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## Why I . . . birdwatch

GP Ray Shrouder tells **Marika Davies** how birdwatching has become an escape from the pressures of work

Marika Davies

For Lincolnshire GP Ray Shrouder, birdwatching is not just about the birds. “It’s about fresh air and countryside, discovering something new, and a bit of detective work. It just takes your mind somewhere different,” he says. “It detaches you from the stresses of the day, and it helped me cope with an awful year at the practice.”

Every weekend Shrouder takes binoculars and a camera and visits the local countryside accompanied by his Newfoundland dog and often one of his children. “We just walk around seeing what we can see,” he says. “While you’re looking it makes you more amenable to talking about other things, rather than worrying about the Monday ahead.”

Shrouder’s interest in birds began as a young boy, when his father took him to see a natural phenomenon known as an irruption of winter birds. “There were hundreds of waxwings, really beautiful birds, in a wood near where I grew up,” he recalls. “It was enough to spark a lifelong interest.”

As a GP trainee Shrouder enjoyed visiting local birding sites with his trainer during their Friday lunch breaks, and he would always carry his binoculars with him on holiday. But his hobby was given a new lease of life in 2016 when his wife bought him a camera for Christmas.

“Until then I worried about not being able to identify birds properly, but the camera meant that I could study what I’d seen,” he says. “I started really looking at things, and it became more of a passion than a hobby.”

Since then Shrouder has taken photographs of 199 different species, which he keeps in an album on his phone. “I’m not trying to take a perfect picture to win any competitions,” he says. “It’s to record shots of what I’ve seen so I can look back at what’s happened over a period of time.”

He is hoping his 200th photograph will be of a local bird. “I’m trying to save it for a Lincolnshire bird, or more local than that if I can,” he says.

Social media also helped to develop Shrouder’s interest in birdwatching. “There’s a network of people on Twitter and WhatsApp telling each other what’s going on,” he says. “That sort of communication makes it easy to go and see things.”

Many birdwatchers enjoy finding rare birds, but Shrouder takes greater pleasure in observing the different species that visit his local area through the seasons. “I enjoy finding things there, things that I’ve never seen before, rather than rushing off to see a rare bird.”

He takes part in the Patchwork Challenge,<sup>1</sup> in which birdwatchers choose an area and log all the species they see over the year, and has registered a sewage works near his practice as his patch. “When you go to the same patch you see it evolve over the seasons,” he says. “It normally starts with the warblers, then the swallows and house martins and swifts, then they all depart and you get the winter thrushes like redwings and fieldfares.”

Shrouder says birdwatching is a simple hobby that has been easy to do during covid-19 restrictions. “It’s a hobby that anyone could pick up, all you need is somewhere to go, some binoculars, a camera, and a book,” he says. “In a time when a lot of people are under stress, and limited in what they can do, this really fits.”

“I recommend just opening your eyes to what’s around you and start off by looking out your own window at your garden to see what wildlife is about,” suggests Shrouder. “See if that stimulates your interest. If it does, start looking at your local parks and get yourself a camera.”

### How to start birdwatching

- If you have a garden, put a birdbath and some feeders there. Choose a variety of food such as seeds, nuts, and suet to attract different species
- Take part in the annual Royal Society for the Protection of Birds garden birdwatch<sup>2</sup> and spend an hour recording the birds that you see
- Get a bird guidebook or download an identification app on your phone
- Take a pair of binoculars and visit a park, countryside, or local nature reserve
- Follow local birding groups on social media to find out what is happening in your area.

Follow Ray Shrouder on Twitter @RayShrouder

1 Patchwork Challenge. <https://patchworkchallenge.com>.

2 RSPB. Big garden birdwatch. [www.rspb.org.uk/get-involved/activities/bird-watch](http://www.rspb.org.uk/get-involved/activities/bird-watch).