Fall is a great time to take up a new hobby—specifically birding. North Texas is perfectly situated along the central flyway, an annual migration path frequented by a variety of different bird species. Many of these birds are large and easily observed, even with the naked eye.

If you are just getting started, there are a few things you may want to take on your birding excursion. Binoculars are number one on most people’s lists, and a good pair of “bins” enhances the experience. Look for a pair with 8x magnification. While 10x binoculars are available, the field of view through these high-powered bins may be narrow, dim, and less colorful. You may also have trouble holding the binoculars steady enough to
get a good view. For those with very young children (or those who plan to share binoculars), you might consider a pair of fixed-focus binoculars. These are often used for sporting events and theater performances but are also useful for quick and casual birding. Small children—and their adult companions—can experience the joy of watching the birds without the frustration of readjusting the binoculars over and over.

Of course, once you see the bird, you may want to know what species it is. A good guidebook goes a long way toward making your experience feel productive. Pay attention to the area covered by your guide. Is it all of North America? Just the eastern birds? Just Texas? A guide that covers just Texas and groups birds by color instead of family may be appealing for beginners. Also pay attention to whether the guide uses photographs or drawings to illustrate the different species. Many birders have turned to apps instead of paper guides. Give these apps a test drive before venturing out into the field. Some will walk you through identification step by step, while others may require a bit of background knowledge. In order to use these apps without Wi-Fi, you will need to download the entire guide, so make sure your phone has enough memory. Some apps let you easily create a digital “life list” of birds you have seen along with when and where you saw them.

Now that you have the essentials, let’s go birding! Many of the classic fall and winter species can be observed without any special equipment. A walk along the Riverbottom Trail on the Refuge may reveal large birds of prey such as bald eagles and osprey. American white pelicans glide in to land on the river looking very much like pirate ships with wings. Duck-like coots travel in flocks called “rafts” and can be easily identified by their dark plumage and bright white bills. See something that looks like a fluffy baby duck with brown feathers and a stubby bill? It’s probably a pied-billed grebe. Neither of these last two species is really a duck by the way, though you will find many species of actual ducks migrating to Texas for the winter.

Be sure to look up while you are out. During migration, you may see sandhill cranes or broad winged hawks on their great migration journeys. Northern harriers (a kind of hawk) patrol the skies looking for their next meal. As you transition into the forest, keep your eyes and ears open. Rhythmic tapping on a tree may indicate that a yellow-bellied sapsucker (a type of woodpecker) is nearby. Red-bellied woodpeckers are a year-round resident, but they become particularly chatty during the winter.
when they seem to have no one to talk to but themselves. White throated sparrows sing “oh sweet Canada, Canada, Canada” in winter as well as during the breeding season. Many birds of prey also begin courting in late fall, so you may hear the calls of great horned or barred owls late in the day.

This is just skimming the surface of the great rewards that fall and winter birding can offer. Now is the time to get prepared. Research those apps, buy a guide or two, and start testing out those binoculars. Our avian migrants will be here before you know it.