



How to find locations for Bird Photography

ULTIMATE GUIDE TO FIND GOOD PLACES
TO TAKE BETTER BIRD PHOTOS

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Finding good locations is one of the most challenging and time-consuming aspects of bird photography.

You visit a place...but the bird species you wanted to see is not there or worse, there is no bird at all in sight, or birds are there but too far away for any good photo. Everyone has been there.

Location scouting requires a significant amount of time and effort. But you can optimize your process!

This eBook is the result of my direct in-the-field experience, in challenging situations. When I started bird photography, I had only recently moved to a new country which I didn't know at all and of which I (still) don't speak the local language. If I wanted to succeed, I had to set up a method to overcome these barriers. Then I tested it also traveling to other countries with no previous knowledge about the territory and no direct connections with local people.

In this eBook, I will share with you the **strategies** as well as **online resources** to select the best **public locations** for bird photography. You will not find here a list of locations but something much more valuable: a new way to approach your personal location search that you can apply wherever you are.

Are you ready?

About me



I am Chiara, bird photographer, birdwatcher and everything bird-related content creator. I met a European robin 3 years ago in a very challenging period of my life and that encounter changed it all. I found in birds my purpose.

From that moment, I started to study birds and photography and I traveled to improve my skills and knowledge in the field. I am a scientist by background with a degree in Veterinary Medicine, but I was missing a way to fully express my creativity. Bird photography turned out to be the perfect combination between *science* and *art*.

With time, I realized that not only I liked to take bird photos for myself but I wanted to share with others my process and everything I learnt during these years.

Today my aim is to help bird photographers to take better bird photos, which in turn will get more people to discover the amazing world of birds.

Bird photography is the way we reconnect with nature, and with photography we can bring more people to understand not only the beauty and importance of birds, but also the need to protect them.

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Before we dive into the factors that make a good bird photography location and how to practically approach the search, the first important step is to determine the objectives of your bird photography session.

What are you looking for?

Generally, goals can be summarized in two main scenarios:

- Specific species target: there is a specific species (or perhaps more than one) you would like to find and photograph.
- Untargeted approach: you don't have a specific species you would like to find and photograph. Perhaps you just want to explore an area and interested in all the birds.

A relevant question to ask yourself at these early stages is also **which type of photo do you want to achieve**. For example, some locations will allow you to get close-ups, but others won't. It is useful to keep this in mind throughout all the stages of location search.



Step 2

Know the birds

Once determined your main goal, it is now time for some preparatory work. Among the many factors that influence the "quality" of a location for bird photography application, the most important one is the **presence of birds**.

But where are the birds? To answer the question it is necessary to **know the bird(s)** you are looking for. This includes being able to identify the bird species and its **habitat** needs.

Bird Habitat: area with ecological and environmental characteristics where a bird species has adapted to find essential elements including food, water, shelter, nesting sites and mates for reproduction.

Bird habitats can be classified in several ways:

- Natural-related environment: for example forestland, grassland, river, stream, coastland
- Human-related environment: for example park, farmland, urban area, farmland

If you are looking for a specific bird, you will have to choose a location tailored to the habitat needs of that species. But even if you don't have a specific target, it is still important to be able to recognize the habitat you will be in, so you can more readily understand which bird species you could expect to meet.

You can find information on which habitats a bird species prefer on bird guides as well as online.

Step 3

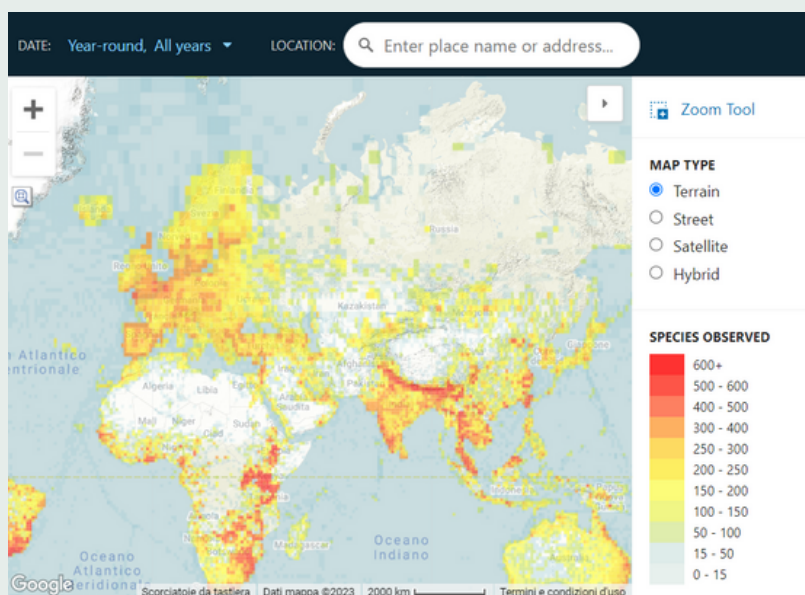
Online search

But then how do you practically look for a location? Luckily, in the Internet era, we have a great amount of information available - but you have to know how to best use the tools. So here's a list of the public resources I use all the time.

