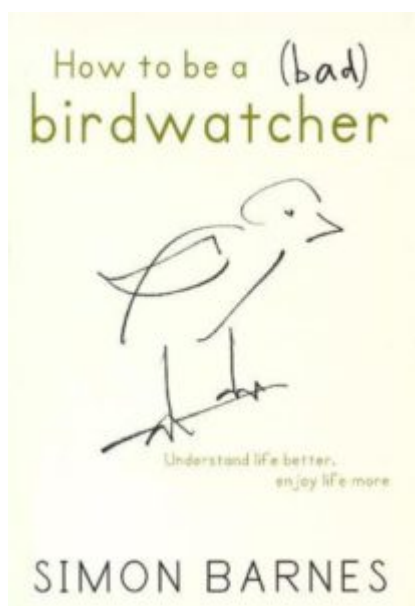


[evergreenaudubon.org](https://www.evergreenaudubon.org)

## How to be a bad birdwatcher – Evergreen Audubon

4-5 minutes

---



**Simon Barnes is a most unlikely individual to be writing a book about birdwatching. He is an award-winning chief sportswriter for *The Times* (London, UK) and author of a dozen books, including three on wildlife. He lives in Suffolk, UK, where he is proud to be a bad birdwatcher. His dedication at the opening of the book is classic: “To my father—the first bad birdwatcher I ever met. He taught me all he knew.”**

Barnes declares in his first sentence, “I am a Bad Birdwatcher.” However, he argues, when it comes to enjoying birds, he is a first class enjoyer. When he started out, he didn’t even own

binoculars because he couldn't use them in a London pub. He wasn't even looking for birds. But, he was looking at birds, being outdoors, being aware of the wildlife around him, even on the streets of London.

On one walk, he enjoys watching the house martins swirling around a church steeple. Then, suddenly, a hobby (a small falcon) crashes into the martins. A stunning drama—a peak experience for a bird watcher.

The same thing happened to Bill and me this evening. We were having dinner out on the porch, watching the hummingbirds at our five feeders. We finally sighted a male Calliope. We've been looking out for him for several days now. Then, wham. Right over Bill's head, not inches above the chair's back, a sharp-shinned hawk slammed into the mob of hummers, turned on a dime, and landed in the Ponderosa behind us. Didn't see a hummer in his grasp, so it looks like he turned up short. But what drama! The exact experience that Barnes recounts. Full of contradictions, from ordinary enjoyment to “dangerous delight.”

“Rather like life, really. And that is what bad birdwatching is all about. Life, that is to say,” Barnes remarks.

*How to be a bad birdwatcher* is a pretty quick book. In a 198 fast-read pages, Barnes imparts lots of advice for being a bad birdwatcher. He suggests you get a bird book, one that helps you tell one bird from another, known as a field guide. Of course, you're not supposed to carry it into the field. If you're a twitcher, the name Brits give to fanatical birders, you are already supposed to know every bird you see. If you don't, you take extensive, and largely incomprehensible to outsiders, field notes

(such as, face is dull grayish, with slightly darker cheek, whitish mustachial stripe beginning at base of upper mandible). But a basic bird book is a good idea for a bad birdwatcher.

Barnes compares bird watching with observing a football match (British for soccer). Of course, he's a sportswriter, so he actually knows the Manchester United players by sight. He tells us they have "different haircuts, different faces, different skin colors, different ways of moving...." He even has a team sheet, football's field guide. Luckily the players have numbers on their backs, not so with birds. But you can't always see the numbers, so you have to use different cues—how they move, how they score, where they turn up.

Actually, birders call this "jizz." Jizz is about just knowing which bird it is by having an overall impression, a general notion of shape and size and movement and place. Barnes quotes a friend whom he asks, "How do you know it's a lapwing." The answer: "just is."

*How to be a bad birdwatcher* is fun to read. It's filled with great advice on becoming a better bad birdwatcher. It has lots of funny stories and great experiences. You'll love it. Read it if you're in a bad mood. It will make you laugh.

Short Books, London, 2004.