

Meet the Phoebes: an active, women-only South Florida birding group which takes its name from the femininely named Eastern Phoebe. Started in 2017, Phoebes Birding represents a growing movement of all-female groups seeking to connect women and girls to nature and transform birding culture. The group is attracting an increasing number of participants to monthly bird walks and other bird-related activities, supported by partners such as Tropical Audubon Society and Leica Store Miami. Through their website (phoebesbirding.com) and social media (@phoebesbirding), and the hashtag #birdlikeagirl, the Phoebes proudly celebrate their sisters in birding.

In this group response, primary interviewee Kirsten Hines and fellow Phoebes Alison Enchelmeier, Ana Lima, and Kirsten Vignes share the group's secret for creating a space where people of all ages, colors, and genders can bond through nature—mimosas and potluck picnic included.

—NOAH STRYCKER

Just try to find a Phoebe who isn't smiling! In their monthly bird walks with brunch, "Mommy and Me" walks with high tea, online Bird Shares, and other activities, the all-female Phoebes Birding group is all about enjoying the experience. *Photo by © Kirsten Vignes.*

A Birding Interview with The Phoebes

Birding: What inspired the formation of the Phoebes?

Phoebes Birding: The Phoebes started as a happy accident—one we partially have Noah Strycker to thank for! Tropical Audubon Society had teamed up with Leica Store Miami to host a bird walk Noah co-led while in town on a book tour. The walk attracted a large and younger-than-usual birding crowd, including a group of similarly aged women. We vaguely knew each other, but hadn't spent much time together. Over the course of the walk, though, we found ourselves flocking together and drifting farther toward the back. We were watching birds, but we were also talking, laughing, and having a far more buoyant birding experience than any of us had ever had before. It was lighthearted and fun, so much so that someone threw out the idea of forming our own birding group—just for women. The idea caught on. To be sure we didn't lose mo-

mentum, we scheduled a planning happy hour for that very week.

We didn't make many logistical decisions that first night. With an expanded number of potentially interested women, we just let the stories flow. One woman after another described a spark bird, her first birding experience, or whatever else had drawn her to the table that night. There were hardcore birders, novice birders, generalist animal lovers, and environmentalists. The things we all had in common were a love of nature and a desire to connect with kindred spirits in the Miami area. Most of us had been on bird walks and called many birders friends, but we ourselves didn't necessarily feel like birders. We felt like birding-world outsiders—our voices unheard and our interest in more than just adding species to a list overlooked on general walks. Yet we yearned for the nature-bonding experience the act of birding provides and, thus, the birth of Phoebes Birding.





The Eastern Phoebe—namesake of Phobes Birding—is a favorite among Eastern birders. This early spring migrant builds her nest around buildings or bridges where she can be easily observed. Photo by © Kirsten Hines.

Birding: What is the Phobes birding style?

PB: First and foremost, Phobes Birding is communal. We encourage all participants, whether it's their first bird walk or their 10,000th, to point out and help identify birds. Mistakes are welcome. We don't mind stopping for several minutes to check reference guides—especially if it helps us dig more deeply into the natural history and ecology of a species. We consider our leaders to be conveners more than anything else. They organize logistics and keep us together as a group, but aren't required to be expert birders.

We may cheer for our namesake Eastern Phoebe or an unusual vagrant, but we also strive to be enthusiastic about Blue Jays and other common species that may be a first for someone in the group. We keep a group list that we submit to our eBird account, but, by and large, we're not listers; high numbers of

species aren't our first priority. Our goal is to bond through and with nature—quality over quantity. So we take time to watch interesting bird behaviors, we talk about plants, we stop to look at beetles; nothing is too small or too drab to pique our interest. Most of all, we aim to enjoy ourselves, ending as many

of our walks as we can with mimosas and potluck picnics, generally laden with home-made goodness.

Birding: What are some ways Phobes Birding connects women and girls through nature?

PB: Our initial goal was simply to host a monthly bird walk and brunch that enabled nature-loving women in the Miami area to network. We weren't sure how widespread the interest would be, so—operating within Tropical Audubon Society's infrastructure—we just started hosting walks, taking care to advertise and manage them in accordance with our desired style. These walks have proven to be a wonderful launching pad. We regularly have 20–30 people attending, including founders, regulars, and

At Phobes bird walks, all participants are encouraged to point out and help identify birds—and mistakes are welcome. Here, Meredith Bergstrom consults a Crossley guide with other group members. Photo by © Eliana Ardila.





The Phoebe's birding style is communal and...exuberant, as deftly demonstrated by Meredith Bergstrom (center left) and Ana Lima (center right), who celebrate first-time bird sightings with the group's characteristic "lifer dance" during a bird walk. Photo by © Kirsten Vignes.

newbies of many ages, ethnicities, and educational and vocational backgrounds, not only from Miami but also joining us from the Florida Keys, Ft. Lauderdale, Palm Beach, New York, and—at a recent online event—even from California and Costa Rica.

In addition, we've hosted "Mommy and Me" walks and a walk followed by high tea, complete with fine china, fancy hats, tea sandwiches, and cakes. We've participated in the Florida Keys Hawkwatch, conducted educational programming at Tropical Audubon Society events, covered a section of the Miami Christmas Bird Count by boat, painted pelican portraits to raise funds for a local wildlife rehabilitation center, hosted an online Bird Share, and created an active WhatsApp Phoebe's chat group.

We've been pleasantly surprised by the widespread enthusiasm generated by our

mission, not only garnering national press, but also inspiring inquiries from other groups, both in Florida and from other states, about starting new chapters. Connecting women and girls to nature on a na-

nature lovers everywhere.

Birding: What are some of the accomplishments and successes the Phoebe's are most proud of to date?

The Phoebe's—including Ana Lima, Eliana Ardila, Natalie Mahomar, and Leticia de Mello Bueno (left to right)—are part of a national movement connecting women and girls to nature. Photo by © Kirsten Vignes.



Phoebes Birding walks have created a launching pad for other nature-related activities. Ana Lima, Meredith Bergstrom, Kirsten Vignes, and Leticia de Mello Bueno (left to right) helped form a Phoebes field party for the Miami Christmas Bird Count, surveying northern Biscayne Bay by boat. *Photo by © Kirsten Hines.*



PB: At the most fundamental level, we're thrilled that Phoebes Birding is successfully fostering a growing community of nature-minded women. The part that makes us most proud, however, is how diverse and inclusive our community is. We've had

nationally recognized birders on our walks. On one of our walks, we celebrated with a woman who had never before in her life noticed birds; she saw her first Northern Cardinal—a bird too often underappreciated due to its commonness—and was hooked.

mothers with toddlers, mothers with their adult daughters, grandmothers, and even great-grandmothers on our walks. We've welcomed lesbians, gay guys, and, yes, even a few respectful straight men on our walks. We've had brown people, black people, white people, and people of many shades in between on our walks. We were joined by a woman in a wheelchair on a walk. We've had

She has attended nearly every walk since.

Phoebes Birding is exactly what we wanted it to be: a comfortable place for people to bond through nature. Of that, we're immensely proud.

Birding: How can all-female groups change the culture of birding?

PB: Being an all-women's birding group has allowed us to reach new audiences, to create an unthreatening, safe, and inviting environment for a wide range of people. The femaleness of our group is no doubt part of the equation, but we certainly believe there are elements of our strategy that could be applied to create a more inclusive birding culture in any setting.

Any group can intentionally be community-minded and non-judgmental, and cherish not just accumulating a long list, but also enjoying the birds within their ecological context—as well as enjoying the company of the other humans in the group. 🌍