

# The Gathering

## Can't We Be Friends, Too?

Field Trips for Community Building (Not to Mention Great Birding!)

Gathering. Birds do it. People do it. Bird-enthusiastic people do it. And these days there are many ways for birders to gather to watch birds. More and more, the idea of group birding outings is morphing into gatherings organized by people to engage a specific community with birds as the hook.

As birders, we're familiar with the traditional birding tour led by a designated expert who points out the *other* gathering—that of birds. The structure of the outing presents the expert as an instructor and the participants as students, the vibe kind of like a classroom. We arrive, watch birds, stay quiet, sneak peeks at the people who seem interesting, then disperse shyly when the event ends. The primary purpose is to observe birds, with only a secondary emphasis on building camaraderie with others around this shared interest.

But can't we be friends, too?

I'm a gregarious birder, often bummed out by the vacuum left after an organized bird walk officially concludes. I consider birding both a pastime and a *community*, and my emphasis on this last word is inten-

**Four** case studies, plus tips, resources, and a few logistical considerations

tional. I have been looking for a birding gathering that is both bird-rich and socially satisfying, by design and not by accident. As a result, I started organizing my own birding outings with personal friends, as well as folks drawn from my broader networks (both birding and general). Going birding and making friends get equal billing. I've organized all-women birding tailgates and parent-and-kid bird walks, an intentional spin on the traditional birding outing and curated for a specific audience by design.

I've noticed others in the birding community doing this, too. Over time, I've seen a creative shift on the birding outing to accommodate our specific demographic groups, our interest in combining outdoor pursuits with birding, and our love for food and beverage as endnotes for a day of birding, as examples. These novel takes are mostly initiated by individuals and can take place within a birding tradition or outside of it as something new.

This story focuses on contributions that build on or depart altogether from



the structure of an existing bird-focused gathering, be it a bird walk, field trip, or Birding Big Day—what we did to make it happen, the perspectives of those who participated, and suggestions for how to organize a birding gathering of your own. The four examples are just that—examples—of directions and themes to

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draw on for building our community of people who love birds, and one another.

### 1 Identity • The Streets is Cawing

Atlanta, Georgia-based birder Corvida Raven photographs birds as @Birdingwhileblack on Instagram, cultivating an online and in-person

community locally among other regional birders, in particular Black women birders.

"In-person connections can start within established organizations," she says. "We find each other on bird walks, and make a more personal connection as women of color outside the larger

• These satisfied birders, guided by Corvida Raven, enjoyed a fine time afield during spring migration at Atlanta's Piedmont Park on Apr. 24, 2022. Left to right: Erica Nesmith, Teresa Beavers, Corvida Raven, Janay Washington, and Vanessa Miot. Photo by © Corvida Raven.

group. I'm aware of the tension of being one of the few people of color in a [birding] space, and I go with who I know and who looks like me."

She organized her first informal women of color birding walk with three women she met through the Tropical Audubon Society in Miami, Florida, where she lived at the time. That resulted in her first trip to the Everglades with her new friends.

"We just made plans and made it happen," she says.

Upon moving to Atlanta, she observed initial efforts at reaching her demographic of birders: walks led by ornithologist Corina Newsome through the parks department, and an event appealing to young Black women and girls through organizer Courtney Akinosho (an outing also joined by Newsome).

"These were one-off events that I was excited to show up for," says Raven. "They've died down a bit since. I assume because life happens and event planning can be hard work."

But not so hard she couldn't try picking up the feather herself. Raven gathered friends for relaxed bird walks in Atlanta, and, with encouragement from her birder friend Vanessa Miot, quickly decided to organize something more formal for the Black birding community there. Thus was born the Streets is Cawing (@thestreetsiscawing in Instagram), Raven's vessel for catching the wave of momentum she saw among Black birders to bird together.

"I want to make sure people know this group is for and by Black people who appreciate nature. Sometimes, being open to everyone can cloud the

intent around who a space is for and aims to be of service to," she says.

The Streets is Cawing's first walk, Take Flight, took place in Sept. 2023 at Atlanta's Piedmont Park, with a brunch afterwards, the brunch being intentional.

"I wanted to provide space to debrief and connect that wasn't in the parking lot," Raven says. "It's a struggle to pay attention to a bird and also try to pay attention to the people you're with and the great conversation you were having with them before the bird appeared. I wanted to create that space after the walk."

She reports that the brunch was the perfect close to an intentionally relaxed morning of birding, and her community is already asking when the next The Streets is Cawing will Take Flight again.



## 2 Appetite • A Birding Tailgate

I, too, observe that birders gotta eat, and I plan accordingly.

Over a lifetime of annual all-day birding trips to Skagit Co., Washington, I've planned a menu as robust as the birding itinerary. Not only is it fun to bring a picnic to the midday stop at Bay View State Park, but Skagit is also a destination agricultural area with farm stands and food-related small businesses ranging from bakeries to shellfish farming.

