

Ready to Start Birding at Sylvan Lake?

By Mike Trahan

Birding, as bird watching is called, is one of the most popular activities in the U.S. today. We're graced with fine natural surroundings and stately older trees at Sylvan Lake. It's a great neighborhood in which to start birding.

Over the years we've lived here, we've seen over 100 different species of birds at Sylvan Lake. Some live here all year, some live here for part of the year, some are regular visitors at certain times of year as they migrate through, and some are occasional or rare visitors.

But how do you get started? Here are some practical pointers. Keep in mind that some of these pointers are just one person's opinion.

The Essentials

You really need just two things to start birding: a bird book called a field guide and a pair of binoculars. While you can get by in your backyard without binoculars, we'd recommend them even there. A pair of binoculars will let you see remarkable beauty and detail that you will never get to enjoy or appreciate without them.

Field Guides

There are a wide variety of fine bird identification books available. The bible among birders is now the National Audubon Society's The Sibley Guide to Birds (\$25-35). It's too large to carry in a pocket. So they have created a smaller Eastern and Western version. (You need the Eastern Version.) The guide I carry with me is the American Bird Conservancy's All the Birds of North America (\$20). There are a number of other outstanding field guides.

If a book that covers over 700 species from all over the U.S. and Alaska as these do seems a bit overwhelming, you may want to try David Johnson's Birds of Chicago (\$10). It's a newer book for beginning birders that covers 120 species found in the Chicago area.

All these are available at Barnes and Noble at Hawthorne Mall, on the Internet, at the Wild Bird Centers, or at a number of other stores. There are many other fine guides. If you have one, just use it. You'll want a guide that uses drawings, not photographs. Some guides have an Eastern U.S. or a Western U.S. version. You need the Eastern U.S. (That means east of the Rockies).

Binoculars

Pick an amount you're willing to spend and then get the best in that price range. Whatever you do, don't be scared off and get nothing. Get 7X or 8X power binoculars. Some people like the small, lightweight compact binoculars. They are convenient but usually harder to look through and pick up birds, especially in poorer light. You may want a medium size (e.g. 8X32) or a full size pair (e.g. 8X42). The first number is the

power; the second number is the size or light gathering capability of the big lenses in front. Neither are indicators of quality, which can vary widely.

The best size for many women is 8x32. If you're willing to wear something a little larger and heavier, then either 8x42 or 8x32 is a good bet. Kathleen uses an 8x32 pair and I use an 8x42 pair.

You can use mail order via telephone or Internet to buy binoculars at Eagle Optics in Middleton, Wisconsin (next to Madison) at (800) 289-1132. They are very helpful and will be glad to discuss the options/tradeoffs with you and give you recommendations. Eagle Optics' web site at <http://www.eagleoptics.com/> has articles giving you more information plus price lists. You also can buy binoculars at the Wild Bird Center in Libertyville or Fox River Grove.

Here is a summary of recommendations, mostly from Better View Desired (BVD), combined with some prices from Eagle Optics (without shipping) to give you an idea of some alternatives (Note: all from 2006). Better View Desired rates the best binoculars and best buys for excellent quality at <http://betterviewdesired.com/RefSet.html> . It has articles on how to check out binoculars and what to look for in a pair as well as reviews of scopes as you get more serious. You won't need the high end where you are getting features such as waterproofing that won't matter for local birding. We included them just so you could see what the best in class costs.

You'll probably need to spend at least \$80-\$100 and if you can afford more, you'll be glad you did. You can call Eagle Optics or check with a Wild Bird Center in Libertyville (847) 573-1450 or Fox River Grove (both now with the same owner) for recommendations in your price range. Eagle Optics will ship you binoculars and you can return them if you don't like them. They sometimes are at shows or birding events in the Chicago area. Check their web site. A rule of thumb for birders is to get the best binoculars you can for the features that matter to you. Don't rely on this table; visit or call one of the sources mentioned earlier. Keep in mind that the choice between binoculars is often a personal preference.

Type of Binocular	What You Can Expect	Some BVD recommendations
Mid size	Fully functional except in the most difficult light conditions. May be the best compromise between weight/size and optical usability	<p>BVD Best Buys: Celestron Noble 8X32 (\$260)</p> <p>Call Eagle Optics for other recommendations at lower price points.</p> <p>Best in Class: Nikon Premier SE 8x32 (\$700), Nikon Venturer LX 8x32, Leica 8x32 Ultra, Swarovski SLC 8X30 (all more \$)</p>
Full size	Can handle widest range of light conditions but bigger and heavier than other categories, so smaller people may not like these.	<p>BVD Best Buys: : Pentax DCF WP 8x42 (\$280), Swift Ultralite 8X42 (\$300), Swift Audubon 8.5X44 (exceptional optical performance, somewhat bulky package-\$350), Swift Audubon 8.5X44 Roof Prisms</p>

Type of Binocular	What You Can Expect	Some BVD recommendations
		<p>(extreme light weight, showerproof, unique body design...not optically equal to standard Audubons- \$360)</p> <p>Best in Class: : Zeiss Victory 8x42 T*FL, Leupold Golden Ring 8x42, Zeiss 7X42, Bausch & Lomb (now Bushnell) Elite 8x42, Swarovski EL 8.5x44 ,Nikon Venturer LX 8x42,Nikon LX L 8x42 (\$700 and up)</p>
Compacts	<p>Many use these as their only pair because they are so light. Usually harder to look through, pick up, and stay with birds, especially in poorer light.</p>	<p>Best Buy: Swift Micron, Minolta Compact, Nikon Tavelite, Pentax UCF, Bausch & Lomb (now Bushnell) Legacy, Celestron (take your pick, all are excellent values - \$100-\$300)</p> <p>Best in Class: Bushnell (Bausch & Lomb) Custom 7X26 (\$240)</p>

Getting Started

Setting up backyard feeders is one of the best ways to start looking at birds. Next try guided bird walks. All of these are free. A knowledgeable leader or co-walker can really help you learn your birds and every birder loves to help others get started. Volo Bog about 15 minutes away (north on Gilmer then off Route 12/59 north of Volo) has bird walks in the Spring and Fall on many weekends. Call for times at (815) 344-1294. The Wild Bird Center in Libertyville, (847) 573-1450, and in Fox River Grove, 847-639-6594, have walks once a month all year long. Finally, the Evanston North Shore Bird Club is very active and has walks all over the Chicago area, most north of Chicago, some near us. It's a fine group; you can try some walks and then join if you like. Let me know if you want information on the club and their walks. Any questions, feel free to ask Mike or Kathleen Trahan, 847-949-5589.

Good birding!