Leading a Birding Trip

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Increasing numbers of birding conferences and get-togethers are being offered by national and regional organizations. As a result, local bird clubs are finding themselves cast in the role of “host club” with local experts frequently asked to guide field trips to their favorite haunts. We have enjoyed some trips that were outstanding and have endured a few that were totally frustrating — because of their planning and leadership. The following ideas may help field trips to be a pleasant experience for both the leaders and the troops. Though these suggestions are particularly applicable to car caravans, they should prove useful for all trips.

Pre-Trip

1. Check the areas to be visited several days before the trip to determine whether the “advertised” species are there. Note potential difficulties like ditches, fallen trees, massive mudholes or vigorous poison ivy when planning any foot travel. Exercise some restraint in planning the agenda for any one trip. In general, the fewer stops involved, the better (a birding corollary to Murphy’s Law).

2. Reaffirm access permissions, dates and times with land owners if necessary. It is also good public relations to invite the owner to join the group.

3. If a variety of trips is offered, accurate descriptions posted at the registration desk will help visitors sign up for the “right” trip. Include the “promised” birds and possible rarities; the length of the trip in miles and hours, the need for spotting scopes, special footwear, lunches, insect repellents or admission fees; and some idea of the type of terrain. It is unsettling when one of your group stops during a hike over rugged ground and takes a heart pill. In some situations it is desirable to limit the number of participants or to split the group at the destination.

4. Once a departure time or location has been set, do not alter it unless absolutely necessary. Post any schedule changes promptly and prominently. Since not all conference attendees stay at the meeting headquarters or go to the session immediately preceding the re-scheduled trip, have someone check the meeting place at the originally posted time to direct the uninformed.

Trip Day

1. Arrive at the assembly point at least 30 minutes before the scheduled departure time with some prominent display for your followers to rally around. Identify yourself as leader and introduce any co-leaders or specialists present. Give route directions to all drivers; describe the location of the destination or first stop, and name some obvious or critical landmarks along the way. Xeroxed maps are invaluable; a flag on the antenna of the lead car and others whose drivers know the way helps in traffic).

2. The take-off point is the ideal spot to reduce the number of vehicles by car-pooling; however, this area must then be a suitable place to leave cars for several hours. Parking meters would be inappropriate
for most trips, and local merchants may be unwilling to have their
parking lots monopolized by non-customers for hours, so ask first.
A gathering field trip also should not block normal use of the
meeting spot by non-birders.

3. Reward promptness - Leave on time ! ! !

4. If the route is complicated and involves traffic lights, pull over briefly at safe and strategic spots to round up any strays. Drive at a reasonable speed. Of more serious consequence than losing cars is the possibility of your followers causing an accident as they rush to keep up your pace.

5. At the destination, regroup briefly and give a quick orientation to the area. Describe terrain and length of walk if appropriate, the amount of time to be spent, bird possibilities and locations, whether a scope or tape recorder is desirable, and the ground rules. State if it is necessary to stay in a group, to close gates, to stay on paths and whether any especially jumpy species require silent stalking. It is also the leader's responsibility to make sure littering, trespassing and plant collecting does not occur. Future access to private lands may depend on how well a group follows instructions.

6. Special tactics must be employed on large group tours that use buses. First, announce that such a vehicle cannot stop and check every puddle and field on the way to the destination, but that if someone sees something great, speak up. Second, it may be best when checking certain areas close to the road to ask riders to stay on the bus until birds have been scanned by the leader. Passengers can then alight if prospects look good, though on many occasions all can see from inside the bus with some cooperation. Finally, encourage people to leave the bus quickly when announced. It might be tactful to suggest that those who are less interested could allow more avid birders to exit first and to encourage passengers to collect gear and put on jackets while seated. If "life" birds are flying over while the aisle is blocked, there will be mayhem.

7. Be decisive but open to suggestions. Communicate! On one field trip the group milled around, birded, and re-birded the area around the headquarters of a National Wildlife Refuge for 45 minutes with no clue as to future plans. Then the leader announced a half-mile car trip that would be followed by a one hour lunch break. Be sure to ask if there are any species of particular interest to group members. Remember, your "trash birds" are someone else's "most wanted".

8. Most groups include the whole spectrum of birders from very good amateurs or even professionals through beginners who need a field guide to identify a Cardinal (an exciting state, remember?). There is a great temptation for a leader to talk birds (and indulge in a little birding one-up-manship) with others who know birds. Resist. The leader is a teacher! Explain not only that it is a Cardinal but why it is, and do it in a way that will encourage more questions. Also encourage other natural history questions; some in the group may be more interested in goldenrods than goldfinches.
9. Be flexible; have alternatives ready. If the scores of birds that hung from every twig on the pre-trip visit departed with last night’s frontal system or if the gate of the access road is unexpectedly locked, plans need changing. Be prepared to shorten the allotted time - how much time does it take 30 people to check 6 shorebirds and 12 ducks? It is a "judgment call", but knowledge of an alternate spot is wise.

10. Keep the trip moving. Allow sufficient time at each stop for everyone to see the birds, but do not run out of time enroute to that last "hotspot". If you are out of time, the last stop will undoubtedly contain the day's largest concentration of avifauna. (Kibbe's Law). Dallying at birdless spots encourages followers to wander, further delaying the schedule.

11. Whether in a building or in the bushes, allow for rest stops during the trip.

12. Unless birds are absolutely falling out of the trees, people appreciate ending the trip on time. After all, no one wants to miss breakfast, the banquet, or a paper session. Be able to give coherent directions back to home base to those who need them, and to further birding hotspots to the "fanatics" who request them.

Good Birding!!

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