

Tips, Activities, and Ideas for Mentors and Chaperones of Birding Classic Youth Teams

If you have a passion for birds and the enthusiasm to take kids birding, then you are the perfect person to be a Roughwings or Gliders team chaperone or mentor! To make it easier for adults taking youth teams out in the field for the first (or even second or third!) time, past mentors and chaperones have put together tips, activities, and more on ways that worked for them. The information below is provided to help you mentor youth teams to learn how to bird, use field guides, become comfortable with optics, be better prepared for what to expect in the field, and experience the fun and challenge of a bird identification competition. We hope this helps!

First, some basic step-by-step advice from a multi-year chaperone/mentor:

- Start without binoculars and have the children spot birds in a park, at home, or from the car over a period of time, start with 5 to 10 minutes so they don't get frustrated before the fun begins. Have a mini-contest to see who can spot the next bird.
- Teach the youth the characteristics of hawks, wading birds, ducks/geese, and passerines using a field guide. Establish standard size birds for comparison, i.e. bigger or smaller than a mockingbird, or crow, or whatever standard you will make the most sense to the kids on your team.
- During practice events use a field guide to point out the field marks of birds as the team sees the bird, and use field marks to eliminate and/or identify species.
- Have them identify or describe 5 birds they see in their yard or in a park. Remind them to look carefully at size, color, color patterns, habitat, and behavior.
- Give each team member a seasonal checklist for the area you'll be birding and have them find the hawks and waders they should see at that time of month. [Ecoregional checklists](#) from TPWD or [State Park checklists](#) might be helpful for this activity.
- Have them talk about their experiences with birds. Ask which birds are their favorites and which do they really want to see in the field. Have them use the area checklist for possibilities on their list of favorites, and then plan a birding outing to find those specific birds.
- When birding, if they have not seen a bird that the leader sees, say "There's a new bird here that you all have not found – who can find it?" instead of pointing it out to them. Then get very excited when the team finds it and praise them highly.
- Have them practice telling each other where the bird is located without pointing, using a clock (the bird is up at 12 o'clock) or landmark (on the second branch from the top of that tree).

- Work on the common calls that you hear in the field (activities/ideas below on how to do this).
- Spend as much time as possible really looking at the birds seen in the field during practice. Ask a lot of questions about the bird while they are looking at it and trying to ID the bird. Help them learn to describe what they are looking at, what field marks to look for in an ID, and how to find bird families in a field guide quickly, possibly having each make a quick index for their field guide for different types of common (and uncommon!) birds.
- Have at least one practice four hour birding session where team should be prepared for the “Big Day” with appropriate attire, water and snacks. If they are having fun and don’t want to stop birding after four hours, you have a great team!!

Activities/Games to Help Teach/Learn Birds

- [Create team bird experts for certain common birds in your area:](#)
 - o Give each young person on the team a list of 10 common area birds for the region you plan to explore on competition day. Each member then becomes the “expert” on their 10 species and can teach their birds to the rest of the team and be the expert for those birds in the field. Your team has now begun the day knowing 30-50 birds already! Now you just need to find them!
 - o As the age increases or skills increase, each team member may be responsible for 15 or more species.
 - o By learning these 10 birds, each team member learns tips on how best to identify birds since they are learning about the field marks and bird calls for each of their species. This training will make it easier for them to look up new birds out in the field.
- [Help your team learn some birds by ear:](#)
 - o Kids can first learn by sight and some may prefer to learn the songs, so if you have them available, provide bird song CDs or playlists for the team or a birding app on your phone or tablet computer to listen to and teach them some of the common calls for your area.
 - o Create a simple CD or playlist with about 20 common bird calls on it and provide to each kid before the tournament so they can take it home and listen and learn some common bird calls.
- [Use flash cards:](#)
 - o Make flash cards for common area birds or purchase bird flash cards, and make up a game for your team.
- [Teach the kids how to use a field guide:](#)
 - o Help team become familiar with the sections of the book, how to read the maps, how to look up birds, etc.

