

5 Must-read tips for winter birdwatching

Winter is a great time to go birdwatching in Massachusetts. Don't miss our 5 must-read tips to ensure you have a great experience outside this winter.

“You go birdwatching in winter? Are you nuts? It’s too cold, windy, and snowy!” “Don’t birds fly south for the winter?” These are some common responses from people who may be questioning your sanity when you mention looking for birds in winter. Winter might seem to be a bust for birding, but there are great opportunities for beginner and veteran birders to spot our year-round feathered neighbors as well as the seasonal “snowbirds” that visit Massachusetts for the winter months. Use these tips to plan your next winter birdwatching adventure!

1. **Plan for the weather.** Winter birding is a great activity for friends and family, but it won’t be fun for long if you’re cold. As the old adage goes, there’s no such thing as bad weather, only bad clothing choices. Dress in layers of fleece or wool, wear warm, sturdy boots, and ensure your outer layer provides wind protection by choosing rain or wind pants and jacket. Don’t forget a scarf or face mask. Sunglasses (or clear safety glasses if it’s overcast) also provide wind protection. You may be unrecognizable, but you’ll be warm and comfortable. A few snacks and water along with coffee or hot chocolate tucked in a day pack will keep you going strong.
2. **Remember birdwatching ethics.** Seabirds from as far north as the Arctic seek out the Massachusetts coast for its milder temperatures in winter. You might get the opportunity to see striking black-and-white patterned eiders, golden-eyes, scoters and long-tailed ducks, aerobatic gannets, diving dovebies, colorful harlequin ducks, and basking seals. Some winter visitors, like snowy owls, can attract considerable attention. Remember, birds may be stressed by hunger and long-distance travel. It’s critical for birders and photographers to resist the temptation to get too close. If you get too close to an animal its behavior will change; it may stop feeding, look at you, vocalize, appear nervous, or flee. If you notice a change in behavior, slowly back away. Always follow marked trails where indicated, speak quietly, and move cautiously. Use your binoculars and spotting scope rather than your feet to get “closer” to your subject.
3. **Enjoy time away from the crowds.** Birding in winter has its advantages. It's easy to spot the silhouette of a hawk perched on a branch or the darting movement of small birds when there aren't any leaves on trees and shrubs. For novices, this is a good time become familiar with the sights and sounds of common resident birds such as chickadees, blue jays, crows, woodpeckers, red tailed hawks, and even eagles. In spring there are so many more species of birds to see and hear that it can be overwhelming. Well-known birding areas such as Cape Anne, Newburyport, Plymouth, Duxbury, Cape Cod, and the islands can be packed with tourists in summer. In winter, the crowds are gone. Parking is abundant and encounters with other people scaring off nearby birds are reduced. In fact, the only other people you may encounter will be birders who will be happy to tell you what they saw and where!
4. **Use the right equipment.** Your main apparatus in bird-watching are your eyes and ears. Binoculars and simple bird identification guide are the minimal gear needed to aid your senses. A spotting scope helps when birding along the coast or in open meadows and fields but not necessary. If you are in a popular birding area, birders are generous and will often offer you a view through their scopes. It might be difficult photographing birds with a camera, but you can capture your birding buddies' excitement and the scenery.
5. **Connect with other birders.** Winter birding is a wonderful occasion to connect with nature and with other people interested in wildlife. There are many places to go winter birding in Massachusetts. Visit the [MassWildlife viewing sites webpage](#) with 67 great wildlife viewing locations in the state to get started. For a more organized winter birding experience, connect with a bird club from your region by visiting [MassBird.org](#). You'll find bird club websites with information on bird walks, events, and meetings. Most events are free or very low cost. One example is the [Merrimack River Eagle Festival in Newburyport on February 15](#). Join Mass Audubon and the Parker River National Wildlife Refuge for a family-friendly event focusing on eagles. Many other kinds of land and seabirds can be seen in the designated eagle spotting areas around the Merrimack River and Plum Island. Admission and most activities are free.