



Cornell site is for the birds

University's lab gives expert advice for bird watchers of all levels

KEVIN O'NEILL / STAFF ARTIST

This week's website was brought to my attention by our newsroom's journalism style guru and birding enthusiast, Ron Davis. The site, www.birds.cornell.edu, is the Web presence of The Cornell Lab of Ornithology.

Ron suggested that this site would be timely since May is the month with the greatest variety of birds in our region. This is due to the return of all the species that winter in the south, as well as the migratory transients that are passing through on their way to higher latitudes.

The loud honking, chirping, quacking and woodpecking that wakes me early each morning this time of year seems to support Ron's thesis. I live at a lake, and every spring brings an influx of waterfowl of all shapes and sizes, in addition to the robins and other familiar birds. Most of the geese are just passing through, but a variety of ducks stay all summer. The great blue herons stalk the shoreline again, and the hummingbirds frequent my neighbor's feeders. The last several years we've had a pair of bald eagles making occasional visits. Rafter of turkeys emerge from the woods, and the turkey vultures feast on the spring fish die-off.

Authoritative and useful

Ron likes this site above other birding sites because of the reputation for excellence of Cornell's animal science programs, and the features it offers to help identify birds. You can search for information on various birds by name, shape or taxonomic order. Clicking on a bird in the search section brings up photos, descriptions, information, audio of the bird's call, and in some cases video. Ron says the audio is one of his favorite features because sometimes

you hear a bird, but don't see it. In years past, you could buy a CD, or even further back a cassette, of bird calls. You'd have to fast forward and rewind over and over to isolate a single call for comparison. The website makes it much easier.

For experts and beginners

Even though there's lots of scientific information and jargon on the site, it's also geared to beginning birders. There's a section called "Birding Basics" with lots of advice to help novices build their bird-watching skills. It includes tips on identifying, attracting and photographing birds. A map locates the staff's favorite places around the country for spotting our feathered friends. A frequently asked questions area rounds out the section.

The "Living Bird" section of the site is subdivided into 14 different categories: Bird Videos, Round Robin, Magazine, BirdScope, Birds, Birding, Photography, Reviews, Science, Conservation, Travel, People, Art and History. Some of the categories overlap in subject matter and should be combined, like Birds and Birding, or Science and Conservation. There are hundreds of links to avian articles, videos and some spectacular photo galleries. Blogs and a quarterly newsletter help to keep things current. Some of the links take you off the site, which can be annoying.

Birds of a feather

Birders apparently enjoy being part of a flock, since the site depends heavily on the participation of members. "Citizen Science" is a program that utilizes volunteers to collect data on bird populations, migrations and behaviors around the globe. The research is used to help craft national policy on issues such as global warming, West Nile virus, land use and conservation.

Throughout the year, there are many birding events, such as the Great Backyard Bird Count or the World Series of Birding, that draw enthusiasts from near and far. Some of the events are competitive with the winners taking great pride in seeing more birds than anyone else. Several "NestCams" on the site allow you to bird watch without ever leaving your chair.

Although the ornithology lab is run and staffed by Cornell University, with access to top-of-the-line resources, it is technically a nonprofit organization supported by donors. There are numerous pitches on the site for financial support, either in the form of a donation, or memberships that range from \$35 for the "Supporter" level to \$5,000 for the "Chairman's Council."

Cornell did a very good job with its website. It's very well designed, with a prominent slide show on the home page featuring top notch photos. The content is organized logically and the navigation is intuitive, though with some redundancies.

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