



BIRD-TRIPPING

How to bring bird-watching into your van life

By Bryony Angell

Anywhere your RV can go, you'll spot multitudes of wild birds.

Van life has a spirit of the migratory to it; that urge to keep moving for the change of seasons, better weather, and better conditions at the next stop. Did you know that many wild birds share this same drive to make a change every season? Looks like you already have a bunch in common with our feathered friends, so perhaps you could incorporate bird-watching into your visual and auditory experience of four-wheeled travel?

"Tell yourself, 'I'm going to start birding!'" says Eliana Ardila Kramer, a van-lifer and co-owner of the bird guiding company Birding By Bus. Fellow birders Emilie Chen in Oregon, Brian Chitundu in New Jersey, and Melissa Hafting in British Columbia, Canada, share Ardila Kramer's enthusiasm for birding on the road, and offer their tips for making birding a part of your own van life.

Why Add Birding to Road Travel?

Watching and listening to birds enhances road travel, whether your birding adventures take you far away, or into your own backyard. Regional road-tripper Chen covers the west coast of the United States. "Birding helps me explore my home state of California more than I ever did as a kid," she says from her current base in Oregon, where she also birds. "Birds help you microscope in on the little details of where you are. By road-tripping, you can access places within reach, and the birds are diverse."

Birding while road traveling can add more purpose and community to a trip. In 2018, Ardila Kramer traveled with her husband, Marc Kramer, across the continental United States and Canada. In their 1978 Volkswagen bus, the couple embarked on a birder "Big Year"—an informal challenge that some birders give themselves to count as many birds as they can



in a single year and geographical area. “We visited 35 states, drove over 25,000 miles, and saw 602 birds in our 12 months of traveling,” Ardila Kramer says. “It was the people we met across the birding community who helped us to our Big Year.” The couple’s ambition gained attention in Facebook’s bird-enthusiast communities, with regional groups chiming in to suggest places to visit, and species to track down. Their Big Year effort resulted in bird sightings in locals’ backyards, and the offer of home cooking and overnight parking in the driveways of new friends.

How Do I Start, and What Do I Need?

While taking up birding is as easy as looking up when you pass telephone poles to spot perching hawks, you want to start your birding path as a good birding citizen. Familiarize yourself with the American Birding Association’s Code of Birding Ethics, which emphasizes

the welfare of the birds and wildlife you observe, as well as respect for property and people you encounter.

The tools of birding are analog, digital, and cerebral. “A new birder will want a field guide, which you can buy, or borrow from a library,” says Hafting. Where she lives, in British Columbia, some libraries even rent out binoculars—the second critical tool for birders. “With binoculars, you see how diverse birds are,” says Chen. “Birds seem the same until you get a close look at them.”

“There are great apps that will help narrow down what you might see,” adds Ardila Kramer. “The Merlin Bird ID app by the Cornell Lab of Ornithology is free, and has regional packs you can download, depending on where you are traveling.” The birders in this story also rely on eBird (also by the Cornell Lab), an online database of bird observations that provides real-time information about bird distribution and density.

A cedar waxwing at the Malheur National Wildlife Refuge, Oregon. Image by Emilie Chen.



Where Do I Find Birds?

Birds are everywhere, occupying every possible landscape: foraging on the ground, hovering among flowers, flitting through shrubs, scrambling up tree trunks, dabbling in waterways, and resting on power lines, rooftops, rock faces and tree limbs. They fly, too, in greater variation than you might imagine, soaring high on thermals, flying in formation en masse, dashing through the air like bats in pursuit of insects. “Birding is always going to be an attraction while traveling,” says Chitundu. “It will make even the most mundane places interesting.”

Birds occupy spectacular areas, too, and are easy to see. “Look for a national park or refuge with an auto tour,” says Chitundu. “They’re deliberately set up to accommodate cars, and they’re safe, as the routes run one way. You can see most birds from your car, or pull up and step out to get a closer look.” One place that offers tours like these is Bosque del Apache National Wildlife Refuge in New Mexico, where you can see sandhill cranes from your car during their fall migration.

Hafting suggests coastal beach town Tofino on Vancouver Island as another locale for vehicle-accessible birding: “You can pull up right to the beach,” she says. “You’ll see shorebirds like snowy plovers, red knots and whimbrels, all from your car.”

Birding from the car can even offer you an advantage. “Your car can act as your blind,” says Chen. “Birds may not be as skittish as [they might be] if you were on foot.”

“eBird uses your location to suggest birds near you,” says Ardila Kramer. “Plus, you can participate in data collection for science when you report what you see.”

Learning from others will boost your birding skills, too. “You’ll meet birders when you’re traveling,” says Hafting. “You can ask others what they’re looking at to get the conversation going. Many people like to share what they are seeing in real time.”

Top: Willets at Morro Strand State Beach, California. Image by EmilieChen.

Bottom: Brian Chitundu. Image by Holly Chitundu.

A sandhill crane and its reflection at Bosque del Apache National Wildlife Refuge.



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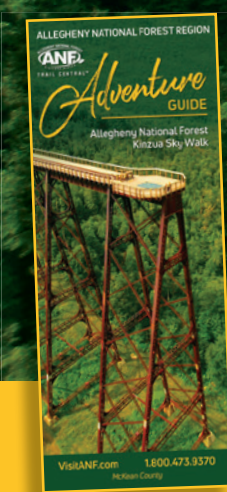
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Car camping at parks embeds you in the birding hot spots. “What I love about campervan birding is that you’re at the site where you want to bird,” says Hafting. “You wake up to birds singing. You can even hear birds at night.” She describes the sound of city terns and crashing waves one night while car camping on Oahu, Hawaii. “We fell asleep to the birds vocalizing as they hunted at night, flying over our van.”

What Kind of Birding Community Is Out There?

The birders in this story credit social media, especially Instagram and Facebook, for camaraderie. “I was disconnected from the birding community until I got on social media,” says Chitundu. “Social media made it easier to find younger people like me.”

Chen and Chitundu also credit social media for finding local birding information for a trip. “You see the birds that live around the people you follow,” says Chen. “Then, you recognize a bird when you’re in that person’s area. Certain species stick out to you, and you look forward to seeing the birds when you travel to that place.” Chitundu has even reached out to local birders when planning a trip, and hired local guides via his connections. “There is the benefit of having someone local teach you the norms for both the birds’ behavior and local birding etiquette,” he says.

Ardila Kramer has built a community around birding festivals, where she and her husband have participated as keynote speakers. Birding festivals take place across

North America every month, from the Florida Space Coast Birding Festival in January to the Washington state Chelan Hawk Ridge Birding Festival in September. Check Audubon online for a list of festivals to hit.

What Are Good Birding Destinations?

In addition to locations listed in this story, visit the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service’s site for auto tours across the United States. Those recommended by the birders in this story include:

- Edwin B. Forsythe National Wildlife Refuge, New Jersey
- Bombay Hook National Wildlife Refuge, Delaware
- Ridgefield National Wildlife Refuge, Washington
- Anahuac National Wildlife Refuge, Texas.

State and provincial parks offer excellent birding. Reifel Bird Sanctuary, south of Vancouver, Canada, and Morro Bay State Park on California’s coast are two examples of bird-rich destinations accessible to beginner birders traveling by car. **R**

Bryony Angell writes about birding culture for various media including Audubon.org, BWD (formerly Bird Watcher’s Digest), and She Explores.

Her work highlights lesser-known voices and perspectives of the human side of the birding world, in particular the voices of women. Bryony lives with her family in the northwest corner of the contiguous United States. You can read more at her website: bryonyangell.com.

Emilie Chen at Estero Bluffs State Park.