

## Get Wild: Birding with youngsters

Liz Roush



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*Courtesy photo*

Binoculars, check. “Sibley Bird Guide,” check. Spotting scope, check. eBird app, check. Stroller, diaper bag, snacks (several), sunscreen, toy truck, strider bike, helmet, check. Oh yeah, and one toddler, check.

The Colorado rare bird alert is out and an intrepid birder identified a common loon here in Summit County — not an opportunity we can pass up. While these birds are a common sight in northern lakes, their arrival in Colorado is worth loading up “all the things” and setting off to see for ourselves!

When you imagine someone birding, you might picture a quiet stroll, listening and looking for birds. This is not us. We are loud, and make frequent stops to observe trucks going by. Puddles are stomped, and outfits are accordingly changed. We get dangerously low on snacks, even before we make it to the loon’s location. However, perseverance (and bribery) wins the day, and we arrive more or less in one piece.

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Today we are lucky: The loon surfaces not far from where we are standing. Even without binoculars, the bird is unmistakable: large pointed bill, dark head, red eye and a white-and-black checkerboard on its back. It is captivating enough that even a 2-year-old can spare a full 3.5 minutes out of his busy day to watch, observe and ask questions.

It is a lot of work for these few minutes. Not all birds are as exciting as a loon, and we have had many adventures where we came home with only a rogue pigeon to report. Being a birder requires patience, and birding with kids also demands adaptability, preparation and a willingness to let go of expectations. The most exciting part of our day might be the concrete mixer we saw on our

way home, but even then, the time spent out with our loaded-down stroller is worth the effort.

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Unlike much of the wildlife in Summit, birds can be found everywhere. And they are everywhere, if you take the time to look. You can get within inches of the pugnacious little Rufous Hummingbird at your window feeder and watch Pygmy Nuthatches stash seeds all along your front porch railing. Birding offers the opportunity for everyone —from toddlers deep in a “truck phase” to the visitors on skis for the first time — to connect and engage with the local environment. If we pause for a moment and look for the birds around us every day, we can change our narrative — there is wonder and wildness even in the most urban of landscapes.

Experiencing birds is not something we can take for granted. A changing climate and habitat loss impact the local populations of some of our hardiest high-elevation birds. When I get the chance to see a rosy-finch or a ptarmigan, I wonder if my son will have the same opportunity when he is grown. My love of these birds drives me to make more sustainable choices — and to brave the adventure of taking a toddler out to see them. In addition to the intrinsic value of the birds themselves, a recent study reported that simply seeing and hearing birds can result in improved mental health, lasting even after the interaction with the bird is over. We need birds just as much as they need us.

I don’t know if my son will grow up to love watching birds like I do. But I believe that the time spent outside together with our binoculars will have some impact on the person he will become. Birding is for everyone, and just might be a path forward to finding sustainable balance and a deeper connection with the natural world.



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*Courtesy photo*

**“Get Wild” publishes on Fridays in the Summit Daily News. Liz Roush is a college counselor and sustainability teacher at the Peak School. This column is organized by Eagle Summit Wilderness Alliance, an all-volunteer nonprofit that helps to protect and preserve the wilderness areas in Eagle and Summit counties. For more information, visit [EagleSummitWilderness.org](http://EagleSummitWilderness.org).**