

## Birdwatching in Melbourne

Of all of the vertebrates, I reckon birds are best. They're always about. Mammals are really only seen at night, to find frogs you're usually somewhere cold and damp, don't even bother looking for reptiles for six months of the year and of course you have to be under water for fish. But birds? They're everywhere.

There're a few things to think about before you go out to look for birds though.

### Binoculars

You have to have binoculars. You might even get a bird spotting telescope but you must have binoculars. But which ones? Check the numbers on them, 7 x 50s or perhaps 10 x 40s? A field of how many degrees? Will you spend \$100 or \$1000 and what's the difference?



Nikon 10 x 50 \$189



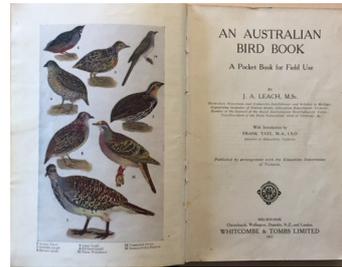
Swarovski 10x42 \$3189

The first number '10' indicates magnifications (or times closer), the second '50' is the diameter of the objective (away from your eye, closer to the object) lens. The larger the lens, usually the more light will be in your view but of course they'll be bulkier and heavier. The field, ie 5.1°, indicates how much of the 360 degrees all around you will be in the field of view of your binoculars. You want to keep it as wide as possible (however, see comment re bulk above) as you need to find the bird. If it's too narrow you'll be looking where it isn't. And price? Binoculars where the subjective and objective lenses don't align use prisms to manage the light. The prisms in cheap binoculars can be knocked out of alignment and you'll not be able to focus. Straight-through binoculars are usually more robust but can be more expensive and they usually have very advantageous warranties. As with everything, you get what you pay for.

### Identification

Birders want to be able to refer to what they are seeing, they want to tick off what they've seen and they want to name the bird. They need a field guide. Where once we only had Leach (early 1900s, terrible drawings), then Cayley's *WHAT BIRD IS THAT?* (drawings not flash and organised by habitat), in the last 40+ years we are spoilt for choice. Don't bother with titles, they all have the words 'field guide', 'birds' and 'Australia' in some order. They're known by the author(s). There's Slater (nice shape and size for a pocket), Simpson and Day (clear drawings and great end notes), Morcombe (adapted from photography and a thumb finder along the edge of the page) and Pizzey and Knight (the clearest drawings). Menkhorst et al was released in 2017 and is setting out to be the category killer. Browse them all in a good book shop and see what artwork, layout and further information appeals.

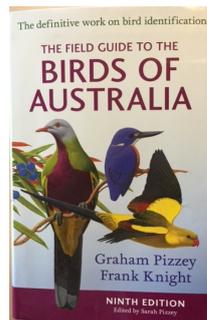
Some of these field guides have been turned into Apps, available through your usual App Store. These feature images and bird calls which are very handy in supporting identification. Please note, sounds should be used sparingly as they can interfere with a bird's routine behaviours.



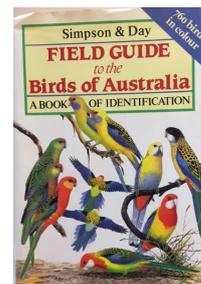
An Australian birdbook, J A Leach, 1911



Morcombe bird app  
- on iTunes Appstore



Pizzey and Knight - my favourite



Simpson and Day  
has many fans



My much-thumbed Slater

### Birders' vocabulary

Giss - general impression, size, shape, but pronounced 'jizz'. This is a World War II term originally referring to aircraft where you couldn't wait to see the paintwork to know if a plane was the enemy. Each bird has a distinctive jizz that you can learn to recognise.

Stringing - claiming a bird that you haven't seen, perhaps a rarity, when you're really only seen a common bird in unusual light. You do not want to be known as a stringer.

Tick - not the parasitic kind but the all-important addition to one's life list (see Lists below). There are hierarchies among bird-watchers, from general nature lovers to driven individuals. The most obsessive are termed 'twitchers', possibly for the physical manifestations of triumph when they've seen a species for the first time and they can tick it on their list.

Crippling views - when there is bright light shining on your target, no twigs in the way, close enough to see the light in its eyes and often turning about to show itself from all angles.

Walk away views - when you have had your fill, the bird is still there but you walk away as you have drunk of its splendour.

Pishing - sucking air between your compressed lips to simulate a bird's alarm call and bring it in to you.

