

# Learn How to Watch Wildlife

Nearly one-third of all Americans enjoy watching wildlife. This number may seem like a dull statistic, but in reality most people find enjoyment in watching a deer emerge from the edge of a forest, catching a glimpse of a red fox as it slips across the road in front of the headlights, or identifying birds at feeders during the winter.

Fortunately, you do not have to drive halfway across the country or hike to a remote mountaintop to see stunning wildlife. All you need to do is look out your window or take a step or two off your porch. Alabama ranks fifth nationally in overall diversity of plant and animal species. Surprisingly, it takes only a little effort to view much of this diversity. Wildlife watching requires developing your observation skills and a bit of patience at times, and it can be a rewarding and inspiring hobby. Getting started in wildlife watching is as simple as taking a few minutes out of your day to practice.

This publication provides practical tips for learning how to enjoy wildlife and the outdoors and focuses specifically on developing the human senses of sight, smell, and sound to detect wildlife in their natural environment.

## Honing Your Senses

In today's fast-paced world driven by technological stimuli, people often tune out what is not immediately important or attention grabbing. Unfortunately, for those venturing outdoors to watch wildlife, this tuning out often impairs their ability to notice wildlife. For example, have you ever started watching wildlife in your backyard only to find that it seems like nothing is happening and your thoughts are being pulled elsewhere? Your senses are probably not finely tuned enough to focus on what really is happening in nature. As some of our great American naturalists have demonstrated through their works, your senses of sight, sound, and smell are important tools for effective and enjoyable wildlife watching. But developing these senses may take some time.



**Figure 1.** Your backyard includes living space (habitat) for wildlife. Watching wildlife can be as simple as looking out your window.

## Seeing

Sight is the primary sense by which humans interpret their environment, but there is a major difference between *looking* and *seeing*. *Looking* is the process through which our brains receive images of the world around us through our eyes. *Seeing* involves our brains actively interpreting those images so they have meaning. For instance, think back to the last time you rode somewhere in a car. Do you remember all the vehicles parked at each gas station you passed? Probably not. You saw them as you drove by, but because they were not important details, they did not register. This is how our brain handles most of the stimuli it receives. Increasing your mind's sensitivity to minor details requires practice.

A good way to practice being more observant is by walking through an unfamiliar building for 5 minutes and then trying to sketch the building's interior. After the sketch has been completed, return to the building with your drawing in hand, and conduct another walk-through. Notice how many details you missed the first time? Now try this same exercise outdoors. If you have ever heard the expression "I can't see the forest for the trees," then you may understand how a person could look at something without really *seeing* it. Look around



**Figure 2.** Animals like this eastern chipmunk are difficult to spot. You may have to practice seeing until you can detect them. At first look for movement rather than the animal.

**Figure 3.** Burrows like this one are often concealed. A person must notice tiny details in order to see it. (Photo credit: Amber C. Marable)



your backyard and become familiar with each tree, clump of flowers, small hole, and any objects placed there by sketching it again and again. Over time, you will become fully aware of all the things in your yard and any change, however minor, will stand out. You will actually be able to see your entire yard for the first time. You can use the same approach when watching wildlife. Carefully search the area for animals, and when one is sighted, observe it as if you were going to make a sketch of it.

### Listening

If *looking* is not the same thing as *seeing*, then *hearing* is not the same thing as *listening*. Listening, like seeing, requires a level of intentional awareness. Our brain will automatically focus on certain sounds and yet ignore many others. People must train their minds to separate individual sounds from the background noise to be able to notice wildlife. However, humans are so accustomed to an active, noisy world that silence can seem overwhelming. Thankfully, our sense of hearing is relatively easy to adjust. Try sitting alone in a quiet place. As you sit still, try to hear your heartbeat. After a while, it will be hard to miss. Next, try sitting outside and listening for the sound of the wind moving through the grass or leaves. When small animals scurry about on the ground, they create small rustling noises. Listen to the patterns of sounds they create, and you will soon be able to tell the difference between a squirrel and a bird foraging, much as you can tell the difference between the footsteps of different friends and family members. Another good exercise is to shut your eyes or blindfold yourself and just listen to the sounds of

nature for a while. With some practice, you'll eventually train your ears and mind as tools for capturing the sounds of nature that you've never noticed before.

### Smelling

Smell is one of our most important but least refined senses. However, the sense of smell is of vital importance to many animals. Developing this sense can help you determine which animals are in the area. Most animals emit some sort of characteristic scent. Some of these odors, like the smell of a skunk, may already be familiar to you, and yet others, like the peculiar musty smell of snakes, may be unknown. Some smells are not created by animals but are part of the environment. Can you smell water? Do you know what soil smells like? Or leaf litter? Practice smelling these components of the environment until they become familiar to you. Before long, you will notice which scents are normally in the vicinity and which may be introduced by visiting



**Figure 4.** Practice listening until you can tell the difference between the sounds that birds and gray squirrels make while foraging.



