The Birder's Dictionary

A TO Z

What birders mean by lifer, dip, spuh and butterbutt, and where the words came from

A

ABA The American Birding Association. It keeps the official list of birds for the US and Canada, the ABA Checklist, and the listing rules many birders follow.

ABA Area The region those lists cover: the lower 48 states, Alaska, Hawaii, Canada and the French islands of St. Pierre and Miquelon, plus the ocean out to 200 miles.

Accidental A bird far from its usual range that has turned up only a handful of times. On the ABA Checklist, Code 5.

Alpha code A four-letter short form of a bird's English name: AMRO for American Robin, NOCA for Northern Cardinal. Bird banders have long used them. Also called a banding code.

Armchair lifer A species added to your list by a split, not by a sighting: scientists divided a bird you had already seen. In Britain, an armchair tick.

B

Big Day A try at finding as many species as possible in one day.

Big Sit A day's count of all the birds seen or heard from one small circle.

Big Year A year-long try at the most species you can find, January to December, in an area you choose.

Bins Short for binoculars. You'll also hear "binos" and "binocs."

Birdathon A Big Day that raises money: teams count birds and collect pledges for conservation.

Birder Someone who enjoys watching wild birds. The American word, first recorded in 1945, in *Audubon Magazine*.

Birding by ear Finding and naming birds by their songs and calls. For some look-alikes, such as the empids, it's the surest way.

Blocker British slang for a bird that has turned up in the country only once, or not for many years, so anyone who missed it has little hope of adding it. When it finally comes back, it's "unblocked."

Bogey bird The British nemesis bird: not especially rare, but one you've never managed to see.

Butterbutt The Yellow-rumped Warbler, for the yellow patch above its tail.



BUTTERBUTT

The Yellow-rumped Warbler, known to birders as the butterbutt

John James Audubon, The Birds of America (1840–44)

BVD "Better view desired": a bird you're sure of, but saw so briefly that you'd like a better look.

C

Casual A rare bird that doesn't turn up every year but has a pattern of records. ABA Code 4.

CBC The Christmas Bird Count, the National Audubon Society's winter count, held every year since Christmas Day 1900.

Chase To go after a rare bird that someone else has found. The British word is twitch.

Checklist Two things: the official list of birds for a place, or your own list of the birds you found on one outing, with the date, the place and the time.

Code 1 to Code 6 The ABA's rarity codes, from widespread to no longer found. The table is on the last page.

Confusing fall warblers Warblers in their duller autumn feathers. The phrase is Roger Tory Peterson's: his first field guide, in 1934, gave them pages of their own.

Countable Allowed on your list under the rules you follow. Under the ABA's, the bird has to be alive, wild and unrestrained, and named to species by sight or sound.

County list Every species you've seen in one county.

Crippler British slang for a rare bird so beautiful, or so big, that it leaves you weak at the knees.

D

Dip, dipped out To miss the bird you went to see. The bird you missed can itself be called a dip.

Dirty bird In New Jersey's World Series of Birding, a bird that not every team member saw or heard.

Dude A British twitchers' word, said "dood," for a casual birder who likes fine weather and is happy with common birds.

E

Empid Any of the small olive flycatchers in the genus *Empidonax*. They look so alike that voice is the best clue.

Endemic Found in one region and nowhere else.

Escape A cage or zoo bird living loose. It isn't wild under the ABA's rules, so it doesn't count.

F

Fallout When bad weather forces a flood of migrating birds to land all at once. High Island, Texas, is famous for them.

Field mark A feature that sets a bird apart from its look-alikes: a wing bar, an eye-ring, a tail pattern.

FOY, FOS First of year and first of season: the first time this year, or this season, that you see a species.

G

GBBC The Great Backyard Bird Count, held every February since 1998.

GISS, or jizz A bird's overall look, its shape, size, posture and way of moving, that lets you name it at a glance. Many birders read GISS as "general impression of size and shape," but "jizz" was in print by 1922, in T. A. Coward's *Bird Haunts and Nature Memories*.

Gripped off British slang for being beaten to a bird: someone grips you off when they see the bird you missed.



LBJ

Song Sparrows: small, brown and streaky, the kind of bird birders call an LBJ

John James Audubon, The Birds of America (1827–38)

H

Hawk watch A lookout, often on a ridge or a coast, where people count migrating hawks, eagles and falcons. Pennsylvania's Hawk Mountain, founded in 1934, calls itself the first refuge for birds of prey.

Heard-only A bird you identified by its voice alone. Under the ABA's rules it counts.

Hotspot A place known for good birding, which many birders visit and report from.

I

Irruption A winter when northern birds, such as finches, come south in large numbers, usually because their food ran short up north.

K

Kettle A flock of hawks circling together in the sky on migration.

L

LBJ "Little brown job": any small, streaky brown bird that's hard to tell from the others, often a sparrow.

Life bird Another word for a lifer.

Life list Every species you've ever identified, by sight or sound, each counted once. The phrase dates to 1900.

Lifer A species you see, or hear and identify, for the first time in your life. The word dates to 1958.

Lifer dance A small celebration on the spot when you see a lifer.

Lifer pie A slice of pie eaten to celebrate a lifer. Kimberly Kaufman named it at Blackberry Corners, a family restaurant in Martin, Ohio.

Lister A birder who keeps lists and enjoys watching them grow: life, year, state, county or yard.

Lump When scientists merge two or more species into one. A bird can drop off your list.

M

Mega A very rare bird, the kind that sends birders running. In the US and Canada, an ABA Code 4 or 5.

