

SARAH HANKINS

she/they



What got you into birding?

I was raised in a very birdy family who taught me how to love and enjoy nature, yet I never felt much of a pull to get seriously into birding. When I moved to Washington 10 years ago, I was seeking a deeper connection with the natural world. Slowing down enough to notice birds and plants made me feel more grounded. Recalling the name of a bird or a flower, after filing it through my brain, was such a delightful feeling! Getting to share that feeling with others is the best.

What can people expect from a bird outing with you?

Heartfelt conversation, enthusiasm, a safe place to be whatever level of birder you are, and encouragement for you to show up authentically as yourself. Also, a whole lot of laughter. We will be kind to each other, and kind to nature and slow down enough to get to know each other.

What values do you lead with?

Empathy, integrity, kindness, openness, and respect.

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How did you acquire your knowledge? Are you self-taught, trained in a school, had a mentor?

I grew up seeing my parents excitement over a western tanager in their backyard. I was always around birders who were casually birding. As an adult I had the pleasure of working as a tour guide at the Ballard Locks alongside some incredible women who knew a lot about the natural world. These women inspired me. I attended Ed Dominguez's bird walks at Seward Park and loved how he was truly a naturalist—he had a holistic way of talking about what we were seeing. He encouraged me to cultivate my own path with self led exploration. And then I got hired at Birds Connect Seattle and I learned so much from my coworkers! Curiosity and a desire to always be growing are major driving forces in my life.

What is your personal approach/mindset toward birding?

It's rather meditative—Slow down, begin to tune into the sounds around you, use all of your senses, let nature delight you! When watching a bird and trying to identify it ask yourself: what behavior is the bird displaying? What habitat is it in? Is it solitary or communal? Like my brother in law says to my niece, let's be nature detectives!

Where do you personally see the intersectionality of birding and creating safe spaces for folks who have often been left out of the conversation before?

I grew up seeing birding as an activity that was dominated by affluent white folks, particularly men. As a neurodivergent queer person, it's really important to me to help facilitate a safe and welcoming space for all to connect with the delight of birding. Nature is for everyone and one of the most joyful things for me is seeing folks of all different walks of life find joy in birding. I seek to be sensitive to the needs of others and help create a safe space where all are welcome—all questions, all gender expressions, all backgrounds, all life experiences. Every human being deserves to benefit from a connection to nature and I am intentional about fostering that environment.



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Do you have an area of expertise or focus that you prefer?

I'd definitely say that my birding knowledge is very locally based. I began really paying attention to birds while living in Washington, so our local residents as well as migrating visitors to the greater Seattle area is my strong suit. My desire is to expand my knowledge as I get to explore more places on our planet with a birding focus! I am particularly fond of Woodpeckers and Waterfowl.

What was the best advice you got when starting out as a birder?

Spend time outside! Bird with other folks you can learn from! Lead with curiosity! Have a blast! Find what gets you excited and build from there!

What is your favorite ecosystem to bird in?

I really love a good estuary—the convergence of fresh water and salt water create such a special environment for wildlife and witnessing different bird behaviors. Plus, I often get to see harbor seals (my favorite animal!) while birding. Great places to do this are the Ballard Locks and the Nisqually River Delta.

Dare I ask, what your favorite bird is?!

How to choose a favorite bird? I have many! Red Breasted Sapsuckers, Red Breasted Nuthatches, Scrub and Stellar's Jays, Cedar Waxwings, Osprey, Goldeneyes!

