

## TIPS FROM MASTER BIRDER GRADUATES

Opinions vary, and what works well for one person doesn't always have the same value for another – but here are suggestions to consider about how to prepare for and make the most of the Master Birder class. Even if you're not interested in the class, these are good tips for improving birding skills.

1. **Get out in the field as much as possible, and learn from others.** “My advice is to get out birding as much as possible, including birding with others. Sign up for field trips with Seattle Audubon and other groups. When I was in the Master Birder class, I used the group email list to invite classmates to join me on trips. I always got a few others, and sometimes we filled a second car. We'd share our expertise and learn from each other. Being in the field with others is a great way to learn.” – Jim Owens
2. **“Adopt” a nearby park.** “I learned a lot by getting to know a local site well. Going to Magnuson Park was how I learned the songs and calls of local birds, by hearing the same sounds over and over. We learn by repetition. I think my brain was better able to absorb sounds in a familiar locale where I didn't have to pay attention to where I was going. Our brain makes a template of familiar places, and then it's easier to tease out what's new. When I go to a new spot, there is so much to take in that I don't always hear everything! Another good thing about going to the same place over time is that you learn seasonality, like when Golden-crowned Sparrows leave for the summer and when Savannah Sparrows leave for the winter, and you learn where they hang out and where the local breeders nest. It becomes second nature.” – Jan Bragg
3. **Take advantage of the optional field trips offered to people in the Master Birder class.** “I went on the field trips that were offered to class participants before my class started. I was excited about the class but had a little anxiety about it too, and the trips really eased that ... I realized that my skills were in the ballpark of some others, and I got to know some folks so the first class wasn't a bunch of strangers.” – Shelley Horn
4. **Read *Sibley's Birding Basics* and *The Sibley Guide to Bird Life & Behavior*.** “Before my class started, I read *Sibley's Birding Basics* and part of *The Sibley Guide to Bird Life and Behavior*. It was helpful to have done that before I got busy with the lectures, trips and homework. *Sibley's Birding Basics* is a fun and easy read that really prepares you for the course. *The Sibley Guide to Bird Life and Behavior* is less exciting but packed with valuable information that a student will want to research during class. Also, I found *Birds of Washington, Status and Distribution* by Wahl, Tweit and Mlodinow a ‘must’ for the homework during the class.” – Shep Thorp “I strongly echo reading both of those Sibley books. I particularly benefited from *The Sibley Guide to Bird Life & Behavior*, which I took my time reading carefully the summer before my class started.” – John Tubbs
5. **Figure out how you'll manage the information you get in class, and how you'll study species.** “It had been a long time since I had been in a class that required a lot of studying. It's important to keep up because there's so much information in each lecture. I took cues from my classmates, who used different strategies, and adjusted my plan as I went along. One person in our class practiced ID by reviewing photos from various on-line sources. One classmate made flash cards by cutting up old field guides (Seattle Audubon sells used guides). One created his own guide, by sketching each bird and adding key points. I used a combination of tools.” – Jennifer Kauffman

