**How to become a naturalist.**

It’s great to get away from our sterile workplaces and homes and experience some nature at the weekends (or during the week if you’re lucky). This might mean going for a walk or bike ride in the countryside, or perhaps driving somewhere for a family picnic. You love to be surrounded by the sights, smells and sounds of the forest and moor.

One day out walking you spot a tree that you think is particularly nice-looking, shapely perhaps, you like the form of the leaves. You say so to your countryside compatriot. It is quite nice, agrees the friend – what is it? Ah. You’re not sure, a birch maybe? Or is it a willow? You move on.

There’s a burst of melodic song from within the hedge. Out jumps a feisty, little bird with a chestnut back and a rufous chest. Ah! A robin! you gasp, I know that one. But so did the friend. Further along, a smallish bird floats up above the hedge, shoots like a bullet across the path before disappearing into the brush on the other side. You’ve no idea what it was. Then up ahead, a smorgasbord of chants and calls is issuing from the crown of a tree. You know a bird is up there, but it’s too far away to see. Another forest companion remains unknown to your walking party.

There’s so many different animals, plants and other organisms (such as fungi) out there that it can seem overwhelming. Many of wish we could recognise and put a name to the trees and birds we see, but only experts are any good at that. We don’t have the time for that kind of thing.

Wrong! You don’t have to be an expert or a full time naturalist to be able to recognise the plants and animals around us. After all, you don’t need to learn the *entire* natural history of the world to be able to name the twenty most common birds and ten most common trees in your area. Birds and trees are easier to learn about than e.g. wildflowers or mammals because they are both pretty easy to spot once you start looking for them.

Here’s what you need to get you started on your path to becoming the next David Attenborough:

1. The kit

People love kit (I certainly do). It’s in human nature to use tools to solve problems. So it’s natural to think you must need a lot of expensive equipment and shelves full of books to start learning about nature. But all this equipment is often just a safety net to stop us feeling helpless before a seemingly insurmountable task. As I point out below the most important things we need come free! But if you insist, here’s a few things I think are pretty useful:

[photo of guidebook, nature book, binoculars and notebook]

Caption: The guidebooks can be got second hand in a local charity shop. Low-end (but not budget binoculars) sell on Amazon for £60. More high-end, used binoculars can also be found on eBay.

Pocket bird guidebook:

For learning about birds, a pocket guide book like the one provided by RSPB is perfect (if you’re from outside the UK then hopefully something similar is available for your area). Whilst there is a wealth of online information about birds, you’ll probably need something in paper so that you can read it in the field. I also find that paper is just so much easier to flick quickly between pages and to visually see how birds can be grouped together (often in colour-coded families such as in the RSPB guide).

Buying this book from the RSPB will ensure your money goes to helping their causes. Likewise, you’ll find it and others available in charity shops for a couple of pounds.

Similar pocket books are available for trees, fungi, wildflowers and so on. You might add these to your collection bit by bit as your interest grows.

“Natural history” book:

Whilst pocket books are great for out in the field, it’s great to have something more substantial for back in the home. I found this natural history book in a charity shop for a few pounds. The great thing about this book is that it covers all the most common birds, mammals, insects, amphibians, plants and fungi in Britain and Europe – quite a lot to take in at first but can be used more like a reference encyclopaedia than something you will read cover to cover. There are many other similar books available. Go for one that has been lovingly-illustrated – you’ll find yourself flicking through it for pleasure!

Binoculars:

Notebook and pen: cheap and light alternative to a camera

2. Turn on your brain

3. Get out there.