

Birding as an Activity System

Piper Coe

In this article, Piper Coe compares two activity systems she was and is a part of as a child and an adult. Both systems are birding and have similar and different tools, members, and goals. She compares the complex literacies of each system, how both systems are still valuable despite looking different, and how our understanding of activity can change over time.

Introduction

Once, my mom let me pick out a “toy” at Target on a shopping trip, and of course, my ADHD brain picked out a ceramic blue bird figure from the home decor section. It might not make sense for a child to play with a ceramic bird over something like a stuffed toy, but because my mom already owned a ceramic duck that I loved, this seemed like something to add to the collection (because, of course, everything has to be a collection). Thus began my obsession with birds, which cultivated a lifelong hobby and fascination. Birding has always been a part of my life, and will continue to be. Whether it is spending six hours in the freezing cold looking for eagles nesting at Lake Bloomington or watching roadrunners, well, run in the streets of Arizona, there is nothing more enjoyable to me than birding. Birding, more commonly known as birdwatching, is the act of observing and enjoying birds (McGregor). It can be either a recreational activity or for scientific purposes. I’ve been birdwatching for most of my life, and in this article,

Activity Systems

Activity systems refer to “cooperative interactions aimed at achieving a goal” (ISU Writing Program).

I will be looking at the activity system of birding through two lenses—what birding looked like when I was younger and what it looks like now—and the complex literacies of each.

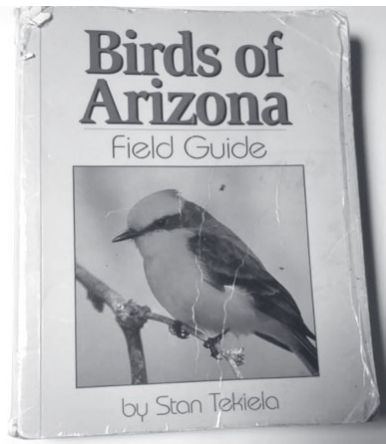


Figure 1: A picture of Piper’s copy of Stan Tekiela’s field guide.

Birding as a Fledgling

Besides the *Sesame Street* series and the book *Giraffes Can’t Dance*, Stan Tekiela’s *Birds of Arizona Field Guide* (Figure 1) sticks out in my mind as something I was obsessed with as a kid. My brother, Brighton, bought this pocket-sized yellow book from Barnes & Noble one day, and we proceeded to spend hours poring over it; I loved the colorful birds, especially the blue ones. Brighton explained to me what a field guide was used for, and I was amazed that these bright birds resided somewhere in the barren desert of Arizona. I knew then that I wanted to go out and find these birds—a seemingly simple task in the mind of five-year-old Piper.

Literate Activity

Literate activity refers to the activities of humans in the world that involve different kinds of reading, writing, languaging, and communicating using all kinds of different tools and resources. When we’re learning new skills and abilities, we’re also engaged in a range of literate activities as we learn.

As a young kid, however, I was unable to read. I relied on my dad to read me books at bedtime, and the field guide (unfortunately) was not one in the rotation of nighttime stories. Rather than reading the field guide in a traditional way, I had to learn new literacies to engage in this literate activity. **Literate activity** and literacies don’t just mean being able to read and write—it’s about learning new skills, abilities, and knowledge while also knowing who to ask for help when you want to accomplish a goal.

As I was developing my birding literacies, I relied on the people in my activity system when I had questions or needed support to reach my simple birdwatching goal: looking at birds. Brighton, my mom, my dad, and my sister, Kennedy, were a part of my system as a kid. Brighton knew how to read, so he read the pages to me, and I asked him questions about what he had read. I wondered if the birds we looked at in the field guide were ones we saw in the front or backyard, playground, or road. My mom was born in Arizona and knew facts about cacti, so I assumed she had other nature-related knowledge, and I relied on her to tell

