

A **BIRMINGHAM AUDUBON** guide to

Gear for Beginning Birders

It doesn't take much to get started looking at birds—millions of Americans do it every day using just their eyes and a kitchen window. But for new birders who want to get serious about their hobby, a decent pair of binoculars and some good field guides are indispensable. Birmingham Audubon wants to make sure you have all the information you need to get that first shopping trip off to a great start.

Pricing binoculars

You don't have to invest a thousand dollars in top-of-the-line binoculars to see birds—many of us have been using affordable optics for years, and we see just as many warblers as the big spenders! In fact, if you're a new birder, it's usually best to start small, with an affordable, entry-level pair. If you have between \$75 and \$150 to spend, you should be able to grab some great starter binoculars that won't disappoint you in the field.

“Bins” by the numbers

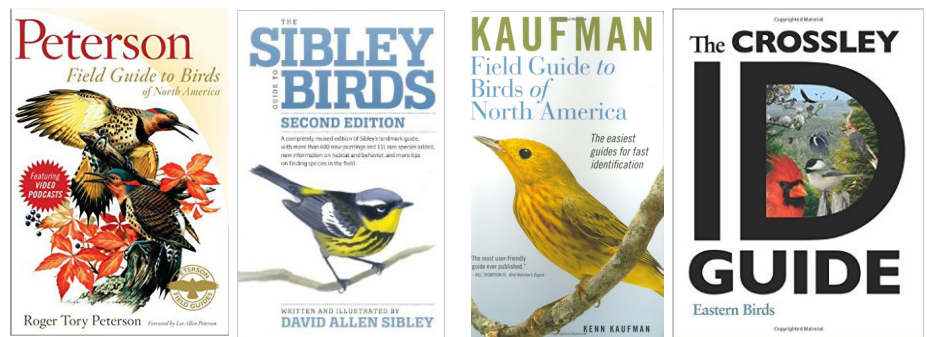
Now that you know how much to spend, how do you sort through the bewildering variety of sizes and configurations available in today's binocular market? Let's start with the only two numbers that really matter for beginners: **magnification** and **objective diameter**. These are usually presented as two numbers, separated by an X. In the case of “8X42s,” 8 is the magnification, and 42 is the objective diameter.

While you might think higher magnifications would equal better binoculars, this isn't really the case—most birders prefer a magnification between 6 and 8, as higher numbers lead to shaky images and hard-to-locate birds. When it comes to the objective diameter, somewhere between 30 and 45 usually provides the right blend of light-weight build and good optics. We prefer 8X42s, but other people swear by 6X32s. Try both in the store, and go with what feels right to you.

A quick guide to field guides

While new field guides and birding apps arrive each year, most of us depend on a short shelf of classics. Two of the most popular are *The Peterson Field Guide to Birds of North America* (\$26) and *The Sibley Guide to Birds* (\$40). Both feature clear illustrations of important identification marks, and are available in smaller, more field-friendly editions covering only the eastern half of North America. (For an even more portable solution, you can download both in the form of mobile apps for your smartphone.)

While some birders like to use field guides with actual photographs, most of us find these difficult to use, as the play of light and shape can obscure key identification features. Two possible exceptions, however, are the *Kaufman Field Guide to the Birds of North America* (\$18.95) and *The Crossley ID Guide: Eastern Birds* (\$35). Both use computer-enhanced photographic illustrations to emphasize important features, but the Crossley guide takes things a step further, depicting the same bird under a variety of viewing angles and lighting conditions. It's an acquired taste, but one that many seasoned birders now swear by.



One last thing you might consider purchasing before you head out in the field: a membership in the Birmingham Audubon Society! For just \$20/year, you'll receive our monthly newsletter, get access to field trips and membership programs, and help support our ongoing conservation and educational efforts. For more information, and to join, visit our website: www.birminghamaudubon.org.

Need more help?

For more advice on how to get started birding, contact Dr. Ansel Payne, Birmingham Audubon's Teaching Naturalist: anselpayne@birminghamaudubon.org.