**Figure 5.** Try having a friend put different spices or perfumes on cotton balls in coded pill bottles. Can you tell which scent is which?

animals. An exercise to increase your ability to identify smells might include having a friend or family member place different materials (common spices, fruit scents, etc.) in coded pill bottles. Remove the lids one at a time, and smell the canisters, trying to identify the scents without looking inside. Have your assistant tell you if you guessed correctly. Increasing your sensitivity to smell will give you a better understanding of how many species of animals interpret their world.

### Practicing Patience

Up to this point, it has been somewhat easy to learn how to watch wildlife by developing your senses. However, the most critical skill needed in watching wildlife is patience. Learning to sit or stand quietly on your porch or against a tree in the woods will increase your odds of observing wildlife. You must be very still because most wildlife species are adept at picking up motion (as well as smell) and will either hide, remain motionless (making it more difficult for you to observe them), or leave the area when disturbed. Once wildlife become accustomed to your presence or determine that you are not an immediate source of danger, they will resume business as usual. However, each time you move to scratch an itch, check the time, or see if you missed any texts on your phone, the situation will reset, and the animals will have to acclimate to your presence all over again.

### Blinds

Using a blind may be desirable if you wish to take photographs of wildlife, write notes in a nature journal, or just be free to move around more. A blind can be basically anything that wildlife becomes habituated to and that shields you from view while allowing you to see out. A strategically placed brushy wall, piece of plywood, old vehicle, tree house, hunting blind, or tarp, for example, can be used as an effective blind.



**Figure 6.** Anything can be a blind as long as it allows you to see out while keeping most of your body concealed.

### Tips to help you watch more wildlife

- Look by moving your eyes, not your head. This will reduce the amount of motion you make.
- Pick a fairly comfortable location and position so you will not have to shift around frequently. (Using a gardening pad for sitting on the ground will increase comfort.)
- Wear soft clothing that does not rustle.
- Wear clothes in neutral earth tones (browns or greens) or patterns that break up your outline, such as camouflage. (You **must** wear hunter orange for safety during hunting season if you are in the woods.)
- Sit downwind (wind blowing toward you) of the area you are watching to reduce the chances of being detected.
- Make sure your clothes do not smell of smoke, perfume, detergents, or any other unnatural odors.

Regardless of whatever precautions you take, the amount of time you spend wildlife watching will determine how much you will see.

The important thing to remember is that it must be left in place long enough that animals have time to become accustomed to its presence. Give animals at least a couple of weeks to acclimate to the new item in the environment before you try to use it. Once they are used to it, you will be able to sit and watch without unduly disturbing wildlife.



**Figure 7.** Wildlife watching can be entertaining and inspiring.

## Stalking

If you wish to take a more active approach to wildlife watching than simply sitting still and waiting for something to happen, try stalking in a natural environment. Stalking is the art of walking slowly and soundlessly in search of wildlife. Most people tend to walk too quickly to observe the hidden signs that announce the presence of wildlife. Many species of wildlife are very secretive, and if you walk too quickly or alert them to your presence by making too much noise while walking, you will miss them. When stalking, purposely slow your pace and make frequent stops to look around, up, and down. Try stopping every 10 to 20 steps to check the area ahead of you for wildlife. It is also helpful to adjust the height from which you look for wildlife during your stops. Try kneeling during these stops to give yourself a different field of view.

Walking soundlessly is difficult but not impossible. Most of us are not usually concerned with having to keep quiet. We live in an environment of relative safety and can, therefore, walk as we choose. Habits like this are hard to break, and wildlife, which are more attuned to

noise than people are, will not hang around to see who is making the noise. The good news is that people can train themselves to walk quietly. First, start by walking as you normally would across a room. Notice how your heel hits the ground first. Then think of a cat stalking prey—what part of its front feet touch the ground first? Try placing the outside edge of your foot on the ground, beginning with the area just behind your toes. Then let your foot roll around smoothly to rest weight on your heel. It seems unnatural at first, but it is a much quieter way to walk. It requires lots of practice to become proficient at this unusual way of walking, but it can improve your chances of seeing wildlife.

## Benefits

Watching wildlife benefits people in many ways. First, it can provide a relatively inexpensive means of entertainment. However, wildlife watching is far more than a thrifty hobby. Wildlife viewing develops skills, relieves stress, allows for self-discovery, and provides inspiration for the soul while providing an opportunity for learning in a dynamic environment. Spending time watching wildlife can enhance your quality and appreciation for life.

## Conclusion

Wildlife watching is a recreational activity that engages many Americans. To be able to effectively watch wildlife, your senses of sight, sound, and smell may need to be “reprogrammed” and developed through practice. Patience combined with practice is the best way to approach wildlife viewing, although some people may enjoy active stalking. Regardless of the reason and means chosen to pursue wildlife watching, you can be sure that you will enjoy this use of your time and its many benefits.



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