me on the fly about different birds and calls I heard in our backyard. When my dad and I went on hikes in the mountains, he would tell me about wildlife and nature, which fostered my natural literacies (i.e., my understanding of the natural world and how to “read” nature). And finally, Kennedy was there to support me. She also loved reading the book with Brighton and me, so she and I would spend time flipping through the pages, marking off in the back of the book birds we thought we identified, and looking at the pictures when no one was available to read it to us. This act is a common means of identification while birding and is generally called a nonalphabetic literate system. Although not a traditional understanding of literacy—but still a very valuable one—“reading” pictures was a new skill we learned to look for birds outside of our windows. I learned rather quickly that the colorful birds that Kennedy and I admired, like the Western Scrub-Jay (Figure 2), Lazuli Bunting (Figure 3), and American Goldfinch (Figure 4), were harder to find outside than we thought. Just because the bird was in the book didn’t mean it would be outside our window.



Figure 2: A Western Scrub-Jay (Burton).



Figure 3: A Lazuli Bunting (Bonello).



Figure 4: An American Goldfinch (Kramer).

Because of our geographic location, we were limited in what birds we could see. My family and I only took part in this activity in our house and surrounding areas. Since we were kids who could not drive or get very far on foot or by scooter, we participated in the activity of backyard birding. Another thing that was not outside our window was a bird feeder. Although we were learning how to identify birds by watching, birds did not sit in one place long enough to give us time to determine what they might be, unlike if they were feeding at a feeder, which would have given us more time to watch.

As we were limited in various ways, we were required to learn new skills and adapt to this system in a way that would work for us. I developed new birding literacies, like learning to ask questions about the activity I was participating in. I engaged in a nonalphabetic literate system, which goes hand in hand with learning how to identify birds by watching them. I also interacted with the members of my activity system in a way that would help me achieve my goals.

All of this knowledge of birding and the new literacies that I gained as a kid transferred over to my experiences birding as an adult. In the next section, I will describe how this knowledge was transferred, what new skills and literacies I have developed, and how the system looks different.

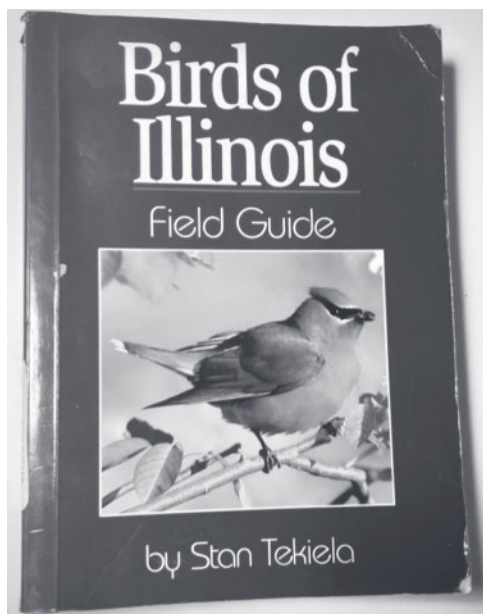


Figure 5: Piper's current copy of Stan Tekiela's Illinois field guide.

Birding as an Adult

Now that I live in Illinois, I have a copy of Stan Tekiela's *Birds of Illinois Field Guide* (Figure 5). Rather than being a pocket-sized yellow book, my Illinois copy is a mud-smearred pocket-sized purple book. People like my dad and Kennedy are still a part of my system, but the way we interact in the system is a bit different. I do not have to rely on them to read the field guide to me, and Kennedy and I do not spend hours poring over the pictures. However, we communicate and interact in the system in a way that is still collaborative. For example, we help each other with identification when it is challenging. We do this in person when we are birding together, or sometimes we do it over the

phone when someone takes a picture of a bird they don't recognize. We are all equally excited about birds; we all have the same tools, such as binoculars and birding apps; and we all have the same goal—to see birds!

