

BETTER BIRDING WITH DFO

How to Get the Most Out of Your
Denver Field Ornithologists
Field Trip



DFO Field Trip Committee
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Introduction

So you're going on a Denver Field Ornithologists (DFO) field trip. This guide will help you get the most out of your time birding with others.

What to Expect

The goal of a birding field trip, as you would expect, is to see and hear birds. The tips in this document will help you and the rest of the group to see as many birds as possible and learn more about them along the way. People come on DFO trips for a variety of reasons: to see birds, observe bird behavior, explore new places, meet likeminded people, add new species to their life list, and to unwind after a long work week.

There are different types of birding trips and the trip description should give you a sense of the kind of birding you will be doing: hiking, driving, photography, perhaps looking for a particular species, or just enjoying what comes your way. Trip leaders will be working hard to ensure that everyone knows what is going on, stays safe, enjoys the birds, learns, and has fun. You and your fellow participants will be spotting birds, sharing knowledge, and enjoying the outdoors.

All types of birders come on DFO trips including beginners, social birders, listers, photographers, behaviorists, and those who simply enjoy being outdoors. Excellent bird-identification skills don't necessarily make for a great trip, but everyone's willingness to come prepared with a positive attitude almost certainly does. Successful trips are collaborations between the leader and the participants.

This guide is based on a survey of DFO's experienced trip leaders. We hope it will be useful to anyone going on a birding field trip, whether or not it is with DFO.

Types of DFO Field Trips

DFO birding field trips fall into several categories. The trip description will clearly describe the type of trip. If you are unsure if the trip is right for you or if you are uncertain of a term used in the description, please contact the leader and ask questions.

Local half-day: By far the most common field trip offered is a half-day trip at a location in or near the Greater Denver area. A relaxed pace usually characterizes these trips. Typically a morning is spent observing birds. Preparation for this type of trip is minimal and includes proper clothing (layers), appropriate footwear, a hat, sunscreen, water, snacks, and binoculars. A daypack or fanny pack should be sufficient to hold sundries including a field guide.

All-day: Full day trips are also frequently scheduled. They require more endurance but often end up with a much longer list of birds seen. They may be walking trips and/or car caravans. Preparation is more extensive as participants need to plan for lunch and varied weather conditions. Driving may be extensive (300 or more miles in a day).

Specialty: DFO occasionally offers specialized field trips. These include multi-day trips to Rocky Mountain National Park, overnight trips to the eastern plains for prairie birds, photography workshops for bird-loving photographers, owling hikes in winter, and snowshoeing adventures to search for ptarmigan on Guanella Pass. Sometimes field trip leaders will schedule a "chase trip" to follow reports of rare birds.

Part I: Preparing for a Field Trip

Find the right trip and get set to go

From the DFO website or *The Lark Bunting*, select a trip that you would like to take and sign up by registering online or contacting the leader. You need not be a DFO member to take advantage of our trips.

If you have questions about the trip, contact the leader for further clarification. That way your expectations will be more likely to match those of the leader. Be sure to let the leader know if you have a medical condition such as a pacemaker, severe allergies, or any other special issues or concerns.

Prepare a target list

DFO field trips are designed to work for birders of all skill and knowledge levels. If you are serious about improving your skills, we recommend that you do some studying before you get to the trailhead.

Look through your field guide so that you know what birds to expect for the habitat and time of year. Check the COBirds listserv and the eBird website to see historical as well as recent reports from the area(s) you will be visiting. Make a list of the target birds you are most interested in viewing and learn their field marks, characteristic behavior patterns, habitat preferences, and vocalizations. Pay attention to variation. A warbler may be in nonbreeding plumage; a sparrow may be in a mixed flock of juveniles during fall migration.

Bring the right clothing and gear

One reason birding is a great hobby is that it requires comparatively little in the way of specialized or expensive gear. We do recommend appropriate footwear such as boots with traction soles and ankle support, layers of warm clothing, a hat or visor, sunscreen, binoculars, and water. That's it.

Of course, extras will enhance your experience. Easy-to-eat snacks or meals are often a necessity. A spotting scope is often useful to observe distant birds. A camera will help you document sightings and scenery. A field guide is great for quick reference. A notebook is handy for keeping a list and sketches. A smart phone loaded with birding apps can aid you in myriad ways. Bring any personal items such as medications. Pack in such a way that you can be in and out of your car without a lot of fuss.

Dress according to weather conditions. It is sometimes a balancing act to figure out exactly what you need and what might otherwise bog you down. Realize that it may be a long walk back to the car if you need more clothing. Most experienced birders have developed a system of layers to meet a variety of contingencies. Always err on the side of having too much warm clothing.

Birds cue in on colors. Make an effort to blend in with your surroundings by selecting neutral colors and earth tones. Clothing that rustles or makes other noises can flush birds out of an area before you ever get to see them.

