

**Media Contacts:**

Jennifer Seeley
(336) 553-1708
jseeley@rlfcommunications.com

Mary Leigh Wallace
(336) 553-1802
mwallace@rlfcommunications.com

WHEN SKY HIGH ENTERTAINMENT IS A GOOD THING

Teach your kids to discover birding

CHESAPEAKE, Va., May 4, 2009 – Is the cost of recreation leagues, expensive equipment or pricey camps beginning to creep into your spring and summer budget? How can you keep kids entertained, engaged and potentially even educated without draining precious financial resources?

To tweet or not to tweet, that is the question. No, we're not referring to micro blogging, we're talking about birding. One of the most overlooked hobbies and sports in the U.S., birding will fascinate and engage family members of all ages, while secretly educating them.

Equipment

Unlike many hobbies that require expensive equipment, lavish participation fees or special training, birding requires very little of its participants. Two basic items will get you on your way to becoming an expert birder.

My, What Big Feathers You Have

Binoculars are the foundation of any birding experience. Although unaided eyesight can identify many species, binoculars allow for seeing birds at a great distance and for capturing the minute details (tail feathers, head shape) that often distinguish one bird from the next.

"You can find good quality binoculars for less than \$100," said Deloras Freeman, a visitor services specialist with the Great Dismal Swamp National Wildlife Refuge in Chesapeake, Va. "The features needed depend on the terrain in which you will bird."

Will you be searching for birds in heavily wooded areas? That calls for a wide range of vision that will let in more light. Or maybe you live in desert condition, where protected lens will help keep out dust and dirt. Different terrains can determine whether you need a larger field of vision or higher power.

Binoculars are identified by two numbers. The first number is the power or magnification level and the second number is the size of the lens, which determines how much light it lets in. For example, a 7 x 25 set of binoculars means objects will appear seven times closer than normal and the field of vision is 25mm.

Visit www.binoculars101.com to find out more and help you choose the right magnification and lens size or your birding adventure.

Can I See Some Identification, Please?

Picking birds out of a line up can be quite challenging, especially for newcomers to the sport, whether young or old. A must for birders is a good field guide that will help you learn and identify birds.

Different publishers (Petersons, Stokes and Kaufmans are all good purveyors) display content in various ways – pictures of birds versus illustrations, maps beside birds versus in an index. No approach is better than another, it just depends on what appeals to you.

In addition to how information is presented, you can also select a guide by region, state, bird habitat or species. You can even get field guides tailored to backyard birders and those designed for children or beginning birders.

Safety and Comfort

Two other areas that should be mentioned are footwear and skin protection. A pair of comfortable walking shoes is a good idea because birding is an active sport, where you often spend spans of time standing still or crouching in wait for a spotting. Select a pair that you don't mind getting soiled. "You won't see a lot of birds while standing on a nicely paved sidewalk," said Freeman. "Be prepared to get dirty."

Sunscreen is a good idea to take on all birding trips, no matter the season. But in warm weather, another precaution is necessary. Bird habitats, especially those full of trees, brush or water, tend to breed mosquitoes and other annoying insects. Insect repellent will become your best friend.

Ready, Set, Go!

You have to start somewhere. "Begin by making a list of all the birds you know and can identify," said Freeman. "This will become your core list." Perhaps you can identify the cardinal in the backyard or the hummingbird that appears at your feeder on a daily basis.

Make a commitment to learn three or four at a time. Look for birds that are typical to the area where you and your children will be birding. You are helping your kids learn a new vocabulary so break it up into manageable parts – learn a few at a time. Learn the bird's call at the same time you learn what it looks like. It helps with positive identification.

At the end of your birding excursion, it is time to tally up your results. "Make two lists," said Freeman, "those you saw and those you heard. In birding, not only do you count the species you spotted, but also those you heard."

So many birds live in wooded or brushy habitats, that especially during the summer when plants are in full bloom, it can be difficult to see them. That is why the sport is referred to as birding, not bird watching. There are also secretive birds, like the Swainson's warbler. Because they live among the brush, they are often hidden from view.

Academic Avians

Education in birding goes way beyond identification and call recognition. Birds teach us about aerodynamics (did you know they have hollow bones to make flying easier?), physiology (one of the highest metabolisms in the animal kingdom), meteorology (they ride with the weather fronts) and ecology (migration) just to name a few.

You are What You Eat

Teach your children to look at the bird itself to find clues about its lifestyle. The shape of the beak is a clue to what they eat. Seed feeders have a short beak to crack open seeds. Shore birds tend to have long, thin beaks to stick into the mud to find food. Nectar-feeding birds like the hummingbird have tiny beaks to poke into the flower for nectar.

Birds, like humans, have varying diets. Some birds eat only seeds, some eat only berries or plants. Birds of prey are carnivores. And then there are some species that are both herbivores (plant eating) and carnivores (meat eating).

What they eat tells you where you will find them in the landscape - in the treetops, among the brush or at the shoreline.

Get Out

If your backyard isn't bird friendly or if you would rather explore somewhere a little less familiar, look to regional resources for locations and assistance in developing your hobby. National Wildlife Refuges www.fws.gov/refuges are excellent bird habitats, and they have skilled staffers to help you get started. Many even hold free birding classes. Another great resource is the National Park Service www.nps.gov.

"What starts out as a hobby can become a lifelong passion," said Freeman, who has been an avid birder for four years and now teaches children and adults to enjoy the sport. "Once you get into it, you begin to realize how much there is to learn and how fascinating it can be. If you feel you've learned enough about the species in your area, then do what the birds do – migrate!"

For more information, visit www.visitchesapeake.com/whattodo/birding/ or call the Chesapeake, Va., Conventions & Tourism toll-free at 888-889-5551.

About Chesapeake, Va., Conventions & Tourism

Based in southeast Virginia, the city of Chesapeake boasts more than 4,000 available hotel rooms and some of the strongest attractions, accommodations and meeting spaces in the area. Chesapeake Conventions & Tourism (CCT) strives to promote, market and sell the city as a destination for meetings, conventions and individual travelers, fostering economic development and benefiting and supporting members and the overall business community.

Because of its location and highway network, Chesapeake provides easy access to several other cities in the Tidewater region including Virginia Beach, Norfolk and Williamsburg, all of which are less than an hour away. The City of Chesapeake is home to several stops along the Civil War Trail and its Great Dismal Swamp is nationally recognized as a stop on the historical Underground Railroad. In addition to rich history, Chesapeake is home to the Great Dismal Swamp National Wildlife Refuge and hosts a thriving outdoor community with thousands of unspoiled acres for kayaking, birding and fishing.

Chesapeake is a part of the statewide Virginia Green program which aims to reduce the environmental impact of the tourism industry. Chesapeake is also rated by the FBI as one of the top five safest cities of its size in the U.S., and *Money* magazine proclaimed it as one of the six best places in America to live. For more information on Chesapeake Conventions & Tourism, visit www.visitchesapeake.com