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PART ONE — Ages 6-12

Introduction

Kids are wonderful. They not only have the great capacity to learn, but they want to learn. Everything around them is new and exciting. Take a kid birding and you not only provide the opportunity to teach a child new things, but you afford yourself the opportunity to share in the same excitement of learning when nearly everything was brand new and interesting.

This guide will provide a starting point to ensure you have a good time birding with a child (or children). By no means is this guide all inclusive, but it will certainly help enhance a child's appreciation of nature, turn them into a birder, and provide future generations with the conservationists we so desperately need.

While this guide is intended for kids aged 6 to 12, younger kids are always welcome to learn about animals and nature.

Part two of this book is dedicated to teenagers, ages 13-19. It has a more intense focus on topics like photography, conservation and advanced birding.

Section 1 — Getting Started

Preparation before you venture into the outdoors is important to having a successful and fun time. There is a balance between packing too much and not having the right stuff. Mostly, it is better to pack a bit heavy than to forgo some of the more useful items. Although you do not need to go overboard either and make hiking miserable.

1.1 – What to include in a backpack/daypack

To help in your packing here's a checklist of important items that can easily fit in a normal backpack without bogging you down:

1. Water!! - make sure to have at least 20 ounces of water for every person and more if it is hot or you are hiking for more than 30 minutes to an hour.
2. First aid kit – a small “camper's” first aid kit is fine. Make sure it is stocked with items to deal with scrapes and cuts, insect and snake bites, bee stings, and ice packs.
3. Cell phone – don't leave it in the car!

4. Map of the area you plan to hike
5. Snacks – nothing that is sticky or would make a mess.
6. Bird book (field guide) – we discuss these in much greater detail later in this section.
7. Notebooks and pens – it is a good idea to write down observations while in the field and also provides a good reason to stop and take a break from hiking.
8. Sunscreen – good idea even on cloudy days
9. Insect repellent – if season dictates
10. Any other child-specific items like medication

No matter how much you pack it is important to always consider functionality of what you bring. Pack more water the first time out and make sure to drink often. Bring extra snacks and take more breaks. For the first few outings you can skip bringing a field guide and maybe just have one small notebook.

The overall goal isn't to turn every birding hike into a grand expedition but instead to be prepared every time you go and it will become second nature. Having tons of stuff doesn't make a birding trip great. It's all about having the right stuff.

1.2 – What to Wear

Any outdoor activity can be greatly enhanced by making sure you have the proper gear. There are so many choices of brands and types of gear and you can easily spend a small fortune equipping your child with the latest and greatest gear. But that is highly unnecessary.

What we recommend is focusing on some of the truly essential gear and moving to other stuff as you see fit. The most important consideration is comfort. If the gear doesn't provide support, warmth, relaxed fit, etc. the journey in the great outdoors will be short-lived.

Boots or sturdy, durable shoes are a good starting point. Birding requires a lot of walking over uneven terrain as well as a great deal of standing in one position. Boots are best if you plan on hiking in a lot of tall, wet grassed areas or muddy trails. They need to be high enough to avoid water cresting over the top as well as waterproof throughout. Wet feet equal bad experience.

For “regular” birding and hiking good shoes are fine. They need not be waterproof but should provide a lot of support and darker colors will provide a longer lasting good look. Some new brands of shoes offer waterproof sneakers or walking shoes that work perfect for birding. If they can be thrown in the washing machine, even better. Sandals, flip-flops, etc. should be avoided since they attract small rocks and sunburn on exposed feet.

For outerwear, layers work best. You can always remove a jacket or sweatshirt but if you go into the field in a t-shirt and it starts to rain, the level of misery will rise quickly. Jeans or other long pants are also a must if you plan on walking through grassy areas or it is a buggy time of year. Shorts do not provide enough cooling to compensate for itchy legs.

Hats and sunscreen are also musts. Even on cloudy days, spending hours in the field without a hat can torture your eyes and sunburn happens even on overcast days. An added bonus for wearing a hat: no worries of messy hair from waking at the crack of dawn.