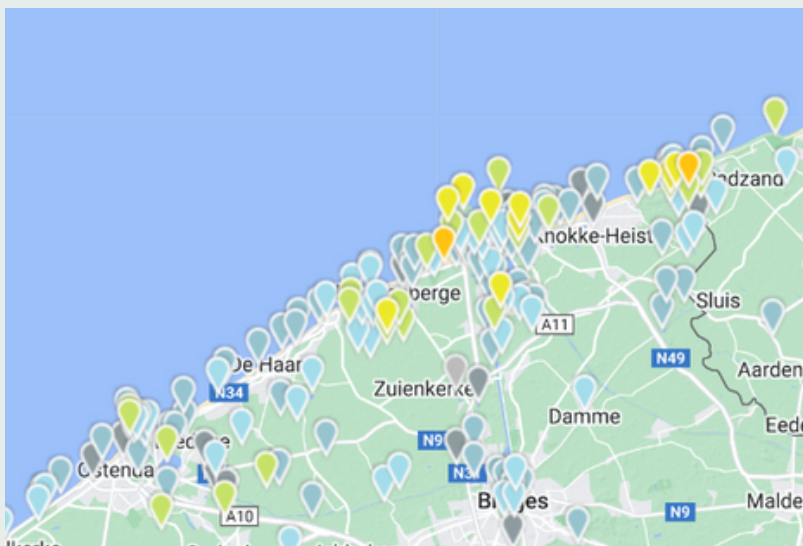
eBird

eBird is among the most popular websites for birders worldwide and one of the largest biodiversity-related science projects. eBird gathers data in the form of checklists of birds submitted by people, and shares it to power new data-driven approaches to science, conservation and education. eBird has different functionalities that can help you to find birds.

1. **BIRDING HOTSPOT:** [click here](#)



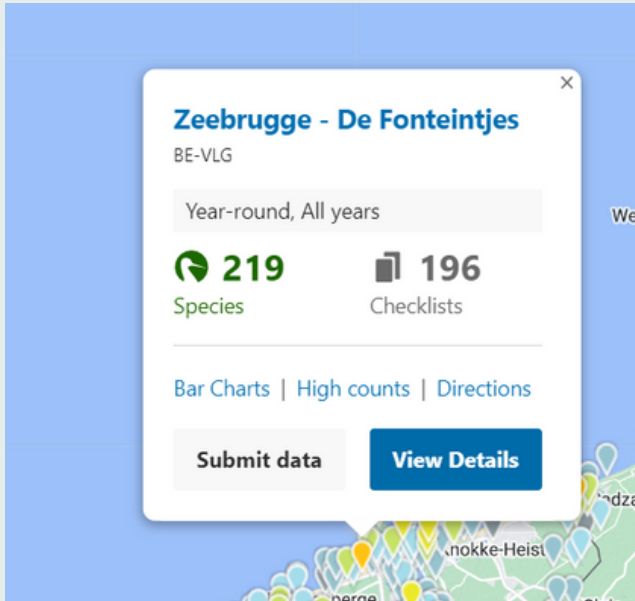
With this heatmap you can quickly identify the areas where the highest numbers of bird species have been seen. You can also filter by this year/all years or choose a specific month.



Zooming in the area of interest you will see the individual locations appear.

