

# Nature Notes, November 2023

## Early Birding Experiences

By Guy Wapple

I recently celebrated my fiftieth anniversary of birdwatching, or as most people now refer to it, birding.

Back in 1973, it wasn't the most popular hobby, but during the past few decades, birding as a "sport" certainly has grown by leaps and bounds.

Earlier that summer, I had purchased a pair of 7x35 Tasco binoculars from Sears, and the 'classic' Peterson Field Guides, (both the Eastern and Western versions), not to mention the valuable Golden Guide to Birds of North America by Robbins, Bruun and Zim.

Shortly after turning 16, I began birdwatching full time in and around my hometown of Biggar. On October 11, 1973, I entered my first 'official' species "A pair of Pine Siskins in the Mountain Ash from 5 ft." into the pages of a Hilroy 3-Subject "spiral" notebook.

While initially some bird families were indeed challenging to identify, I knew I had found my passion. Little did I know how this sometimes-crazy hobby would eventually take over my life.

From the very beginning I was interested in keeping lists of species seen from sites such as our yard, nearby Queen Elizabeth Park, the airport slough (just south of town), "Cooper's Lake" (west of town), etc., etc. This obsession of recording bird observations during my daily life has continued to this very day!

Although most of my sightings are from Saskatchewan, I have been fortunate to visit B.C., Alberta, Manitoba, Ontario, Quebec and Nova Scotia, not to mention twelve U.S. states. I also have bird lists for Tahiti, Costa Rica and Panama, as well as the Netherlands, Belgium and France. Several of these visits were on family-oriented vacations. However, as I always say: "They may not be dedicated birding trips, but birds will be seen!"

Since 1985, most of my sightings have been faithfully logged onto 8.5 x 11-inch sheets of graph paper by my ever-patient wife, Sandra, as we've travelled various



Pine Siskin

Photo by Nick Saunders

highways and byways. As a result, there are thousands of bird records currently sitting in a dusty file cabinet waiting to be entered into a program called eBird.

Launched in 2002 by the Cornell Lab of Ornithology, eBird is a collaborative enterprise with dozens of partner organizations, thousands of regional experts/referees, and hundreds of thousands of users.

Originally designed for use in North America, eBird has expanded into a global database, with the observations of tens of thousands of "citizen scientists" contributing to bird distribution patterns. This dataset has proven to be extremely valuable in helping move bird conservation efforts forward.

The current statistics are impressive, to say the least, with 10,828 bird species reported on over 85 MILLION checklists from 900,000-plus birders! After years of procrastination, I began using the program full-time since 2017 and now am officially obsessed with it.

Once you set up a profile, "eNerd" (the nickname I use!), is free. You then can submit as many sightings as you wish. There is also an excellent, easy-to-download phone app which keeps track of the birds everywhere you go.

Today's constantly evolving technology makes it easy to enjoy the wonders of our natural world. In fact, the good old days of a physical field guide, notebook, pencil, and eraser are rapidly becoming a distant memory. Especially for an old dinosaur like me!

Having said all that, a good pair of binoculars is still essential to enjoy birding.

*Guy Wapple is a member of the Saskatoon Nature Society (SNS). All are welcome to participate in SNS field trips. Check [www.saskatoonnature.org/scheduled-trips/](http://www.saskatoonnature.org/scheduled-trips/) to see what's planned.*