Now that I can read the field guide independently, I use this tool in a few ways that reflect my growth as a reader. I utilize the descriptions listed in the book next to the images (which I still use to help me identify) of the bird. I also bookmark pages in the guide to revisit if I am uncertain of an identification I have made so that I can verify it with the Cornell Lab of Ornithology and Audubon Society websites (Figures 6 and 7) when I get back to my apartment. I am an adult who can drive long distances to look for birds that I am interested in locating based on what is shown in the field guide. The John Wesley Powell Audubon Society is the Normal, IL, chapter of the Audubon Society, and I am a part of their Facebook group. Birders in the community and Illinois in general post their sightings, questions, and group activities that members and the public can attend. When I visit their Facebook page and see birds being posted that were sighted close to me, I go out and look for them—this is how I have previously ended up spending hours with my dad looking for Bald Eagles (Figure 8) and the Eastern Screech Owl (Figure 9). Social media



Figure 6: The Cornell Lab of Ornithology website.



Figure 7: The Audubon Society website.



Figure 8: A Bald Eagle (Hillebrand).



Figure 9: An Eastern Screech Owl (Brigida).

is a digital tool I use while birding, allowing me to expand the reach of my passion. My activity system is embedded in this more extensive community comprising all types of birders, ranging from amateurs to professionals.

I also have a pair of binoculars to locate birds from afar. Having them shows an embodied understanding of birding that differs from before because when I was a kid, I merely used my eyes. Now that I have binoculars, I take field sketches and notes and go hiking or walking to locate birds. Although birding is traditionally understood as a physical activity, I did not engage in the physical aspect as a kid the way I do now. It is one thing to look at pictures or out the window, but it's another to get out and hike for hours to find a specific bird species. Of course, even though I no longer rely on backyard birding, I still participate in this when I am at school, looking out the car window, or staying at my parents' house (they have a neat stone birdbath with a feeder that I like to watch).

I use new (and old) tools when I go birding. When I go birding with my dad and sister, we use a green laser to point at trees if the others struggle to locate the bird. I still use the physical field guides, but I now have access to online guides with more capabilities. Digital field guides have a catalog system allowing you to mark off what birds you think you saw, where, and at what time. This tool is a more precise way of tracking sightings that is different from what I did as a kid. Before, we would merely mark off the checklist in the back of the book. The online field guides also have recordings of birdcalls that are easy to reference. I spend time listening to birdcalls that I am likely to encounter in my day-to-day life so that I don't have to wonder what I am listening to. Speaking of birdcalls, this is another nonalphabetic

literate system that I can now engage in. I am able to “read” calls that I hear and use those to identify what bird might be singing. For example, I can identify a band of Blue Jays (Figure 10) based on their holler.



Figure 10: A Blue Jay (Miles).

I use both of these transferred and developed literacies to achieve the goal of my system: looking at birds. This activity is a passion that has stayed with me since childhood. As I continue to grow, both as a person and a bird enthusiast, I know I will keep developing my birding literacies. I have more tools at my disposal and a community that is helping me achieve my goal.

I'll Always Keep Binoculars in My Bag

The activities I have described have specific patterns that have stayed the same from childhood to adulthood. For example, I still rely on my family, who are a part of my activity system and community, to help and support me in birding. I use Stan Tekiela's field guide in a similar way, like engaging in nonalphabetic literacies when I "read" the pictures. I also still ask other birders questions about what birds I see, though my questions are more specific. Despite my growth, in age and as a reader, some of the literacies I engage in have stayed the same. There are some differences, however, like introducing technology into my birding practices. Now that I have access to the Audubon and Cornell websites, my experiences with birding have been further complicated and greatly improved. These digital tools have made a huge impact on how I bird.

Although my birding literacies have changed as I have developed a more complex understanding of the world around me, this activity wasn't any less enjoyable as a child who couldn't read than it is now as an English major in college. There has been a transfer of knowledge from childhood to adulthood while also an acquisition of new knowledge that is helping me look at, understand, and appreciate birds, which is always an exciting and wonderful thing. So, the next time you see a bird outside your window, take a moment with it. You might just find yourself picking up a new hobby!

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Notes

