

Caitlin Acquiroff, RPBO Lead Educator, March 2023

In recent years, birding has become increasingly popular amongst people of all ages, particularly in 2020 during the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. According to the CBC, eBird, one of the world's largest databases for bird observations, saw an increase in app downloads of 34% in Canada in 2021. With many people no longer able to do their usual activities or gather indoors, there was a surge in outdoor pursuits of all kinds. Something very accessible to people that was free and can be done anywhere was bird watching. Like many other people, I was a pandemic birder. Having always had a love for nature but never really noticed at an individual level the animals around me, birding was not really on my radar until I had nothing else to do but go outside. This was a pivotal moment for me that deepened my appreciation and connection with birds and my life continues to be enriched every day by this newfound hobby, which has brought me here as the lead educator for Rocky Point Bird Observatory (RPBO).

RPBO has been operating as a migration monitoring station since 1994, and as the organization grows, so has the education program. These education programs are crucial to the work RPBO does because it is more important than ever in the face of climate change and biodiversity loss to get people involved and educated on the threats facing birds, and what they can do to help. More people are reaching out to organizations like RPBO with questions about what they can do to help, or how they can learn more. We could not be more excited to be a part of this shift to make birdwatching and citizen science an activity for everyone.

Families can get many benefits from birdwatching together. It can simply be a new activity to take part in that gets everyone outside and active for as little as 20 minutes a day. It is also a great opportunity to spend time and learn together, something that is easy to bond over and can be a suitable learning opportunity for all ages. Ultimately I think what brings a lot of people into birding as a hobby is how easy it is to connect with nature via birds. They are everywhere; they are colorful, vocal, charismatic and smart, and connecting with nature benefits both us and the planet.

It is so good for us to be active every day, especially in a busy world with desks at work and in the classroom. Birding with kids can be fun and exciting when games are incorporated like I Spy, Bingo, follow-the-leader, etc. These activities get kids moving, excited about birds, and can still be done while on the move through a local park as a family. It can be too easy for everyone to get home and be too tired or busy to do much during the week, and weekends or weeknights may often be packed with other obligations, so taking a 20-minute walk around the neighbourhood park a few times a week ensures some quality family time without having a huge time or financial commitment, which is key to making outdoor activities accessible to more people.

This can be a great opportunity for older siblings to teach younger siblings about birds, point new ones out, or help them use their binoculars. This will help them to develop skills in teaching, leadership, and teamwork while bringing a family closer together. Think of birding together like family game night but outside! You can make up challenges if you're more competitive, and keep track of what you see as a family as well (for example - how many species can you identify?). I didn't grow up birding, but now that I do, my family can connect with me about this by asking me questions, or going on walks with me where they can learn new things.

The thing I like most about birding is that it makes me feel like I am a part of nature, not separate from it. Once you learn the language of birds, a whole new world opens up that you get to be in on! Learn to observe when a predator is nearby by the body language or sounds made by birds around you, or notice the bird in your yard building a nest and raising young. This is the pinnacle

of birding, which brings physical and mental benefits to people, but equally benefits the birds and other wildlife as well. If we care about and respect nature, we will conserve nature. Getting into birding as a family can teach kindness, ethics and appreciation that will carry into adulthood and this is what we need to make sure the birds we enjoy have a future.

Local birder Rebecca Reader-Lee and her family have been very active with RPBO and she grew up birding. Rebecca says: *“Some of my earliest and most fond memories are spending time watching birds with my family. This fostered my understanding and appreciation for science and our natural world, which I carry with me every day.”*



Rebecca as a young child, looking at a family of ducks[/caption]

Would you like to start birding but may not be sure where to start?

Follow RPBO on social media or check our [events calendar](#) and email bulletins for community events that are family-friendly, where we often have birding activities and binoculars you can try! Save the date for our Christmas Bird Count for Kids in December to participate in North America's longest-running citizen science project, or email me at education@rpbo.org for ideas on activities you can try with your family.