

# Tips for Easy Bird ID:

How to Identify Birds Like an Expert!

Bill Thompson, III



*a special  
publication from*

**BIRD WATCHER'S**  
DIGEST

## Dear Fellow Bird Watcher:

I've spent the past 45 years working on my bird identification skills—always trying to get better at knowing which birds I'm seeing. In those early years, when I was a teenaged birder, I encountered many challenges to proper and accurate bird identification including poor optics, limited access to a good field guide, and infrequent opportunities to go birding with others, which is the very best way to improve one's bird ID skills. But I kept at it and got better over time.



Today, we live in The Golden Age of Birding. Great optics are easy to find, try, and buy. There are more than a dozen wonderful and helpful field guides to the birds of North America, in addition to regional, state, provincial, and local bird books. Bird clubs and birding festivals abound. And anyone connected to the Internet has instant access to birding-oriented content, images, videos, sounds, apps, and identification forums. As birders, we're more connected to each other than ever before.

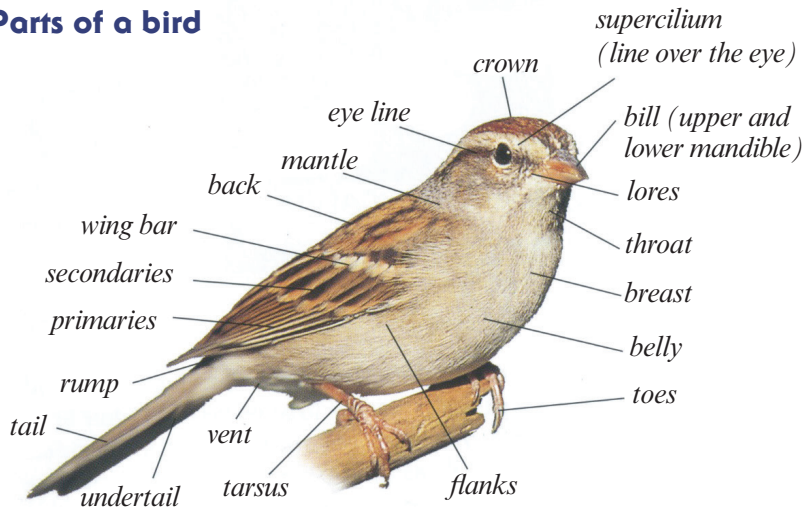
Now that you've downloaded our guide: *Tips for Easy Bird Identification*, we can be connected, too. Inside you'll find my approach to identifying birds—something I've refined over my entire birding career. I've distilled the information into a handy, easy-to-read, easy-to-understand guide which should have you identifying birds like an expert in no time. As with anything, the more you practice, the more you'll improve.

I hope you enjoy this guide and I also hope you'll want to stay connected with us. While accessing our e-book, you've probably received an email from us asking you to join our community of online birders and to select the topics about which you'd like to hear from us. We promise to abide by your preferences—we'll never SPAM you or share your name/email with anyone else.

Wishing you many years of enjoyable and satisfying birding!

Bill Thompson III  
Editor/Publisher  
Bird Watcher's Digest

## Parts of a bird



*Bird watchers who know the basic parts of a bird will find it easier to describe and identify unfamiliar birds.*

Identifying birds is at the very heart of bird watching. Each bird encountered is like a little puzzle or mystery to solve, because, while birds of a single species all share a certain set of physical traits, no two individual birds, like no two individual humans, are exactly alike. You solve the mystery of a bird's identity by gathering clues, just like a detective.

Most of the clues we birders use are called field marks. Field marks are most often physical things we can see—visual clues such as a head crest, white bars on the wing (called wing bars),

a forked tail, patches of color, spots on a breast, rings around eyes (yes, called eye-rings), long legs, and a curved bill, for example. But field marks also include behavior, such as hovering in flight, probing with a bill, pecking on a tree (woodpecker!), and flitting about actively. And field marks include sounds, too—songs, calls given in flight, chip notes, and even the whistle of wings. When added up, these clues should lead you to a correct answer: the bird's identity.

New birders are wise to start with the obvious visual field marks of a bird. You'll want to collect these field-mark clues in

a logical way: Start at the top of the bird (by the head and bill) and work your way down and back. Most North American birds can be identified by field marks above the bird's shoulders: on the bill, head, and neck, and near the bend of the wing.

