

Tip Guide: To Tip...Or Not To Tip Your Birding Guide?

... Birding “Tip-equette” from a guide who makes his living from birders who hire him — and tip him, he hopes

by Daniel Edelstein
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Did you tip your birding guide after a recent outing?

If so, how much?

Assisting your viewing pleasure and helping you add a bunch of lifers was certainly worth a few more coins in his or her pocket, correct?

Then again, did you even tip?

Don’t blush if you answered “no” to the above questions.

Given my 20+ years of guiding, I know how it feels to be left tipless after a day helping birders pursue their “wanna-see” birding list.

Granted, I am not complaining. I realize many birders have never hired a guide. It’s a new feeling to pay a stranger big bucks, even one who claims to be the second coming of Roger Tory Peterson.

So, for many birders, the idea of adding a gratuity onto an already expensive day’s outing conjures ambivalence.

The confusion about tipping etiquette happens in the following situation: it’s the end of our birding foray. Together, we’ve spent hours seeing lots of cool birds. We vigorously shake hands. Pleasantries are exchanged before we part. So is money.

When the payoff occurs, the birder’s wallet opens and I, the cordial guide, accept the agreed-upon fee.

But it’s also a drumroll Moment Of Truth: my birding clients either underline their satisfaction with a tip pressed into my palm — or it’s.....nothing.

The contrast of tip vs. no tip speaks loudly. It’s an “A” vs. an “F” grade. Simply, when there’s no tip, it’s a “thumbs down” review of my birding guide performance.

At least that’s the way I usually interpret the non-tipping birder’s behavior. My first reaction is to think: “Whoa, I must have done something wrong! Where did I screw up on today’s tour?”

More kind with my self-appraisal, I instead blame reality: for some birders, my \$200 all-day birding fee is steep. My tab nearly doubles when I drive from my distant residence into San Francisco to pick up birders. Consider, also, that some of my clients are retirees who subsist on a fixed income. Plus, because we're in a perpetually recovering economy, "Thrifty" would be an apt middle name for many people — whether they are birders or not.

Then again, after more than two decades of leading outings, I know the typical kind of birders that hire me. We get to know each other before an outing happens via the phone and emails. There's plenty of time for chit-chat in my vehicle from one birding stop to the next and we often become fast friends as an outing progresses.

They share how they discovered my guiding services on the Internet and why my background — more than 35 years of birding nearly daily and serving as a community college teaching ornithologist for the last 10 years — convinced them to choose me above a suite of other avian tour guide competitors in the San Francisco Bay Area. It's my challenge to prove them correct.

To do so, my character shines: More than helping birders see new species in prime time spots they would never find without a chaperone, I relish the opportunity to teach them how to hone their identification skills, while also interpreting the natural history of the birds they discover.

My effort includes pre-outing prep, such as scouting an area where we'll bird and consulting several Rare Bird Alerts to ensure I'll be at the top of my game in helping birders. Likewise, I give them local checklists and utilize specialized birding guides corresponding to the areas we visit. During the non-breeding season, I employ a high-fidelity audio playback device to coax birds into view that would otherwise remain unheard and unseen.

In short, my effort and avian expertise provides birders a premium experience, one deserving the "thumbs-up" approval review often uttered by my grandmother: "You get what you pay for."

Meanwhile, as a tour progresses, I continue to learn more about my fellow birders. I realize the vast majority could easily afford to tip their birding guides. Most are not retired, either. Instead, they almost always have excellent-paying jobs— six-figure jobs, in fact — an income level that supports a 2005 study conducted by the American Birding Association that found half of birding households earn more than \$90,000 annually.

Given the Moneyball games I note above, you may be wondering if I truly enjoy serving as a birding guide?

Of course. Absolutely.

It's an honor to share the joy of birds with people. Plus I often pinch myself when I'm afield and remind myself that I'm getting paid to watch birds all day.

But all good things must come to an end. Our tour time is up. Did you enjoy the birds I showed you?

And before you leave, look at me holding out my tin cup.

Clink. Tips welcome.

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Biography of Daniel Edelstein (www.warblerwatch.com):

Beyond leading birding tours, Daniel is a community college birding instructor (Merritt College, Oakland, CA) and freelance Certified Wildlife Biologist (associate) who has published articles in several publications since the 1980s.