- If possible, have every kid carry a field guide during practice days, and each bird they are not able to identify THEY have to look up and find in the guide. Then the team must collectively decide if that was a good ID before the adult mentor says yes or no. That way they learn the ID – and they learn the book!
- Conduct practice runs in the field:
 - Take teams (or potential team members) out on several birding trips well before the Birding Classic to practice the ID of local birds.
 - Practice runs help kids learn about what species are related to different habitats which can help (especially with older kids) them start to create a target species list for their tournament day.
- Engage area experts or bird clubs (might be you!) to share their birding knowledge, enthusiasm and passion:
 - Host one or more evenings where the team leaders get together with their teams and look at birds by slides or photos (with local birding experts) to get to know these birds and discuss their field markings that would be used to make an accurate ID on competition day.
 - See if any local birders might share binoculars, scopes, field guides, or even their mentorship on practice days or even the day of the tournament (reminding them that ID and bird location on the actual real tournament day is up to the kids – they are there to verify only!).
- Create a bird-a-thon within the Birding Classic to support a local birding project:
 - Is there a local birding habitat program the team could donate money to? If so, then team(s) could raise funds for habitat, i.e. much like a Big Day where a certain amount is pledged for each bird seen on competition day. The team could contribute these funds to an actual habitat effort in their own community! (similar to the larger conservation grants awarded by adult teams through the Birding Classic)

A Wonderful Problem: More than 5 Kids/Teens Want to Join My Team!

- Teams include 3-5 birding members (Roughwings are 13 years old or younger; Gliders are 14-18 years old) and as many mentors, chaperones, or other non-birding members as they would like on the day of the tournament. Mentors, chaperones, and other non-birding members MAY NOT assist in bird location or identification.
- If your school, scout troop, or other organization has more than 5 kids interested in doing a Roughwings team, consider enlisting additional mentors so that you can have multiple teams and no one is left out. Your teams can compete on the same or different days with the new flexible format.
- If having multiple teams will not work and you have more than 5 kids interested in participating, get creative on other roles additional people could have. You could have a mini-competition to determine which 5 kids are officially on the team and

then take the additional members with you on the birding day, with the understanding that they are not identifying or finding birds but who instead have different duties for the day:

- team photographer,
 - checklist record keeper,
 - blogger taking notes throughout the day so they can post about the team's experience (using the photographer's photos),
 - social media reporter to post real-time information of your day on Facebook, Twitter (#GTBC13), and/or Instagram (#GTBC13) with your team's highs and lows and any stories of interest from the day,
 - food provider (takes care of keeping team and other members hydrated and fed throughout the day), etc.
- Get creative and see what special skills each person could bring to the table! I've seen elementary school teachers do this with great success and they end up with a great, fully fleshed out record of their birding day(s) after the event. It's win-win!

Equipment – What to Bring

- Make sure there are plenty of binoculars and team leaders ready to help. Is there a local business or bird club that would be willing to lend the team binoculars and a scope or two for the day of the tournament?
- Contact a local bird club, library, local book club, or even your friends to find field guides for each team member to use on practice runs and on the official tournament day. They can be different guides – it might be useful to help compare details and notes from guide to guide to get a fuller picture of birds the team is trying to ID.
- Bring bug spray, sunscreen, hats, water, snacks and lunch, and anything else your team might need to have the most comfortable day birding possible.
- If visiting several state parks, purchasing a [State Park Pass](#) might be an economical choice since it will give you and everyone in your car entry into parks on practice run days and your tournament day.

On the Road!

- Take the team to sites during practice days that you know you will visit during competition so that they become familiar with the sites and birds there.
- If possible, make a few of the practice days start early to simulate a real field day.
- Encourage each team member to play a part in selecting the birding hot spots for the route.....this gives them "ownership" of their day.
- Get very excited when they find or identify a bird on their own. Show your pleasure in seeing their bird, and don't skimp on the praise.
- When driving and when safe, let them determine where to stop and what birds they want to look at – challenge them with who will spot the next bird.

Registration Fees and Team Sponsorship

- Teams pay either an independent registration fee per team member or find a sponsor (or sponsors) to pay a sponsored team registration fee. See [Registration Fees](#) for more information.
- If your team wants to incorporate the name of your school, scout troop, or other organization you must pay a sponsored team registration fee. Ideas for finding sponsorship can be found in the online [Team Sponsorship Tips](#). Here are some basics:
 - Approach local businesses such as grocery stores, sporting goods stores, restaurants you plan to frequent during the event, and any business that you have a personal tie to through parents, teachers, or team mentors to see if they would be interested in sponsoring your team.
 - If \$250 is too much for any one sponsor, think about seeking multiple smaller sponsors to add up to the \$250 fee so that they all become co-sponsors of your team.
 - Once you have a sponsor (or sponsors) on board for your full fee (and possibly some travel expenses – gas, food, snacks on the road), create a fun creative name for your team that reflects your organization.
 - Prepare a "report book" to give to each sponsor after the Classic containing a list of species seen, photos of the team in the field, and a thank you letter.