6. **During the Master Birder class, read about species before the lectures.** “Reading ahead in *The Sibley Guide to Bird Life and Behavior* was the best thing I did. I tried to read about what we were going to cover in the next few weeks so I could pin my notes from Dennis’s lectures on some recent learning.”  
– Penny Bolton
7. **Study bird silhouettes.** “I use the *Peterson Field Guide to Western Birds*, copyright 1990, which has bird silhouettes, as well as overhead and side-by-side comparison of similar species, that are quite helpful.”  
– Etta Cosey [Ed. Note: The newer versions of the Peterson field guide also show bird silhouettes inside the back cover. Seattle Audubon sells used bird books and often has these field guides.]
8. **Make use of the public library for online and text resources.** “One thing I used was/is the Seattle Public Library. They have a subscription to Birds of North America online, plus a lot of other resources that can be borrowed and used before/during/after the Master Birder course.” – Sarah Peden
9. **Learn bird bander's codes.** “When you are taking notes or listing birds seen, it’s time-consuming to write out the full name of each bird. The codes used by bird banders make record-keeping quick. The most popular approach is to use a four-letter code to replace the full name. The basic rule is to use the first two characters from each name (for two-part names), for example, AMRO for American Robin and MODO for Mourning Dove. If a name has three parts, e.g., Red-naped Sapsucker, use the first character from each of the first two parts: RNSA. This works pretty well, but can be confusing in some cases. Is BASW a Barn Swallow or a Bank Swallow? To resolve this, banders defined conflict-resolving substitutions: Barn Swallow is BARS and Bank Swallow is BANS. Two websites describe the rules: <http://www.birdpop.org/alphacodes.htm> and <http://infohost.nmt.edu/~shipman/z/nom/bblrules.html>  
Note: There are similar lists that use different conflict-resolution strategies -- pick one strategy and stick with it. An alternative approach, using a six-letter code, is better at minimizing collisions. <http://www-personal.umich.edu/~bbowman/birds/sixlettercode.html> “ – Scott Ramos
10. **Try sketching birds.** “Consider sketching bird species from photos (or from life, though that is much harder to do), regardless of whether you consider yourself capable of drawing or not. Sketching makes you really study shapes, their relationships to each other, and proportions, such as the length of the tail relative to the body, and the angles and shape of the bill. The benefit is that you really ‘see’ some of the field marks that distinguish species. I was afraid to even attempt this, but it helped me see the details of birds. (As an added benefit, it got me started being serious about art, even though I had spent my whole life thinking I couldn't draw at all.)” – John Tubbs
11. **Find a birding-by-ear resource that works well for you.** “I like the Peterson series on *Birding by ear: Western*. It has groups of similar-sounding birds, like the trillers group, robin-like birds, etc. – and disc 3 has habitat groupings that I found useful. Making playlists for particular habitats or particular groups of birds makes it easier to study and ‘tune up’ when getting ready for a birding trip.” – Rebecca Evans
12. **Use Larkwire Birdsong.** “I found the Larkwire Birdsong apps (available on iTunes for iOS and on the internet as a program that works on any computer) offered me the variety and repetition that I needed. Begin at the ‘Beginner’ level to learn how to play the game, then move to ‘Intermediate’ and build yourself a custom playlist so that you are focusing on the birds you want to learn. (e.g. ‘Backyard birds’ or ‘Western WA birds’ from the MB class list). The app will group birds that sound similar and challenge you to distinguish between them. As you master these smaller groups of similar-sounding birds, increase the level of difficulty and/or add more birds to the custom list. For me, success followed LOTS of repetition.” – Patty North

13. **Modify your bird song sound files.** “Many commercial recordings start with a speaker giving the name of the bird, followed by a sequence of songs, calls, etc. When using the recording on a smart phone, you may not want the spoken name to play, either to avoid making a disturbance in the field or to not to give away the ID if you are using the recording as a study aid. You can easily 'hide' the spoken part: In iTunes, play the recording that you want to edit, making note of what time the spoken part ends. Then, with the recording highlighted, choose File > Properties (Windows) or File > Get Info (Mac). Click on the Options tab. In the Start field, enter the time that you noted above. Now, when you play the recording, it will start after the spoken part has ended. You can also use this to shorten the recording if there are sounds you know are not relevant to your part of the bird's range.” – Scott Ramos
14. **More about: Modify your bird song sound files.** “For all of the bird sounds I want to study, I cut the voice speaking the bird name from the beginning of the file and paste it to the end. For some birds with many different vocalizations, I break the one sound file from the CD up into multiple different files which each contain only one vocalization. I use the ‘Bird Songs of the Pacific Northwest’ CDs produced by The Macaulay Library/Cornell Lab of Ornithology because it seems to have the most extensive collection of bird songs/sounds in one package. I import these sound files to my computer using iTunes, then use audio-editing software called WavePad. It has free versions for both PC and Mac computer systems, but you need to verify that you're using the software for home use only each time you use the software. Do a Google search for WavePad and download the version you want. To modify a sound file, open it in WavePad where it is visually shown on the screen. Highlight the section of the sound file to cut/copy and then paste. Save the file with a different name.” - Roland Kilcher
15. **Shuffle your bird-sounds playlists.** “We all have nemesis birds because they sound similar to others. For example, American Robin, Black-headed Grosbeak and Western Tanager can sound quite alike to a beginner. Another group that can be difficult to distinguish includes the trilling birds -- Spotted Towhee, Dark-eyed Junco and Chipping Sparrow. You can make a playlist to challenge yourself ID-ing these birds. First, use tip #8 to remove or move the identification from each recording. Then add them to a playlist, for example, a list of Trilling Birds. Now, turn on shuffle. With shuffle off, after you play the list a few times, you will remember the order – by shuffling, you won't know which song will come next.” – Scott Ramos

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