Migrant trap A patch of trees or shrubs, often on a coast, where tired migrants drop in to rest and feed.

N

Nemesis bird A species you have looked for again and again without ever seeing it, often while everyone around you seems to find it easily.

O

Owling Going out at night to look and listen for owls.

P

Patagonia Picnic Table Effect The belief that one rare bird draws so many birders that they find more rare birds nearby. Named for a rest area near Patagonia, Arizona. Researchers who tested it in 2021 found "little support."

Patch The place near home you bird again and again: a town park, a pond, or just your street.

Peeps The small sandpipers.

Pelagic Of the open ocean. As a noun, a boat trip far offshore to see seabirds.

Pish, pishing A hushing "psssh, psssh" sound birders make to draw small birds out of cover. It copies the scolding calls songbirds give when they spot an owl or a hawk.

Playback Playing a recording of a bird's song or call to draw it in. Madison Audubon's advice: never in the breeding and nesting season, and sparingly at other times.

R

Raptor A bird of prey: hawks, eagles, falcons, kites, the Osprey and owls.

Rare bird alert A list, page or group where birders report rare birds as they're found.

Review species A bird so rare in a state that its records committee asks for a description or photos before accepting a report.

S

Seawatch Watching the sea from land, often for hours, as seabirds fly past.

Siesta time The middle of the afternoon, when most birds go quiet and out of sight.

Slash A record of a bird that was one of two species, without knowing which, written with a slash: "Greater/Lesser Yellowlegs."

SOB "Spouse of birder."

Spark bird The bird that got you hooked on birding.

Split One species divided into two or more by the scientists who keep the lists.

Spuh A bird you could name only to its group, such as "gull sp." The "sp." is short for species; said aloud, it becomes "spuh."

Stakeout A rare bird that stays in one known place for days or weeks, so birders can come and see it.

Stringer A birder who reports rare birds they didn't really see, or keeps mistaking common birds for rarities.

T

Tick A species added to a list; to tick a bird is to see it and count it. This sense dates to 1975.

Trash bird Some birders' name for a species so common where they live that they stop looking at it. Many now avoid the term.

Twitch, twitcher A long trip at short notice for a rare bird, and the birder who makes it. British: "twitcher" was first recorded in 1974, in *The Guardian*.

V

Vagrant A bird far outside its normal range.

W

Warbler neck The sore neck you get from staring up into the treetops for warblers.

World Series of Birding New Jersey Audubon's 24-hour birding contest and fundraiser. It began at midnight on May 19, 1984, with 13 teams.

Y

Yard list Every species you've seen from your home and yard.

Year list The species you find between January 1 and December 31; it starts from zero each new year.

FIRST IN PRINT, THE RARITY CODES AND THE SOURCES

Where the words come from

FIRST IN PRINT

1900	1922	1934	1945	1958	1974	1975
life list Oxford English Dictionary	**jizz** T. A. Coward, *Bird Haunts and Nature Memories*	**confusing fall warblers** Roger Tory Peterson's first field guide	**birder** *Audubon Magazine*	**lifer** Oxford English Dictionary	**twitcher** *The Guardian*	**tick** Oxford English Dictionary

The dictionary dates are the Oxford English Dictionary's earliest examples, as reported by Wordnik.

THE ABA'S RARITY CODES

CODE	WHAT IT MEANS	THE ABA'S EXAMPLE
1	Regular: widespread and usually numerous	*American Robin*
2	Regular, but with a restricted range, in low numbers, or secretive	*Spectacled Eider*
3	Rare: very low numbers, but every year	*Ferruginous Pygmy-Owl*
4	Casual: not every year, but six or more records, three or more of them in the past 30 years	*Black-tailed Gull*
5	Accidental: five records at most, or fewer than three in the last 30 years	*Amazon Kingfisher*
6	Cannot be found: probably or actually extinct or gone from the region, or only in captivity	

The American Birding Association's words, shortened, with its own examples.

SOURCES

Audubon magazine: "The Audubon Dictionary for Birders" (Purbita Saha, 2015); Nicholas Lund's Birdist columns (2016–17); "Birding Is its Own Reward, but 'Lifer Pie' Makes it Even Sweeter" (Andy McGlashen, 2019); "Inside Birding's Most Dramatic 24 Hours" (2018)

Wordnik: "Twitchers, Megas, and Life Lists" (Angela Tung, 2020), with first uses as dated by the Oxford English Dictionary

Madison Audubon, now the Southern Wisconsin Bird Alliance: "Twitching, Pishing, and Dipping, oh my!" (Caitlyn Schuchhardt, 2020)

American Birding Association: the ABA Checklist codes; ABA Recording Rules and Interpretations (2020)

Fatbirder: "Twitching Terminology"

10,000 Birds: "The Truth About Jizz" (2011); "What is an Empidonax Flycatcher?" (2008)

BirdNote: "How Well Do You Know Your Birder Lingo?" (2019)

The Institute for Bird Populations: Alpha Codes for North American Birds

Bob Duchesne, *Bangor Daily News*: "Warblers remain confusing to many" (2012)

Oregon State University, via ScienceDaily: the Patagonia Picnic Table Effect study (2021)

Hawk Mountain Sanctuary; New Jersey Audubon; US Fish and Wildlife Service; A Way with Words; Hitchcock Center for the Environment; Golden Gate Bird Alliance; The Nature Conservancy

Every source, with its link and the longer story of each word: mybirdfolio.com/guides/birding-terms

ABOUT THIS DICTIONARY

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ABOUT BIRDFOLIO

Birdfolio prints a birder's own life list as a hardcover book, every species beside a classic painting.