

## My Binoculars: Love 'Em or Leave 'Em

I was on my morning walk, observing nature, looking around me and breathing in the fresh desert morning. A bird called from a clump of ocotillo. Immediately my binoculars came up and I focused on the black-throated sparrow, a bird I have seen a thousand times, whose light-hearted call awakens me on spring and summer mornings. The binoculars went down and I moved on. Then it occurred to me, did the binoculars help me identify the bird or was it simply a patterned response that, to a degree, made me less of a birder? What did I learn from the experience? All I did was recognize the bird, I took no time to look for anything new about the animal.

I think of questions like these when I am out birding, particularly when I recognize a bird's song and quickly jerk my binoculars to my eyes to verify the bird. I usually do this without thinking about the bird or my actions. Most of the time, in an area I am familiar with anyway, I know the bird by its song and the way it flies, or the way it sits. And yet, every time, I raise my binoculars without even thinking about what the bird is. Then I usually dismiss the bird with its name. Why? I don't keep a life list on which to mark yet another bird (although I do keep a list of birds in my yard, primarily to look for changes in what is happening in my particular habitat).

I have mulled these questions over and over and keep asking myself what I am doing. Several times I have gone looking for birds but kept my binoculars down so that I could think about what birds I was hearing and/or seeing. Quite often, after a moment of thinking, I have recognized the bird without the enlarged image afforded by my optics. A few times I had no idea where the bird was, only hearing its call. At this point I either knew the call or didn't and binoculars would have made no difference. On a few occasions I have heard and seen the bird and could identify the bird, but could not come up with the name. Would the binoculars have made a difference? I am thinking that they would have but why?

Perhaps it is just that I have gotten lazy and depend on the binoculars to supplement the calls for identification. Of course, there are times when distinctions between two different species of birds would be visible through binoculars or a field scope and would enhance birding for those who must know everything they are seeing. Binoculars, for me, are most beneficial when I am observing something (be it bird or person or plant) for a period of at least several minutes. These are the times I usually learn something about whatever I am looking at. A glance through binoculars is of little value it seems.

I have spent a lot of money on my optics. They are designed to give me the best view my money can buy and I think they do. However, would I be a better birder without them? To find the answer I have to ask more experienced birders, those who have been in the field much longer than I have. Are they better at what they do with binoculars or without?

One of my more experienced friends told me that he had lost his very expensive binoculars over the railing of a ship he was working on at the beginning of a long trip and had to bird in an area he was unfamiliar with using just his naked eyes. He stated that he had become a very good birder as a result and did not rely totally on his new binoculars (when he eventually did replace the lost pair). Today, thirty years after the unfortunate cruise, he has a relatively inexpensive pair of binoculars (less than \$300) and depends on all of his senses instead of just his eyes.

Another friend, this one a birding tour leader in Costa Rica, says that he depends more on his ears than his eyes but he has to have an incredibly expensive pair of binoculars for his job (they are discounted through the guide service he works for). Why such high dollar binoculars? It is what the guests expect! I have been birding informally with him and had no such expectations and, true to his description, he rarely raised his binoculars at the sound or movement of a bird. Mine, on the other hand, were being raised and lowered as if they were a pump handle. While I looked at the bird he would describe it and give me information on its natural history. He was correct in his identifications at least 95% of the time before using binoculars.

A third friend, long passed on, never owned a pair of binoculars but just birded by ear and bird behavior. She was responsible for me becoming interested in birds because of the joy she displayed when we birded together (and we spent a good deal of time birding together). She would see the bird, and then describe what to look for in the bird: "See that hawk? Notice the width of the wings in comparison to the length of the body? See how often the wings are beating? It has to be a goshawk!" The name was always the last thing she told me. One time I asked her about binoculars and she told of growing up during the depression on the Kansas prairie with no money (or anything else, really). She could watch the birds for free and really enjoyed it, telling me that the birds could go where ever they liked, to places she thought she would never see in a life time. After working hard she had the money for binoculars but never got used to them so never bought any, preferring taking a little extra time to get to know the bird.

These are interesting perspectives, each giving me a lot to think about. I have my binoculars and I will always use them but perhaps not as quickly as I have in the past, preferring, in some instances, to listen to the bird a little longer and look

at it a little more closely and enjoy the moment before dismissing it with just a name.

**Posted by Patt Sims - July 14, 2012**