"I loved stopping for oysters as part of birding along Samish Bay. I'd never shucked oysters before! Though I'm not gonna lie, those oysters later made me sick! I maybe should have put more lemon juice on them," says Tiffany Adams, a participant in an all-women birding tailgate I organized in Mar. 2019.

I pitched the outing as an all-day, women-only potluck birding tailgate to a Seattle-area women's birding Facebook group which I administrated at the time, capping the head count to 10—including me and my cohost, sister Gilia Angell, so we could keep it to two cars for greater socializing. I also reached out directly to friends like Adams, whose company I wanted for the trip. Adams lived in Seattle and didn't have a car, and a trip like this would give her access to birding spots she couldn't otherwise get to.

"I really wanted to go," she says.

Already an experienced birder on the East Coast, Adams had not yet birded beyond the Seattle city limits and was eager to see more of the state.

"My main incentive was to hang out with other birders and see new habitats," she says. "I think about birding

not just as a way to get out into nature, but also a way to connect with other people who share the same interest."

Participants that day were bird-curious friends and acquaintances, ranging in age from 27 to 60, with various birding experiences, ready for a day of casual, non-competitive birding, making new friends, and enjoying food and beverage as part of the experience. It didn't hurt that we saw birds at every food stop, from the bakery where thousands of Snow Geese flew over as we piled into our cars to the final stop of Taylor Shellfish Farms, where we drank Prosecco and resigned ourselves to not identifying the gulls along the shore.

What I promised for the day was exactly what was delivered, according to Adams, who loved incorporating treats, hiking, joking, and "the togetherness of women just being ourselves."

• Sisters Bryony Angell and Gilia Angell led a women's "birding tailgate" in Washington state's Skagit Valley on Mar. 2, 2019. Below: Meg Schmitt (red hat), Tiffany Adams (beige hat), and Julie Kloss (black hat) scan for waterfowl. Opposite page: The whole group. Photos courtesy of © Bryony Angell.



### 3 Activity • Bike and Kayak Birding

For some birders, combining physical activity with an even broader purpose beyond birding prompts memorable group efforts. Josiah M. T. Clark of San Francisco, California, is a longtime advocate of carbon-neutral birding, combining biking, hiking, and kayaking to gather bird data across the Bay Area of the state where he lives.

Clark's birding excursions are not for beginners, nor the slower-paced, and the range of activities is a means to an end for gathering bird data.

"I was given one of the challenging areas to cover one year," he says of the 2011 Point Reyes Christmas Bird Count, one of many he's participated in. "Two of the critical areas of the count were best accessed by small craft, paddling up narrow waterways on private property of canyon country

to cliffs where we might see Rufous-crowned Sparrows. If you have a large area to cover and not a lot of time, a kayak helps."

Clark's ebullience and imagination makes for a memorable experience for those who join him. Steve Phillips of La Conner, Washington, had occasion to both bike and kayak bird with Clark. Phillips, who lived in San Francisco at the time, accompanied Clark on an ambitious 2012 Green Big Day, a purposely carbon-neutral version of the Big Day. They cycled the entire day and tallied 161 species for Marin Co.

"Josiah planned the route," says Phillips. "We covered about 100 miles by bike, not a lot of rest. Josiah has boundless energy and is very motivated by the natural world. He brings it!"

Clark later beat his own record, re-

cording 187 species with Rob Furrow for the 2015 Bike Big Day.

"It's a fast and furious adventure," says Phillips. "When I was paddling with Josiah, the birding was secondary because you have to be mindful of the conditions of the water."

But carbon-neutral birding is a rich experience.

"The birds will be right next to you, that's the most profound thing I remember, seeing Marbled Murrelets close to us at Baker Beach in San Francisco," Phillips says. "The kayaks are like a blind."

For Clark, however, the social connection might be secondary to the data collection, depending on the purpose of the day.

"You can do social stuff later in the day," he says. "I put the best birders in the best areas by themselves without disturbance. We'll all be together at the



end. Everyone comes back with huge grins on their faces.”

What Clark fosters is a memorable physical experience of birding that intensifies the social connection afterwards. No one who’s joined him ever forgets it.

COUNTERCLOCKWISE FROM OPPOSITE PAGE:

- Birding buddies Josiah M. T. Clark and Steve Phillips get started on a Marin Co., California, Big Day on Apr. 4, 2012.
- Clark and Phillips’s Big Day was “green”—by bike only.
- The tandem closes in on the shore—and Clark spots a California Quail.
- Birders gotta eat!
- The day wears on, and the pace picks up!
- By the end of the day, the duo had recorded 161 bird species, at the time a “green” Big Day record for Marin Co. *Photos courtesy of © Steve Phillips and © Josiah M. T. Clark.*



## 4 Age • Kindergarten Birding Scavenger Hunt

In my experience, if you're a vociferous birder and a parent, you may have been asked to lead a birding outing for kids at some point. I've resisted this for years, regarding birding as my grownup fun, separate from my parenting. But I credit my kids for the friendships I have made with other parents, and considered organizing

something for all of us to enjoy together. Enter the friends with kindergartners birding scavenger hunt!