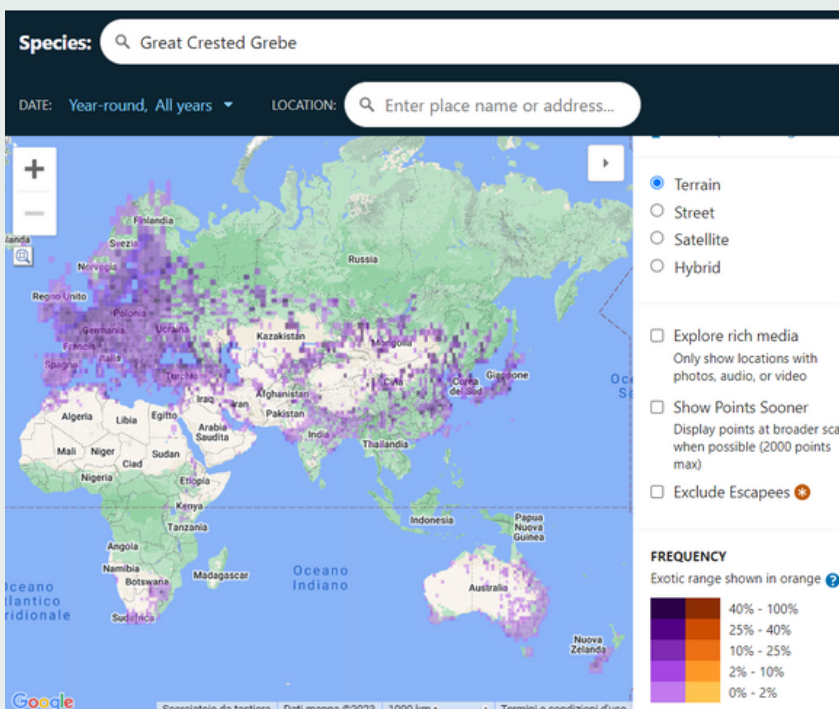
Step 3

Online search



Then you can click on the potential location of interest to access the details. The **Bar Chart** function is very useful as it shows which birds have been seen there for each month and how easy should be to see them (rare vs. common species).

2. SPECIES MAP: [click here](#)



If you have a specific target, you can use this function to get an overview of the locations where the bird has been seen.

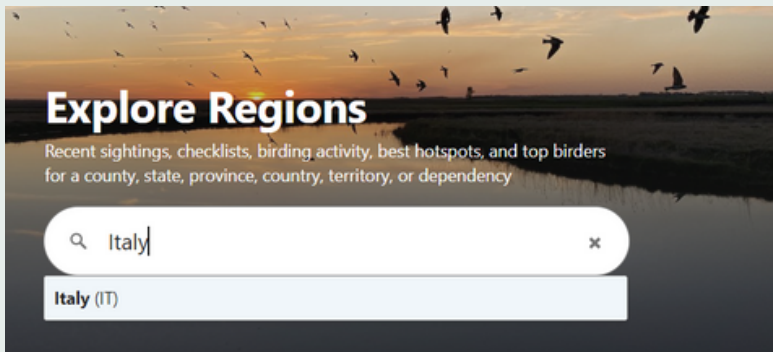


Zooming in your area of interest, you can see the individual locations. Clicking on them you will be able to see when and how many individuals were reported recently.

Step 3

Online search

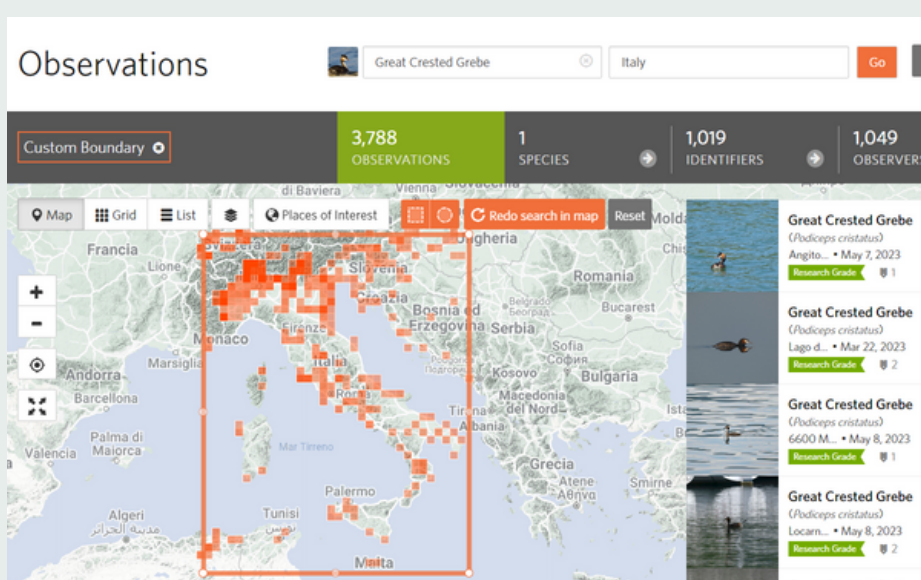
3. EXPLORE COUNTRIES/REGIONS: [click here](#)



You can also look for your country/region and access a dashboard view. Data include most recent sightings, first-ever sightings, all-time high counts, best hotspots, photos and recordings.

iNaturalist

iNaturalist is an online community (app and [website](#)) that allows to share observations to discuss, identify, and create research-quality citizen science data for science and conservation. Note that it is not limited to birds only!