Suzzling - how a spoonbill or some ducks feed, almost nibbling the mud on the bottom of a pond to feel the invertebrates on which they feed.

## Lists

These are all important to birders. There are around 800 plus species in Australia, including the rare vagrants and those blown from their normal haunts by cyclones or just mixed in with the wrong crowd. An experienced birder will have seen at least 600. In fact the Bird Observers Club had a badge to mark entry to the 600 Club.

So to your list. How will you recall what species you have seen? Where you saw them? How many were there of which species? Birders typically carry a small pocket notebook for recording what they have seen. Some only keep a life list, each species they have ticked of the 800+ ever seen in Australia and where and when they saw it. Others keep a year list so they've always got something to look out for while others also keep a list of what they have seen on their property.

The lists might also be contributed to the many Citizen's Science programs such as Birdlife Australia's Birds in Backyards or Bird Atlas where the information contained in the many birders' lists is aggregated to build up a picture of the nation's birdlife.

## Support

Birdwatching does not have to be a solitary pursuit. Birdlife Australia [birdlife.org.au](http://birdlife.org.au) is the national peak bird research and advocacy organisation and you should think of joining. They conduct regular activities, send to members a magnificent quarterly magazine edited by professional birder and all round good guy Sean Dooley (buy a copy of The Big Twitch and you'll see what I mean). They're also a conservation lobby to governments on behalf of Australia's bird species. Birdlife Australia also conducts the annual fund raising Twitchathon, where teams of birders race around the state (not so fast that they get a speeding ticket though for that is automatic disqualification) to see as many species as possible in either the Champagne Section (8 hrs with a break for lunch) or the hard-core 24 Hour Competition. It is required that teams have poor puns on bird names – the Lawn Moas, the Dirty Harriers, the Wrong Terns and my team, the Common Loudmouths. Teams seek sponsorship of so much per species recorded, on an honesty system (see stringing above), and the money raised goes to bird research.

There are other sources of support. BirdingAus <http://birding-aus.org/> will give you access to more information about birds than you thought possible, including an email list you can join to take part in discussions on all manner of bird matters, while Birdline on Eremaea Birds [www.ereamaea.com/](http://www.ereamaea.com/) features daily postings of sightings by birders in every state in Australia.

## Birdwatching about town

Melbourne has a rich bird population and there're many places to see them. Under the piles along the South Wharf in Docklands, you'll find lurking Nankeen Night Herons. Walk around Royal Park and the Trin Warren Tam-Boore ponds and you'll see a range of water and bush birds. The wetlands of Newell's Paddock in Footscray is a top birding spot, as are the wetlands under WestGate Bridge, both beside the Todd Rd servoes and the wetlands at Yarraville on the western bank of the Yarra. Go further afield and many of Melbourne's suburbs support birds aplenty.



*We share the city with a number of nocturnal species. Powerful owls work their way around Melbourne's inner city parks and through their possum populations, taking a possum every second night. Tawny frogmouths are masters at camouflage—they'll be in your suburb if only you can find them.*

## Become involved

If you get the bird bug badly, there are many further ways to become involved. There's a monthly pelagic trip out to the continental shelf off Port Fairy to look for any number of albatross species, giant petrels and prions. There are trips off Tasmania's Eaglehawk Neck, Wollongong and Southport in Queensland. There are also operators who will take you out to the Western Treatment Plant at Werribee to see the migratory waders, to Bunyip State Park for emu wrens and nightjars perhaps, to the Iron Range on Cape York for the summer visitors from Papua New Guinea or to Kakadu for everything. And then there's always the rest of the world if you are truly smitten.

There's nothing wrong with being smitten. In my time as a bird-watcher, I've been to the Iron Range and watched nesting Eclectus Parrots, travelled beyond the Western Australia border into the Great Sandy Desert to see Princess Parrots and tossed about off Hippolyte Rock in Tasmania to see a Wandering Albatross. And if those destinations are not exotic enough, there's always our own poo farm. There's hardly a capital city in the world as blessed as Melbourne with such a major bird and birders' destination so close to the city centre as the Western Treatment Plant at Werribee. You haven't lived until you've been there – and take your binoculars, whatever numbers are on them.

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*CERES, the environmental park on the Merri Creek in Brunswick, holds an annual celebration for the return of the migratory Sacred Kingfisher. Melbourne's creeks, lovingly restored by local environment groups, are ideal local birdwatching spots.*

*Photo: Michael Livingston, October 20, Merri Creek Trail*