Arrive ready to roll

Arrive at the meeting location fifteen minutes early. Most groups will be eager to start birding in the morning's most productive hour, so they usually will not wait more than a few minutes for

stragglers. If you know you are going to be late, call the leader on their cellphone. Sometimes the group may be willing to wait a few extra minutes; other times you may be asked to meet up at a secondary location,

For car caravanning trips, arrive at the meeting place with a full tank of gas. Even if you do not plan to drive you may be called upon to do so. Bring walkie-talkies if you have them for car-to-car communication.

Have your gear packed ahead of time. If you will be traveling in someone else's car, organize it so that you can easily transfer between cars. Lots of small items can be gathered in a tote bag or backpack, which will also help to keep from misplacing belongings along the way.

Part II: Teamwork

The best birding trips are hallmarked by a good working relationship between the leader and the participants. There are a number of things you can do to help things go well, most of which can be summed up in a single word, “communication.”

Communicate with the leader

Don't be shy—the leader's number one goal is not to rack up the birds, but to address the participants' needs. Ask questions in advance of the trip about logistics, gear, weather, restroom locations, or anything else. At the beginning of the trip, make sure the leader knows your target birds to help you find them.

During the trip, ask questions about the birds you are seeing. The leader is there to teach. If you are unsure what makes the bird in the scope a snipe, ask about its field marks. If you are curious about an Ovenbird's behavior, ask about it. Also, it's perfectly normal to feel hungry or have to go to the bathroom. Let the leader know your needs, especially if you feel faint or sick, to properly accommodate you.

That said, try not to dominate the leader's time so time can be shared with others. Allow the leader space to look and listen for birds. If the leader is listening intently to a bush or scanning a muddy lakebed, hold your question until there is a break in the action.

Find out from the leader the protocol for identifying birds. Some leaders may not want trip attendees to call out the name of the bird to give others a chance to work through the identification. Other leaders may encourage identifications and will not penalize trip participants if they make a wrong identification.

Finally, express appreciation. Leaders work hard and a little gratitude will usually go a long way.

Bird cooperatively

When you are on a DFO field trip, you're a very important person. Of course every other person on the trip is just as important. Trips are most successful when participants find a balance between satisfying their own interests and helping others achieve theirs. Birding cooperatively includes helping others, letting others know when you need help, and being aware of how your actions affect other birders in the group.

If you are the first to see a bird, let others know, especially the leader. Try to describe both the bird and its location (see below for more tips on how to efficiently describe a bird's location). In some situations you should hold back on calling out birds, such as when the leader is trying to share information on a different bird. At the same time, there is nothing worse than hearing someone say, “Did anyone else see that Northern Shrike back there?,” when it is too late for others to see. If you don't see or can't find a bird that others are watching, say something so that they can help you locate it. Ask for clues about its location, size, and shape.

Help others who are having difficulty when the group is watching an interesting bird. Offer observations about the bird's location for those who have not yet seen it and field marks for those unsure about how it is identified. Be aware of where you are standing in relation to others so that you do not block their view. If you have a scope, consider sharing it with others once you've seen the bird. When using someone else's scope, take time to see the bird of interest, but don't hog the scope. Share your field guide.

Use words to describe a bird's location

Any experienced birder will tell you that helping fellow birders locate a bird in a vast landscape, whether in a crowded forest or an open grassland, can be challenging and requires a skill that may be elevated to an art form. Here are some simple suggestions.

- Begin with a distance orientation. Is the bird near, distant, or a mere blip on your radar screen?
- Describe the bird's behavior. Is it flitting around, perched, soaring over a ridge, or feeding on the ground?
- Find a prominent landmark as a reference point. If there's a single tree in a field, then "It's in the tree" does the trick. If there's more than one tree, directions need to be more precise. Does the tree have a large trunk, a skinny trunk, or a distinctive patch of missing bark?
- Give a height perspective. Is the bird near the top of the tree? In the middle? Near the base? For soaring birds, describe their height in the number of "fields of view" above the horizon. One field of view is what you can see through your binoculars in a vertical direction.
- Use a superimposed clock face to describe location in a tree or the sky. A bird at the very top of the tree would be at 12 o'clock. A bird just below the top of the tree might be "About 3 feet below 12 o'clock." A bird on the right side would be at 3 o'clock. The same system works for flying birds.
- Buildings, fence posts, and utility poles can also be landmarks. Is the bird near a building with a distinctive color or distinctive roof? How many fence posts away?
- In open habitats, sometimes changes in vegetation color or type can help pinpoint the location.
- When describing birds in flight, it may be helpful to describe them in relation to cloud formations. Is the bird above the cloud, below the cloud, or somewhere inside the cloud? Features on the ground may also help. Is the bird flying towards you or away?
- As long as others have not seen the bird, try to invent new ways to describe its location. Development of this skill takes a lot of practice.