Although this was my first try at a kid-included birding walk, I knew enough to limit it to a specific age group of kids and manage the invitations to caregiver friends accordingly. This would be a private event for a first go. My friend Michelle Schopp, who's a community outreach coor-

dinator for a Wild Birds Unlimited store in Yorktown, Virginia, suggested occupying the kids with a scavenger hunt, and shared the one she'd used for one of her store's events.

I chose Wiley Slough in Skagit Co., Washington, a wildlife area within a 30-minute drive for most of the guests, a place with good visibility, flat trails, ample parking, and easy-to-see birds. Our destination hosted ducks, Bald Eagles, Snow Geese, and Trumpeter Swans on that November day in 2022. I set the kids up with bags for the scavenger hunt to find nesting materials and foodstuffs birds might eat, and off they ran, along a mile of elevated dike trail, leaving the parents to socialize and eBird.

The two-hour amble started at 10am to accommodate these parents of five-year-olds and six-year-olds on a Sunday morning.

"You curated a list of people with interest, friendliness, who would want to come out and you considered how they would all interact with each other," says Jen Willup, who participated in the event, along with her son, Ivan. "The kids loved having something to do, and I didn't feel like I needed to be a serious birder to enjoy it."

As I mentioned earlier, birders gotta eat, especially parents of elementary school-age kids on a Sunday morning.

"The coffee and muffins you brought elevated it to an event more than a casual get-together," says Willup, referring to the home-baked provisions laid out in the trunk of my Ford Escape as everyone arrived in the parking lot.

In the end, the kids were more enamored of the still-edible blackberries at the end of the trail than they were of any birds, and everyone enjoyed themselves and talked to someone new.

"A leader can be someone to turn to, but in a group like this with looser structure we got to learn from each other," says Willup. "You have to know your audience. It would never have

## How to Organize Your Own Intentional Birding Outing

Here are some basics to consider before, during, and after an outing, suggested by the folks in this story and gleaned from *The Art of Gathering*:

### Before

- What is something I can offer my community that will excite new birders?
- What do I want out of this and what do I hope my participants will get out of this?
- Who is my audience? Be specific. For example, women on local Facebook birding group; parents with kindergarten-aged children; and Black birders in Atlanta.
- Is there another similar style of gathering whose outline and purpose I could mimic and tweak for my intent?
- Is this a physically accessible birding trip? Be specific.
- How big of a group can I manage and how will we get around?
- What ground rules will be necessary to keep the outing true to its purpose?
- Does my event description contain details to help potential audiences recognize themselves and want to join me?
- How will I get the word out?

### During

- Are there any potential diversions I've identified ahead of time or upon meeting my group that might impact the purpose of the gathering? For example, weather, last-minute added-on guests, and late arrivals.
- Am I sticking to the purpose of the gathering as communicated to the group ahead of time, or am I allowing for diversion and distraction?
- How do I feel as the leader? Am I comfortable communicating the intent of the gathering, or am I being influenced by group dynamics?
- Have I identified details in real time that may help me the next time I do this?

### After

- Am I satisfied with the outcome of the event? Was the purpose met?
- Have I invited feedback from participants? How do I respond?
- What will I do the same or different next time?

worked to lecture to this group!"

Our kids are now older, and happily this same group of parents is still connected. I imagine organizing more outings like this for our growing fledglings in the years to come.

The secret to a successful intentional birding gathering is for participants to identify as the intended audience and to feel that they've been included in something special *for who they are*—with helpful prompts from a dedicated, thoughtful organizer. That takes a birding experience to the next level, connecting as humans doing something we love. And it doesn't have to be high stakes! Organizers can simply be ourselves, sharing what we know we can do with people who want to try it, too.

### Resources for Designing a Birding Outing

*The Art of Gathering: How we Meet and Why It Matters*, by Priya Parker, argues that a gathering is a richer experience when vigorously intentional. While her

book applies to a range of gatherings from corporate retreats and conferences to dinner parties with friends, Parker urges unapologetic “niching down” to give obvious purpose and structure to the participants for any gathering. The success of a gathering is determined long before anyone arrives by providing an intentional and clearly communicated specific purpose, promising a safe space for participants, and laying out a reliable structure for the organizer to follow. The idea that not everyone might find a gathering appealing is by design.

*Find More Birds: 111 Surprising Ways to Spot Birds Wherever You Are*, by Heather Wolf, offers a variety of ways to discover birds, including an entire chapter dedicated to “Finding Birds While Doing Something Else.” Her photo-packed book includes potential group outing ideas such as birding at a local zoo, visiting a playground, hitting golf balls, and birding while camping. 🐾

● On a brisk day, Nov. 13, 2022, kids and parents—and a dog—assembled for lighthearted yet purposefully organized birding at Wiley Slough in the Skagit Valley of Washington state. Photo by © Bryony Angell.

