



How to Identify a Bird

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The challenge of identifying birds is one of the best parts of bird watching. It can seem difficult and frustrating, but here are a few hints will make it easier and more enjoyable. The steps for identifying a bird are the same whether you are watching a bird at your feeder, walking down a beach, or hiking through the woods. Bird watching goes something like this:

See a bird. Find it in the binoculars.

Look for field marks (physical traits) and other clues.

Try to determine what type of bird it is: hawk, duck, heron, warbler, finch, etc.

Watch it a little longer, especially if it's an unfamiliar species.

THEN reach for the field guide and try to find the matching species.

Looking at the bird

For both beginner and expert, the most important piece of advice is: ***Look at the bird and not at the field guide.*** Two minutes later the bird may be gone, but the field guide will still be there.

Sometimes the general impression is a good starting point. Begin at the head or bill of the bird and work backward. Look at physical traits such as markings, shape, color. These are called *field marks*.

1) **Size** will limit your choices a lot. Think of birds as falling into the categories small, medium, and large. Associate those categories with familiar objects: a pencil, a 12-inch ruler, a loaf of bread. Before long, your judgment of a bird's size is automatic. In most field guides the size given is for the bird's length, measured from the tip of its bill to the end of its tail.

Important: A bird hunched over picking up seeds looks shorter and fatter than the same bird perched on a tree limb. Startled birds stretch their necks, making them look considerably longer than when they are relaxed. Birds look thin when they hold their feathers close to their bodies, and fat when they fluff them out, such as in very cold weather. Watch it for a while and look at both its length and bulk.

- 2) **Bill** shape and size often indicate the family to which a bird belongs. A family is made up of related bird species that share many characteristics. Sparrows have short, thick bills. Warblers have short, thin bills. Thrashers and mockingbirds have long, thin bills, usually down-curved.
- 3) Check the **back, wings, and body**. Ask yourself: *Is the back darker or lighter than the head or the belly? Does it have streaks? Are the underparts plain, or are there streaks or spots?*
- 4) Are **wing bars** present? Wing bars are contrasting, usually pale, lines across the wings. Warblers and sparrows, for example, are divided into those with wing bars and those without.
- 5) Is the **tail** long or short, rounded or forked, darker or lighter than the back? Is it all one color? Does the bird bob or wag its tail persistently? Is it held cocked up or angled down?

All this sounds like a lot to remember, but after a few times the questions will become automatic. As in most things, there is no substitute for practice. Try these steps on familiar birds.

Looking at the Field Guide

Now it is time to try to put a name to the bird you have been watching. Field marks combined with other clues such as distribution, voice, and behavior, help a bird watcher identify the birds he or she sees. A field guide describes birds by listing these traits along with a picture or drawing.

The ideal guide is easy to use, portable, and accurate. Luckily, there are many excellent field guides from which to choose. A partial list of some popular ones appears at the end of this article.

- 1) **The MOST important thing about your field guide is that it is appropriate for the region in which you live and watch birds.** There are field guides for all of North America; for just the eastern or western half; for specific states or provinces, and even for smaller geographic areas - birding trails, refuges, parks, or preserves.
- 2) **Become familiar with its content and layout.** Field guides are typically organized *taxonomically*, meaning that related birds are grouped together in an order established by ornithologists, from the least-evolved birds (loons, grebes, waterfowl) to the most highly evolved birds (warblers, sparrows, finches). Many guides provide a color-tab key to help you find these bird families quickly.
- 3) When using your guide in the field, don't forget to **look at the bird, not at the book.** If we take quick glance at the bird and then try to find it in the field guide without enough visual information we cannot make a positive ID. When we look again, the bird is gone.
So, look at the thing with wings (the bird) until you've noted enough field marks to narrow the search down in the field guide (which stays put because it does not have wings).
- 4) **Always check the range.** Expect the expected. A bird's range can be a valuable clue to its identity. If you live in Oregon and identify a bird at your feeder that, according to the field guide, occurs only in Florida, your identification may be incorrect. Reconsider the other clues you have and try again. Birds occasionally show up a long way from where they are supposed to be, but it isn't common.

Three Tips for Using Your Field Guide

Tip one: Be sure to go all the way through the guide at first, even if you think you have found the bird. Check if there are similar species with which the bird might be confused. A common mistake is to settle on the first bird that looks something like the bird you see.

Tip two: The bird may not be identical to the picture in the book. Birds, like people, are variable. If almost everything matches and there are no very similar species, then you have almost certainly got the right bird.

Tip three: Check another book if the choice has been narrowed down to three or four birds but certain ID remains elusive. Every guide has a bit different information.

Misidentifying Birds

Everyone does it. Beginners do it frequently, but even experts make mistakes. Misidentifying birds is part of the learning process. Don't let yourself worry about it too much. The occasional mistake should not discourage your excitement for bird watching.

For an alternative way of identifying birds, see Cornell's video tips:

<http://www.allaboutbirds.org/netcommunity/page.aspx?pid=1270>