Hot weather can come up on kids and become a dangerous problem rather quickly. Many kids don't realize they are feeling the effects of the heat until it is too late.

Heat exhaustion can lead to much worse problems and should never be taken lightly.

Here are seasonal checklists for what to wear based on our northern Illinois climate.

Spring

- Hat
- Long-sleeves
- T-shirt
- Rain-resistant jacket
- Long pants
- Comfy socks
- Sturdy walking shoes or boots

If there has been recent rain, hiking boots that go past the ankle can provide extra support and keep feet dry if there is any standing water/mud on trails. Throwing in an extra pair of socks is a good idea too for avoiding wet feet.

Summer

- Hat
- Cooling bandana (soak in cold water before hiking trip)
- T-shirt
- Long-sleeves (especially if buggy out)
- Long pants – we highly recommend not wearing shorts on a hike because it reduces bug bites, sunburn, and potential for poison ivy or other plant related itchiness
- Socks
- Sturdy walking shoes or boots

If there has been recent rain, hiking boots that go past the ankle can provide extra support and keep feet dry if there is any standing water/mud on trails. Throwing in an extra pair of socks is a good idea too for avoiding wet feet.

Fall

- Hat
- T-shirt
- Long-sleeves
- Sweatshirt
- Long pants
- Socks
- Sturdy walking shoes or boots

Winter

Stocking cap
Balaclava (ski mask or other that covers more of the face)
Long-sleeves
Hoody
Long underwear
Long pants
Snow pants
Winter jacket
Gloves or mittens
Warm socks
Snow boots

Just because it is cold out doesn't mean you can't go for a bird hike. Bring extra pairs of socks, extra gloves, and hand and feet warmers to ensure extra comfort. Just don't bundle up so much that walking is uncomfortable. Once you get moving and keep moving staying warm is much easier.

1.3 Binoculars

Binoculars [also called bins, binocs, field glasses, optics] are one of the most important items in birding and also one of the most difficult for kids to use. Big and bulky binoculars are often cumbersome to use. But high-end binoculars can cost over \$1000 (or more). So how do you choose a pair for a kid that may or may not enjoy using them?

For starting out, a good, inexpensive pair will be sufficient. There are several good ones between \$80-\$150 that will work well enough, especially with young eyes. Some may see this as a pretty big cost for an activity that can be done pretty much anywhere and with out much effort (watching birds) but considering how much other sports cost, this is a good deal for an activity that can easily last a lifetime.

We feel that avoiding ultra-cheap, ineffective bins will have a longtime, positive gain. If the optics don't work well enough to see moving birds you've already lost the young birder to boredom. Binoculars are easy to work and the price differences are directly related to how clear an image you'll see, along with the magnification, field-of-view, and to a lesser extent, how durable they are.

Note: much of the cost of optics is related to how the lenses are coated. The higher quality, better coatings cost more and last longer while the lower quality are the opposite.

Magnification varies a great deal. The best options are 7x, 8x or 10x. It is a common mistake to try to get a pair with a larger magnification, say 15x, but this actually makes it harder to see birds clearly because it is too difficult to handhold a pair steady. Spotting scopes, used to see far away birds, have 20x and more magnification but are almost always mounted on a tripod so are not as prone to unsteady shaking.

Make sure before heading into the field the bins are adjusted properly including the strap, and that the bins are comfortable around the neck of the child. This will help ensure the trip isn't cut short because of discomfort. Explain that the bins aren't a toy but a tool. This is yet another reason not to use cheap and often plastic, colorful bins.

Our recommendation is to check out Eagle Optics' "Technical Guide" [<http://www.eagleoptics.com/articles/technical-guide/>] as they have an amazing array of choices and recommendations on which bins will fit your budget. In popular birding magazines there are numerous articles (almost in every issue) explaining in great detail the latest optics so this is another great place to check. (See Appendix A for some excellent birding magazines.)