Some birds may appear to be completely plain and will require a longer look. But plainness itself can be a field mark! Don't give up. The clues are there, wait-

ing for you to notice them.

The challenge of identifying birds is one of the best parts of bird watching. It can seem difficult and frustrating, but there are a few hints that will make it easier and more enjoyable.

The steps for identifying a bird are the same no matter where you are, no matter what bird you are watching. Here are some basic steps to follow.

## Top 20 Rules of the Bird Identification Game

Bird watchers everywhere know that identifying birds can be either easy and intuitive or the hardest, most confusing thing they've ever attempted. Different people become birders in different ways and for different reasons, but what never changes are the basic techniques that maximize your chances of getting your identifications right. To give you a head start on the journey ahead, we've broken them down into the Top 20 Rules of the Bird Identification Game.

You'll certainly come up with your own versions of some of these rules. They are not intended to be set in stone; think of them as guidelines, meant to be

adapted to fit your circumstances. The idea is to give you the tools you need to enjoy the bird identification process more, and let fewer birds get away from you unidentified.

### What to Look For

**1. Look at the bird, not at the book.** Roger Tory Peterson, the father of American bird watching, once said, "Birds have wings and tend to use them." How right he was. Birds have wings — books do not. Unlike the bird, your field guide will stay right where you left it. When you have a mystery bird in sight, resist the urge to dive into your field guide and start flipping through the pages for a matching





***Swamp sparrow.***

image. What if all you noticed in your brief look was that it was a yellowish warbler, or a streaky sparrow? There are dozens of birds in your guide matching these descriptions. It's tempting to reaching for the guide, especially if you're excited about an unusual bird — but resist. Watch the bird for as long as it lets you. The longer you look, the more you'll notice and remember about the bird's field marks and behavior. Then, when you do open your field guide, you'll be better prepared to make your identification.

**2. Start at the top and work down and back.** If you've managed to follow the first rule, you're taking a long careful look at your mystery bird. The next step is to look at the bird in an organized way. The head

is the best place to start, provided you can see it; many North American birds can be positively identified by the shape of and markings on their heads. Start at the crown, work down toward the breast, and then back toward the tail. By the time your eyes get to the bird's tail, you will probably have noticed at least three key field marks, and these should be enough to nail an identification.

**3. Shape says a lot.** The flight silhouette of a chimney swift, the bill of an American avocet, and the tail of a scissor-tailed flycatcher are a few examples of birds whose shape alone is enough for a positive identification. Though the shapes of other birds may be less immediately identifiable, it is nonetheless an important clue. First, try to get



**Male Wilson's warbler.**

an impression of a bird's overall shape. Then look specifically at head shape (is it peaked, flat, rounded, or crested?); tail shape (is it long, forked, fanned, or pointed?); bill shape (is it long, decurved, upturned, pointed, blunt, thick, tiny?); and finally at wing shape (are they short, long, broad, pointed, angled or straight?). The descriptive terms you use may vary from those in the field guides, but the point is to give yourself a general impression of how the bird is put together.

**4. Size sometimes lies.** Small dark birds can look larger than they actually are on overcast days. Young birds might appear larger than their parents. The effects of temperature might also alter how big a bird looks. Still, size is an important clue to its

identity. When judging size, it's often more useful to compare your bird to other nearby birds or objects than to try to gauge its size in inches. Noting its size in relation to familiar species — "It's larger than a robin, but smaller than a crow" — can be very helpful. Judging the size of distant birds, like soaring raptors, is much more difficult. In those cases it's better to rely on other clues, such as shape and behavior, in working toward an accurate identification.

**5. Color can mislead.** Most beginning bird watchers (and even some experienced ones) focus too intently on a bird's color when attempting to identify it. Perhaps this is because color is such an obvious clue. Or perhaps it's because as birders, we tend to get more excited about the really



*Male Painted bunting.*

colorful birds. (Go ahead, try to remain calm while watching a male painted bunting.) Color is certainly important in bird identification, but overemphasizing its importance can lead us astray. Accurate bird identification relies on several clues—it's not a puzzle with just one piece. Factor color into your identification process — it certainly can be diagnostic, not least for the male painted bunting— but bear in mind that viewing conditions, seasonal molt, and individual variation make it an unreliable clue most of the time. . And remember that sometimes even “plainness” can be a field mark.