Respect the leader

DFO leaders undergo significant training to maintain the organization's 80-year tradition of providing quality field trips. They are great birders, but more importantly they are versed in group management, teaching techniques, carpooling strategy, and other applicable issues. Please respect their authority in guiding the trip.

Follow the leader's plan. Second-guessing the leader's birding strategy will only slow and divide the group, so go along with the day's plan. Sometimes a question will arise as to how best to bird a patch of habitat, where to stop on a road, or where to go for lunch. Feel free to offer your opinion, but when the leader has made a final decision, go with it.

Stay with the group. Missing participants create an immediate cause for concern and will stop the trip for everyone. If you must leave the trip early, be sure to personally inform the trip leader.

When you sign up for a field trip, you are committing to be part of a group, which means trading your birding autonomy for the joy of birding with others. Unless it is a photography trip, there will typically not be time to wait for a bird to strike an interesting pose. Wandering ahead can be just

as disruptive as it spooks birds before others have the chance to see them. We have had several incidents of birders putting themselves in harm's way, getting too close to the bird and stressing it, or slowing down the entire trip just because they want the perfect picture. Don't be one of these birders. Be respectful, pictures come second to birding on any nonphotography trip.

In emergencies, do as the leader instructs. Emergencies are best handled with the clarity of a single leading voice, and DFO's leaders are prepared to be that voice in most emergencies.

Share with your fellow participants

Share a positive attitude. When birds are scarce, look for other things to enjoy. Enthusiasm for what is being seen, whether it is the fiftieth robin or a mega-rare jaeger, will make the trip a more fun adventure for everyone.

Assist fellow participants if and when they need help. Share your sunscreen, relay directions, give someone a hand down a steep section of the trail. Contribute your birding skills.

Have fun socializing, but don't go overboard. Remember that the number one goal of a DFO field trip is to see birds. Good communication can aid that effort, but unfocused chatter will distract from the experience. Use an indoor voice; speak softly. Avoid making and taking unnecessary cell phone calls. Quietness is the best predictor for how much wildlife the group will see.

Share carpooling costs. DFO policy is to calculate mileage costs at the rate of \$0.30 per mile. To figure each person's fair share, multiply the number of miles driven by \$0.30 and divide by the number of people in the car. So a 100-mile trip would come to \$30. If there were a driver and three passengers, each would contribute \$30 divided by four, or \$7.50. To make it easy, the driver should set the trip odometer to zero at the beginning of the trip. We encourage drivers to accept payment even if they feel they don't need the reimbursement. They can always donate the payment to the DFO Grants Fund.

Part III: Better Birding

These additional tips and tricks will help you bird more effectively on DFO's field trips as well as any time you go birding with a group. Birding takes practice and requires the development of a collection of skills.

Prepare yourself

Experienced birders see lots of birds not only because they are good at identifying what they are seeing and hearing, but because they are alert to what *might* be seen or heard in a given environment. A field trip will be more rewarding if you study which birds might be seen in the habitats you will be visiting. Use field guides, bird behavior books, eBird's "Explore Hotspots" feature, and the COBirds listserv. The latter two provide historical data including recent visits.

Hoping to find a Red Phalarope for your life list when you take a fall trip to the eastern plains? Memorize the key field marks that distinguish nonbreeding Red Phalarope from Red-necked Phalarope. Hoping to track down an elusive Marsh Wren? Listen to recordings of its call. The more you bird, the more these clues will come to mind when you're in the field.

Study each bird carefully. If you see something that seems inconsistent with a certain species, let the rest of the group know. Often a rare bird will lurk in a flock or masquerade as something much more common. Take time to note the many details of an unusual bird before pronouncing its identification. Expect the unexpected.

Prepare your equipment

Have your equipment ready to go. Clean the optics and make sure you are familiar with how to use them. If you borrow someone else's spotting scope, take a few minutes to understand how the scope and tripod function. Zoom, focus, pan, and tilt features all vary from scope to scope.

Be stealthy

Integral to the predator/prey relationship, birds are sensitive to sound and motion. That's why DFO trip leaders emphasize the importance of keeping voices to a low level. Avoid walking on dry leaves, calling out to other participants, or opening a granola bar when waiting for a sneaky warbler to show itself. It can be very hard not to shout when you spot an interesting bird, but try to let the others know in a way that won't scare it away.

One of the hardest reactions to suppress is the instinct to raise your arm and point at a bird. While the movement might not bother a gull a quarter-mile away, it will almost certainly send a nearby vireo diving into the brush. That's why learning to use words to describe a bird's location is such a valuable skill.

Staying with the group allows everyone to see the birds that are around. The group will be annoyed if someone who charged ahead returns to report: "Wow! I just had a heart-stopping Prothonotary Warbler up ahead, but it flew across the river."