Using the [Explore](#) function, you can check the worldwide observations reported. You can also filter to include birds only. To narrow down your search you can select a country and/or a specific species.

Step 3

Online search

birdingplaces

In this more recent [website](#) you have the best birding hotspots on a map. Note: this is mostly an European database.



You will get much more information on the location, including map with route, hides or platforms present. The accessibility information as directions and parking are also very useful.

national Birding databases

It would be nice if all the bird sightings were in one place. But unfortunately that's not the case. eBird is the most used platform only in some countries. But in the others, eBird is used only by a part of the local birders and more often by foreigner visitors. The vast majority and more updated list of bird sightings will more likely be in locally-based birding databases. In addition, in the same country there might be multiple bird sighting recording projects.

This is an example of local databases I have used during my travels (note: this is not meant to be an exhaustive list).

Italy (ornitho.it, uBIRD), Belgium and the Netherlands (waarnemingen), Germany (ornitho.de), UK (birdguides, birdtrack), Australia (birdlife Australia)

Always check if local databases are available

other resources

- **NATURE ORGANIZATIONS:** websites of national parks or local nature organizations often contain a list of nature reserves they manage (including bird information).
- **BLOGS:** to help you identify good locations and get more information, you can also look for blogs online. There are many people who share information and experience about their birding trips. This is also something that I will focus on this year for my blog (for example [here](#) an article on birding in Queensland, Australia).
- **SOCIAL MEDIA:** social media can also be a source of information. On many Facebook groups or Instagram, photographers sharing their work might mention the location. Or you can try to ask them if the information is not there. However, you should accept the fact that not all bird photographers will want to share the details (rightfully so). As you will see, huge efforts can go into finding a good location.

PRO TIP: after selecting your location, check it out on **Google Maps** using the satellite view or on Google Earth. Check also photos people uploaded of the place (if available). Then you will have a better understanding of how really the place look like!

So now you have selected your location, there is nothing else to do than go out and check it out!

Step 4

In the field

You are finally on site and it is time to start exploring! Although many information can be found online, that is often not sufficient and at the end the field check is the most important step because only then you can really decide whether that location can fit your goals (which birds and which type of photos you want to achieve).

Many locations might be perfect on paper, but then they could be not suitable for photography once you visit them. And also the opposite is possible: you visit a new location with low expectations to find a great surprise!

When you visit a location, you should try to **collect as many information as possible**.

In case any *interpretation board* is available at the entrance, always check it to get more information on paths, hides or platforms that might be present. That is also a very good place to find specific information on the habitat you are about to visit.

While exploring the location, keep track of the *birds* you see or hear, their *behavior* as well as the type of *habitat* and general *environmental conditions*. You can do that doing a bird checklist and then uploading it to any of the websites we discussed earlier.

PRO TIP: even if subjects are not present, while you explore the location, imagine the potential photos you could get in specific spots. This will help you planning future photo sessions better!

Birding or Bird Photography?

You have to remember that the information you can find online is mostly birding-related.

But a good birding location is not necessarily a good bird photography location.

This is because although having the same subjects, birding and bird photography are separate activities with different aims. Birding locations still remain the best starting point for bird photography - but then it is up to the photographer to understand the value of the location for specific photography application.

On the other way round, some locations might be less popular for birders, but those can still make a very good bird photography location. An example is given by city parks. As only common birds are there, less birders will visit it. But as birds are more used to human presence they might be very good subjects for you to practice!



Step 5

Evaluate + Repeat

It is now time to take a moment to review how your first location exploration went. And ... plan next visits!

Why multiple visits

If you visit a location for the first time, it is possible to take photos and you might find some of the great birds that were listed on the websites. However, on a general level, **to increase the chances of good bird photos normally more than one visit to a location is needed.** These are some of the more practical reasons why you should consider multiple visits:

- To *familiarize* with the location access. I lost count on how many times I had to spend much longer than predicted by Google Maps to find a location the first time. Often the places don't have good signage or are quite hidden.
- To see *more birds*. Although it really depends on your level of experience, more visits increase the chances to see more bird species. In addition, depending on the size of a location, one visit might just be not sufficient to cover it all.



Step 5

Evaluate + Repeat

Why multiple visits

In addition, a location and its suitability/value for bird photography can dramatically change based on some factors.

