



# NOTHING TO SNEEZE AT

*—Why you simply must go birding with your kids*

By Eli J. Knapp

“But Daaaad, I wanna go birding, too!”

“Ezra, wouldn’t you rather stay home and play with your Legos®?”

“No. I wanna go birding!”

I was poised by the door, binoculars and camera in my bag, ready for a brief blitz on a nearby lake to see hooded mergansers that only show up in my corner of New York right now—in the fall—on

migration. This was my only chance to see them. But here was my four-year-old son begging to come along. I looked hard at my skinny, blond-haired boy, who was imploring me like a prosecutor whose life depended on this one case.

“Do you really want to come?” I asked.

“Yeah, I wanna be with you,” Ezra replied in the sincere tone known only

to small children. Ouch. My guilty conscience grew heavier by the second.

If I went alone, I’d have the chance of seeing mergansers. If Ez tagged along, I’d exchange the shy mergansers for father/son time. With Ezra’s larynx on board, we’d be lucky to see a mallard. It is the ultimate dilemma of young parents who love birding and other outdoor pursuits

that require patience, stealth and quiet. Perhaps there was still a way out.

“Why don’t you check with Mom?” I said, hoping to high heaven his mother had other plans for him, like a bath perhaps. Ezra disappeared into the living room. He was back instantly.

“Mom said I can go,” he said, clapping his hands. “And I’ve already got my shoes on!”

My heart sank. While I love time with my kids, I also cherish solitude. This obviously would not be one of those solo moments.

“Okay, Ez, but when we get to the pond, you have to promise not to make a sound. We’re going to see some really shy birds.” While I knew we wouldn’t see the birds, I still had to try.

“I promise, Dada.”

We had a great drive to the lake, chatting about all things from Hot Wheels® to telephone poles. But upon arrival at the well-wooded lake, I admonished Ezra again about the need for quiet. Solemnly, he nodded understanding.

I scanned the waters from across the lake and saw a flock of likely mergansers at the far edge. We’d have to approach stealthily through the woods.

“Ready, Ez?”

“I’m ready, Dada.”

“Okay, let’s go. Remember, don’t make a sound.”

We entered a thick stand of conifers and slowly picked our way to the other side of the lake, being careful not to step on loud twigs and leaves. Ezra mimicked every footstep I took and never said a word.

“We’re almost there,” I whispered. “Great job.” Ezra smiled back and flashed me a “thumbs-up.”

We crouched low behind a log and slowly lifted our heads. There they were. Right in front of us, two doting male mergansers paddled alongside half a dozen earth-tone females. The afternoon sun’s slanting rays lit up the males’ white head



crests like flags of surrender. Wanting to remember the scene, I pulled out my camera and snapped a few shots. Euphoric, I glanced at Ezra to see if he was enjoying it too.

He wasn’t. His smile was gone. His eyes were pinched shut, his cheeks were red, and he had both hands covering his mouth. Uh-oh.

## The decision to bird or spend time with Ezra needn’t be an either/or. I’ve learned it’s a both/and.

“Ez, are you okay?” He nodded his head feebly but wouldn’t open his eyes or pull his hands away from his mouth. Confused, I picked him up and crashed back out through the woods, this time oblivious to the sound we made. When we reached the roadside, I set him down.

“AAAAHHHH-CHOO!” Ezra’s head shot forward like a released bowstring. Then for the next 30 seconds he hacked, sputtered and wheezed. As for me, I started laughing uncontrollably. In between laughter, I turned to Ezra.

“Why did you wait so long to sneeze?!”

“You said not to make a sound!” he retorted accurately.

“Well done, Ez! Did you see those beautiful mergansers?”

“What mergansers?” he replied matter-of-factly. I doubled over again.

The setting October sun lit up the orange-red trees like flames as we drove home. With his colossal sneeze now behind him, Ezra quickly made up for lost time, filling the air with a string of

questions and non sequitur proclamations typical of a four-year-old. It’s a time I’ll treasure someday when he’s an uncommunicative and self-conscious teenager.

The decision to bird or spend time with Ezra needn’t be an either/or. I’ve learned it’s a both/and. We had time together, made a priceless memory, and I even saw my birds.

Now if only Ezra could see them, too.

**Eli J. Knapp** is a professor of biology at Houghton College. He enjoys birding with his son near their home in Fillmore, New York.