Minimize disturbance to the birds

As birders, we have a responsibility to protect the resource that we enjoy. Our observations of birds create an awareness of their habits, habitats, distribution, and population trends. We open a

window into the challenges that birds face. On field trips, we should make every effort to observe them without disturbing their lives.

Within the birding community, the use of recorded bird vocalizations to draw certain species into view is a particularly sensitive issue; birders harbor a wide range of opinions as to whether using recorded calls is ethical or not. DFO generally discourages the practice but ultimately leaves the choice to the leader's discretion. If you are tempted to use playback, check with the leader first. If you feel like the leader is using too much playback, discuss it in private rather than creating a debate in front of the group.

Avoid approaching birds too closely, particularly during breeding season. Use your best judgment about how close is too close, but in general if a bird flushes you were too close.

A word on safety

Enjoy your birding safely. No bird is worth seeing if you might have an accident. In the USA 55,000 people die every year in traffic accidents. When carpooling, we add a significant element of risk. People tend to follow too closely. They may be looking more for birds than on the road where there are likely innumerable distractions. However, it is definitely possible to participate in a great field trip and do it safely.

To ensure a safe and secure trip, please adhere to the following expectations:

- Do not exceed the legal speed limit.
- Leave at least 2 seconds of time between you and the vehicle ahead of you.
- Do not stop to bird on a busy street.
- Park only in legal areas where there is no risk of accidents.
- Focus on driving at all times and let passengers look for birds.
- Do not distract the driver.
- If walkie-talkies are being used on the trip, ensure a passenger does all the communicating.
- Do not trespass on any private land. If the trip leader chooses to go into a questionable area, please point this out and then report it back to DFO.
- Do not assume that dogs are friendly. If you come across a canine while birding, assume it is not friendly to avoid a potentially nasty bite.
- When birding on foot, always evaluate your travel path and make sure you do not step blindly into a potential hazard.
- Bring all necessities such as water, sun screen, insect repellent, etc.
- Dress in layers. Heat exhaustion and hypothermia are real concerns in Colorado, sometimes even on the same day.

Part IV: After the Field Trip

Debrief the adventure

Back in the parking lot at the end of a trip is a great time to gather as a group and debrief the trip. Some participants may need to leave immediately, which is certainly fine, while you may want to go over the list of species seen, compare notes, ask lingering questions, consult a field guide, or inquire more deeply into a particular sighting. This is also a great time for the group to share the day's most memorable highlights.

A good field trip will inevitably inspire questions for further research. Perhaps you saw a strangely plumaged Northern Shoveler or a migrant flycatcher gleaning insects on the forest floor. Don't hesitate to ask the leader for references such as books and websites that might help you learn more about the things that piqued your interest.

Share photos and the eBird list

During the trip, you can make arrangements to exchange photos with other participants. We encourage you to share your photos with the wider DFO community by posting them on the DFO Facebook page (<https://www.facebook.com/groups/dfobirds/>). The Facebook page is also perfectly suited to sharing the results of your post-trip research, as it may foster a discussion of the things you observed.

The leader will offer to share the trip's official eBird list with any participants who have an account. Once you have accepted the list into your account, you can delete any birds you missed during the trip (which will not affect anyone else's version of the list). If you do not have an eBird account, let the leader know and a printed list of the birds you saw will be forwarded to you.

Join Denver Field Ornithologists

Finally, if at the end of a successful field trip you feel inspired and wish to continue participating in the organization as an active birder, this would be the time to join DFO. DFO has been running highly respected field trips for more than 80 years. Today we also offer monthly member meetings with fascinating speakers, the monthly newsletter *The Lark Bunting*, opportunities to get involved with bird conservation, and other special events. We encourage you to join in the fun.

Appendix A: Participant Guidelines

These guidelines are condensed from *Better Birding with DFO: How to Get the Most Out of Your Denver Field Ornithologists Field Trip*. We urge you to read the full guidelines to understand what trip participants should be able to expect from each other and what leaders will expect from participants. You'll also find tips that will improve your birding skills.

Preparing for a Field Trip

- ✓ Find the right trip and register online or contact the leader
- ✓ Prepare a target list
- ✓ Bring the right clothing and gear
- ✓ Arrive early and ready to roll

Teamwork

- ✓ Communicate with the leader
- ✓ Bird cooperatively
- ✓ Use words to describe a bird's location
- ✓ Respect the leader
- ✓ Share with your teammates
- ✓ Stay with the group

Better Birding

- ✓ Before the trip, prepare your mind and equipment
- ✓ Be stealthy: Minimize talk and movement
- ✓ Minimize disturbance of the birds
- ✓ Practice safe driving and birding

After the Field Trip

- ✓ Debrief the adventure
- ✓ Share photos and the eBird list
- ✓ Join Denver Field Ornithologists