."

Hunting squirrels has traditionally been an entry point for new hunters. While you may not be able to hunt your backyard or nearby park, you can certainly practice stalking squirrels by moving slowly, quietly and staying aware of your surroundings.

"Go somewhere you can socially distance: your backyard, a local park or even a game land," Clark said. "Get some good practice of locating a squirrel and practicing your stalking skills and your still-hunting skills. See how close you can get and imagine that you can take a shot. Hone those skills of the hunt."

Fishing From Home

Fishing has long been a great social distancing activity. Find a quiet spot on the bank by yourself or with family members and make a day of it. However, if you cannot get to the water, there are plenty of fishing-related activities to keep you busy at home.

Learn how to tie a fly: Tom Carpenter, director of the Commission's Pechmann Center in Fayetteville, said learning how to fly-tie can be affordable and easy at home. A basic starting kit costs roughly \$40 (most outdoor retailers carry them and kits for making soft plastic lures), and typically includes a vice, fly-tying scissors, fly-tying bobbins, a bobbin threader and hackle pliers. From there, find a website or YouTube channel you enjoy (Carpenter is a fan of the instructional videos and tutorials at CharliesFlyBoxInc.com) and begin learning the basics.

"Get proficient with two or three patterns, such as the Woolly Worm or Pheasant Tail Nymph, then move on," Carpenter said. "It is easier than it looks, but like with everything else, you improve with repetition. Also, tying a perfect fly doesn't mean you are going to catch fish. There are a lot of fish caught on imperfect flies. So have fun with it and give yourself time for self-discovery and growth in the activity."



Backyard Casting: Staying proficient with your casting skills can be done easily from the friendly confines of your yard or nearby park. Set out hula hoops or cut various-sized holes into plywood and spread them out. Then practice tossing jigs into these targets. Similar activities can be done with fly rods. Practice casting for distance in your yard. Setting out pie plates is a great way to practice your aim. Visit the Commission's YouTube channel for backyard casting instructional videos.

Threats and Precautions

Before heading outdoors, know what potential hazards exist in nature. Identifying these hazards and being able to recognize them is the first step to avoiding them.

Learn how to identify poison ivy: One of many plants toxic to humans, poison ivy is among the few that you simply need to touch to have a reaction. An online search will reveal how to identify its three leaves

and a red stem. Remember the motto: "Leaves of three, beware of me."

Ticks: *Wildlife in North Carolina* Associate Editor Mike Zlotnicki often advises that despite people's fears of "scary" animals like snakes and coyotes, one of the only things outdoors that can kill you is a tick. Be sure to check yourself for ticks after coming in from the outdoors. Take preventative measures to avoid tick bites before going out, like treating the bottom of your pants with Permethrin.

Know your Snake IDs: Snakes are cool and spotting one in a yard is even cooler. Knowing what you're seeing can only enhance that experience and make it a safer one. The copperhead is the most common venomous snake in North Carolina, so it is important to be able to identify it and its look-a-likes. A great website for identifying snakes is herpsofnc.org.

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