**6. Behavior.** Bird behavior (much like human behavior) centers around food and sex.

Like humans, different birds pursue these objects in different ways. Watching a mystery bird long enough to notice its specific behaviors — tail flicking, wing flapping, feeder-hogging, and so on — vastly increases your chances of identifying it. As your bird knowledge grows, you'll be able to sort out familiar birds by their habits and behavior, even if you can't get a long careful look.

### **What to Learn**

**7. Learn the anatomy.** Words such as crissum, lores, tarsus, mantle, and flank may seem like a foreign language at first, but learning the parts of the bird that these words refer to will make you more fluent in fieldguide-ese and give you the

vocabulary you need to describe the bird very specifically. Don't be discouraged if you cannot remember the names of all the parts of the bird at first. Just knowing that they can be used in identification is half the trick to using them.

**8. Learn the sounds.** Sound is often the first clue to a bird's presence. Listen to the dawn chorus on a spring morning, and you'll know how vital sound is to the birds themselves. Start by learning the songs and sounds of your familiar local or backyard birds, so that when a stranger adds its voice, you'll notice the difference. Finally, when your fellow bird watchers identify a bird by its sounds, ask them how they did it. Learning bird sounds takes time, field practice, and a good audio collection, but it'll be worth it when your fellow birders start asking you how you do it.

**9. Know what to expect.** British bird watchers pioneered the concept of "birding by habitat," in which a birder starts off by anticipating the bird species he or she is likely to encounter in a given location. Put simply, as you are approaching a particular place — say, an old farm field that's been left to its own devices for a few years — consider the habitat and season and make a mental list of the birds



you could expect to see there. Knowing what to expect gives you an advantage in spotting something out of the ordinary. This technique also gives you the opportunity to sharpen your knowledge of bird ranges, habits and preferences, and makes finding sought-after species simply a matter of placing yourself in their preferred habitat — what a concept!

### **What to Have**

**10. Good optics help.** We are living in the golden age of bird watching. Excellent optics and birding gear are widely available and affordable. Of all the things that you can do to become a better bird watcher quickly, none will make you better faster than excellent binoculars. One day in





*Rusty blackbird, winter.*

1984, I'd been struggling with my student-model binoculars to see *anything* birdlike in a certain bush. When I looked through a friend's top-of-the-line binoculars at the same bush, it was as if someone had shone a spotlight into the shady interior directly onto a skulking yellow-breasted chat. Within a week, I had upgraded my binoculars and I've never looked back. Buy the best optics that you can afford. Make sure they are comfortable, easy for you to use, and light enough to hold steady for several minutes at a time. Ask your friends for recommendations (or to try their binoculars!).

**11. Good field guides help, too.** As with optics, today's bird watcher has a rich array of field guides to choose from. Photographs or illustrations,

worldwide, continental, or regional coverage, pocket-sized or reference-sized — there *is* a field guide for everyone. Buy several, and use them all. You'll find a favorite. The important thing is that you take it with you whenever you go birding — or wherever you might see a new bird. There's nothing more frustrating than needing a field guide that's back home on the shelf.

### **What to Do First**

**12. Use memory devices.** Yes, bird watching requires you to remember a lot of information. Many birders find it easier to remember details if they use a memory device. I find this especially helpful for remembering bird songs — a silly, short phrase can perfectly remind me of a bird's song ("Quick! Three beers!" from the olive-sided

flycatcher. Or “I will see you. I will seize you. I will squeeze you ‘til you squirt!” which reminds me of the warbling vireo’s song.) The first mnemonic I learned as an eight-year-old bird watcher was “downy is dinky, hairy is huge” for telling these two similar woodpeckers apart. To help with ibis identification, one of our experts recommends using the sound of the bird’s name — *eye-bis* — to remind you to check the color of the birds’ eyes. Your memory devices may be just as pragmatic — or just as silly — as these, but you’ll find they come in very handy.

**13. Bird with others.** A good musician will tell you that he or she performs better when playing with other, more experienced musicians. It’s true for bird watching, too. Take every opportunity to get out in the field with other birders. Go on bird-club field trips. Join the walks at the local nature center or community park. Birding has become such a popular past time that it’s almost impossible not to find people near you who share this interest, no matter where you are. You’ll be a better birder for it.

