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The Mentor's Corner

By Ken Behrens



Summer With Seabirds

A Young Birder's
Position as a Seabird
Technician



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I'm often contacted by young birders who aspire to become international birding guides. I'll present here some version of the thoughts that I have often shared with them. There are two things that I'll cover. The first is how to think through whether or not you want to become a guide. The second is some advice on how to pursue a guiding career if that's the path that you choose. I'm hoping to present more of a framework for making good life decisions, rather than simple "advice that you should follow!" There is no simple formula that will get you a guiding job! My own "career path" has been haphazard, and frequently relied on serendipity. So, it's good to make some general choices about what you want to pursue, but then to follow and enjoy the flow of life as it leads you along!

The first question is whether guiding is a good fit for you. This is obviously not a 9-5 job, but an irregular and intense one, so that won't be for everybody. Keep in mind that guiding is a fundamentally different activity

from birding. Some people enjoy both, but not everyone! People who just want to have their birding subsidized by paying clients rarely make good guides. Guiding is best viewed as a service industry in which wildlife viewing is the product, and unlike other service jobs, you're spending 10+ hour days with your clients. Patience, kindness, and high emotional intelligence are essential, not to mention the stamina and fitness to work incredibly long days for weeks on end.

It's also good to think of your long-term desires in life. While guiding in your 20s and 30s can be great, it's not a career path that has a retirement plan naturally built in. Another fundamental question is how much money you need to live a rich and full life. Thoreau said "I make myself rich by making my wants few." That's great advice for how to live a good life as a birding guide. This won't come as a shock to anyone, but it is not an especially lucrative career! People like me who make a living in this sphere tend to mix a variety of activities,



A Banaquit perches on Purple Porterweed at the Místico Arenal Hanging Bridges in Costa Rica on December 21st, 2022. By Katie Warner

including guiding, writing, consulting, and often things outside of the natural history sphere, such as landscaping or IT work.

A related question, but one that is often neglected, is where you think you might want to live in the world. It can be challenging to remain financially solvent as a guide in the US and other highly developed countries, but you can live an excellent life in many other countries that have a lower cost of living. If you're already attracted to the idea of living in Peru or Indonesia, it's more likely that guiding will be a good fit for you. I can personally attest to how fulfilling and fascinating a life lived outside of the United States can be. It's not just a low-budget alternative to life in a "proper" country

into their 40s, 50s, and beyond, but many are ready to move on at a much younger age, and if that might be you, consider what might come after guiding.

OK, let's say that you've carefully thought through the previous paragraph, and decided that "yes, international bird guiding is my dream job!" Great! Again, I can attest to having had an amazing life for nearly 20 years while mainly working as a guide. But how do you go about finding a job in this very small niche of the vast tourism economy? The first thing to know is that it's about way more than birding skill. Most guides are excellent birders, for sure, but most keen young birders have more than enough birding skill to become guides. What



- it's actually better in many ways! A final important question to consider is whether and when you might want to start a family. Having kids puts you under extra financial pressure, and also makes it more difficult to be away from home for long periods. If you do want to guide and have a family, it takes a special sort of partner to pull this off. A related question, though a tricky one to answer, is just how long you might want to guide. Some guides continue to love the job

you need to be an international guide is travel savvy and excellent people skills. To gain travel skills, the best thing to do is... you guessed it... travel! Everybody who gets hired as a guide has already done loads of travel on their own. Adventurous travel, such as backpacking in South America or long North American road trips, is especially useful in gaining confidence and competence. Learning a variety of destinations and avifaunas is also very useful. One of the fundamental skills of a guide is actually the meta-ability to learn birds and places quickly.

On the people side of the equation, I have a couple suggestions. The most fundamental is to network within the birding community as widely as possible. Getting a guiding gig usually comes down to knowing the right people and having already demonstrated to them that you have what it takes to do the job. Even if you're not naturally social, try to go beyond your comfort zone,

reach out, meet people, write e-mails, and connect on social media. Guiding is incredibly, intensely, social, so if you find that you consistently hate this sort of interaction, guiding may not be a good career choice. You don't have to be a social butterfly to make a great guide, but you do have to find a way to enjoy the human side of the job. Local bird club outings and festivals are a great way to connect with other birders and to gain some initial guiding experience. Whenever possible, co-guide day trips with experienced guides, watch what they do, and ask them lots of questions. Also consider becoming a local guide in some corner of the world; someone who guides visitors for a day or a couple days. This type of gig can be an excellent springboard to a full-time guiding job,

as long as you retain the willingness and ability to learn other places. One way to do this is a temporary volunteer position at a lodge in the tropics.

My final suggestion is simply "don't be in a hurry!" There have been some exceptions, but the earliest age at which most guides are hired is their mid-20s. In the meantime, enjoy travelling the world, making friends and contacts all over, doing some temporary field jobs, and slowly gaining the skills that will merit the confidence of a tour company. Some people go down the route of starting their own tour company, which is great, but it's still unlikely that you'll have the knowledge and network to do that earlier than your later 20s. And enjoy the journey!

Left: Blue-gray Tanager
by Katie Warner
Background: Mangrove
Swallow by Katie Warner