- **Weather** conditions not only will affect how the environment looks like (think about a rainy day) but it can also affect the number of bird species and/or the number of birds and/or their behavior (during a storm most birds will be in cavities or roosting sites rather than being in the open).
- **Light:** photography is about light and in bird photography we rely on natural light coming from the sun. Beyond the general lighting conditions (ie. sunny day versus overcast), within the same location certain specific spots might work better in specific lighting conditions.

PRO TIP: focus on the sun position.

Knowing where the sun will rise and set can help you determining how to best position yourself.

- **Season:** seasons can affect how the environment looks (just think about how some trees' appearance change!) as well as the bird species present (migratory birds) and/or their behaviours (for example during breeding season, courting and nesting take place).

Step 5

Evaluate + Repeat

Examples

All these photos were taken in the same location, but in different periods and in different light/weather conditions.



Sunrise,
backlight



Early morning,
migratory species



Sunset,
backlight



Overcast,
breeding season



Foggy



Mid morning,
overcast and windy,
+ higher view point!

Step 5

Evaluate + Repeat

What makes a good bird photography location

These are the major factors that can help you determine the "quality" of a location for bird photography.

- **Bird presence**

Including bird diversity (number of bird species), bird numbers (groups or only individuals) and bird rarity. For example an ideal location will have both many different bird species, including rare ones, in good numbers.

- **Accessibility**

How easy is to reach the specific location (for example 10 minutes walk on a path versus 3-hour hike) and how can you position yourself in the specific spot (for example is there space to sit or lie down or use a hide?).

- **Distance**

How far is the location from where you live. Distance can have a big implication in terms of time spent to reach it. Also, the closer the location, the easier will be to visit multiple times.

- **Flexibility**

A location where you can work in different conditions (no matter the weather or light - there are always good photo opportunities)

- **Popularity**

How many other people normally visit the location (including "general visitors" as well as other bird photographers). Generally, the more people the higher the chances birds will be disturbed and flushed.

Step 5

Evaluate + Repeat

What makes a good bird photography location

Locations that perfectly meet all the requirements are extremely rare. In real-life, in most cases there will be compromises.

For example:

- For a rare bird, you might need to travel quite far away to get a good view and a good photo. Due to the distance, the opportunity to go there multiple times (and therefore to improve your photo result) might be limited.
- For common birds, you might have locations very close (as a city park) but they might have many visitors, meaning that the photography activity could be easily disturbed.
- The spots that will be ideal for photography might not be accessible: for example not always it is possible to get water level.
- Some locations might be great in terms of distance and accessibility, but the number of bird species might be very limited.

As a practical real-life example, the location where I took the photos you can see in page 13 is very good in terms of distance. But I am limited by the number of accessible spots to go water level (although luckily they allow good positioning at sunrise and sunset). In addition, there is no much bird diversity and it is sometimes busy with people walking. Still that remains one of my most reliable location!

Good practices

So now you are ready to look for locations! But before you go it is worth reminding that as bird photographers we have a code of conduct to follow. We are in the privileged position of using our lenses to "get in touch" with wildlife. But we have to remember that we are only guests in nature.

Respect for the birds and their environment come before any photo result

- Avoid causing disturbance to birds. You can recognize signs of stress in the bird's change of posture and/or behavior. If you can't interpret the bird's response, back off.
- Keep a reasonable distance or use other techniques (for example longer telephoto lenses or hides)
- Follow the specific rules and laws of the locations you are in (for example keeping on a path in a national park or not accessing roped-off areas)
- Always check if you have permission to enter in a specific location (for example private properties)
- Do not share with others locations of rare birds or of birds in sensitive periods (as breeding season)
- Be extra careful if you find nesting birds: anything that could flush adults or scare the young might expose them to danger. Generally it is not recommended to take photos of nest and especially sharing them on social media.

Summary

Location scouting is a very important step of your photography process - and eventually being able to find good locations can critically change your photo results.

There are no shortcuts - you have to be ready to invest time in it. But you can work smarter.

1) SET YOUR GOAL: decide which bird(s) you are looking for

2) LEARN ABOUT THE BIRDS: what they need and what they do

3) PREPARE doing an ONLINE SEARCH using one or (even better) a combination of the tools suggested

4) VISIT THE LOCATION and try to record as many information as possible

5) EVALUATE THE LOCATION and GO THERE AGAIN to fully understand its potential

Choose a set of locations, test them extensively so that you know in a reliable way which will be the best one to go to at specific time, depending on your bird goal and the period/weather/light conditions.

**Good luck with
your next location search!**

Let's connect

Thanks for reading until the end!

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Then click [here](#)

Do you want to reach out personally?
I am only a message away!
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