**14. Ask questions and take notes.** When you’re afield with other bird watchers and someone identifies a distant speck or calls out the identity of an

unfamiliar bird song, ask “How did you know that?” Nearly every experienced bird watcher is willing to share his or her knowledge with others (and is usually flattered to be asked). Take notes on the information others share with you. I keep my notes right in the margins of my field guide, and over time I’ve found that I associate them automatically with the corresponding illustration. Don’t be shy — if you want to know, ask.

**15. Practice.** Whenever you can, wherever you are, practicing will make you a better bird watcher. The more time you spend watching (and listening), the more birds you’ll see and



*Savannah sparrow.*

**Female American redstart.**



identify. An hour spent watching wild birds is equal to three or more looking at pictures in a book — even if those birds are just sparrows in a city park.

### **What to Do Next**

**16. Take your time.** It's great to be able to nail every identification within a few seconds, but we all know that this is sometimes impossible. If an unfamiliar bird is being cooperative, take advantage of the opportunity to watch it closely for as long as possible. If you've only had a brief glimpse of the mystery bird, it might be helpful to reflect a moment to try to recall everything you noticed about it. You might even want to take a few notes. Often these mystery birds reappear later and can be positively identified. Blurting out a guess at a bird's identity prematurely

may lead to a misidentification (not in itself a tragedy, but occasionally mildly embarrassing if you're birding with a group); it also prevents you from making a more considered judgment that could lead you to a new bird.

### **17. Trust your instincts.**

As you become more experienced, your innate ability as a bird watcher will begin to take over. Learn to trust this instinct when you encounter an unfamiliar bird. In direct contradiction to rule 16, remember that your first guess will often be your most accurate one. (Well, we did say these were guidelines rather than rules.) Isn't this what our teachers told us before we took an exam in school? In technical terms, this method is sometimes referred to as "jizz," a mangled acronym for "General Impression of Size and Shape" (or GISS), which was developed in World War II as a way of identifying distant aircraft and ships. It works wonderfully with birds, too.

**18. Bad calls happen to good people.** Everyone has done it. Made an embarrassingly bad call and announced it out loud, just as the bird proves itself to be another species. I seem to have a knack for really bad calls

when I'm leading a group of bird watchers on or near my home turf, where, presumably, I should know the birds. It's nothing to be ashamed of. In fact, it's a rite of passage. You can't be considered a full-fledged bird watcher until you've made a backpack full of bad calls — the more embarrassing, the better. Be happy in the knowledge that it happens to everyone.



**Blackpoll warbler, male  
in breeding plumage.**

**19. Know when to let go.** I'd be lying if I told you that I can identify every bird I encounter. Anyone who told you this would be lying. It's simply not possible. Some birds refuse to fully show themselves, some race past at Mach One, and some never appear at all, but call to us in unfamiliar voices from just out of sight. As a birder, you must accept this fact with Zenlike resolve. Some birds we must let go, forever unidentified.

### **What to Do Last, and One Bonus Rule**

**20. Celebrate your victories.** When you nail a really tough identification on a mystery bird, pat yourself on the back and celebrate a little. You've climbed the bird-identification mountain and planted your flag at the top.

Whatever your mode of celebration — I'm partial to hot fudge sundaes, myself — just do it. You deserve it.

**21. See more birds. Have more fun!** This may be the most important rule of all. We watch birds because they are fascinating creatures. We relish the identification challenges they present, with their changing plumages, confusing songs, odd behaviors, and extreme mobility. The more birds we see, the more fun we have. May there *always* be more birds for us to see.

Adapted from *The New Birders Guide to Birds of North America*. <https://redstartbirding.com/collections/print-books-booklets/products/the-new-birders-guide-to-birds-of-north-america>



1.



2.



## ID these birds?

- 1. White-throated sparrow.
- 2. Yellow-rumped warbler, winter.
- 3. Sanderling, winter.

3.



1.



2.



ID these birds?

- 1. Snow goose.
- 2. Red-shoulder hawk.
- 3. Blue-winged teal.

3.





## Want More Great Content Like This?

If you enjoyed this publication, *Bird Watcher's Digest* is for you. Every bimonthly issue of *Bird Watcher's Digest* delivers useful advice and helpful information, in addition to captivating photographs and compelling stories.

One Year/Six Issues

**\$19.99**

Ohio residents add  
7.25% sales tax.

[Click Here to Subscribe](#)

# BIRD WATCHER'S DIGEST



TO ORDER: call

**1-800-879-2473**

or visit **birdwatchersdigest.com**