

Mecklenburg Audubon Society

Birding 101: Identification Basics

Learning to identify anything is like solving a mystery. Every good detective works systematically to solve the case. They do background checks, ask a lot of questions, analyze data and then make a decision. Science in general and birding specifically is just detective work on the wing.

Be Prepared - Have the Right Tools

Like all detectives you will need some tools to help you solve the puzzle. To begin your work you should have a pair of binoculars, a field guide and a tape recorder to listen to bird songs. Study your field guide and listen to tapes before you go outside. What you learn about size, shape, markings, habits and habitats before you look at birds will allow you to spend more time looking at the bird and less time rummaging through the book. Use the guide in the field as a reference only after you have observed the bird very closely and for as long as possible.

Ask the Right Questions

Because birds are living creatures adapted to specific life styles they exhibit a wide range of characteristics that aid in identification. Since people



are very visual creatures most try to identify birds by visual characteristics such as color alone which can lead to incorrect identification. However, if you are willing to spend a little time studying, learning to identify and enjoy the birds around you is simply a matter of asking the right questions. If you can answer these basic questions about a bird, you should be able to identify it correctly. The questions are basic and may sound a little familiar.

What does the bird look like?

Most people will focus in on the color of a bird but this can be misleading. Lighting and the time of year can greatly change the color of a bird. An Indigo Bunting appears completely black if it is sitting in the shade. But when it darts out into the sunlight for a tasty morsel it will instantly and magically turn a bright indigo blue like a neon sign. Hummingbirds are the same way. You can't see the color on the male if the light isn't right. Then there is the Goldfinch which is bright yellow in the spring and summer but the rest of the year is a drab green. So you can't rely solely on color.

Look at the bird as a whole and ask:

- *How big is it?* Relate the size to something you already know. It's a good idea to memorize three or four birds of different sizes such as a sparrow, robin, crow and/or turkey. Then you can note how the size of the bird compares to them.
- *What shape is it?* Is it tall and skinny, short and plump, etc.? Often a bird's silhouette is all you can see. Fortunately, that's the only clue necessary to identify some birds like a dove – tiny head on a very large plump body.



Learning the overall shape of birds is important. Knowing the shape should help you narrow down your possibilities.

Then look more closely at things like the beak, tail, wings, color, etc.

Where is the bird located?

As you spend more time observing birds you will discover many of them seem to look alike. A sparrow has a certain look about it – small and brown— but several finches, wrens and warblers are also small and brown. Now what? Stop and take a look around you. What type of habitat are you standing in? Are you mowing the lawn, hiking a mountain trail, wading at the beach? Even during migration birds prefer certain habitats and seldom deviate from them. You are not going to find a Great Blue Heron in the desert or a Roadrunner in a forest. Knowing what birds will be in what habitat will also help you eliminate species. So do your homework.

What is the bird doing?

Is it soaring, hovering, or gliding? Is it wading in the water or perched high in a tree? Even something as subtle as the bobbing of the tail could be a determining factor between one bird and another.

What does the bird sound like?

You can birds apart by their voices just like you can your friends. In fact some birds can only be identified by their voice. Birds such as the Whip-

poor-will are seldom if ever be seen but is very often heard. Other birds like some flycatchers look identical and can only be identified by their voice. Learn the songs and calls of the common birds around you first. Take them one at a time. This will help you avoid spending a lot of time 'chasing' a song thinking it is a new bird. Songs and calls are also the first indication there are birds in the area.

All these questions may seem a little daunting but they really aren't. If you start with what you know and eliminate those species it can't possibly be, you have a better chance of correctly identifying a bird. But don't stop there. BIRD WATCHING does include being able to identify a BIRD, but the active word in the phrase is WATCHING. That's when the fun really begins!



Recommended Resources

Field Guides (only need one to get started):

- Coe, James. Eastern Birds- A Guide to Field Identification of North American Species. (Golden Guide) St. Martins, 2001.
- Field Guide to the Birds of North America. 4rd. ed. National Geographic Society, 2002.
- Griggs, Jack. All the Birds of North America. Harper, 2002.
- Kaufman, Kenn. Birds of North America. Houghton Mifflin, 2001.
- Petersen, Wayne R. Songbirds and Familiar Backyard Birds: Eastern Region. National Audubon Society Pocket Guide. Knopf, 1994.
- Peterson, Roger Tory. *Field Guide to the Birds.- Eastern and Central North America.* 5th edition. Houghton Mifflin, 2002.
- Robbins, Chandler. *Birds of North America: A Guide to Field Identification.* Golden Press, 2001.
- Sibley, David. *The Sibley Guide to Birds.* Knopf, 2002.
- Sibley, David. *Sibley's Birding Basics.* Knopf, 2002.
- Stokes, Donald. *Stokes Beginners Guide to Bird Eastern Region.* Little Brown, 1996.
- Stokes, Donald. *Stokes Field Guide to Birds - Eastern Region.* Little Brown, 1996.

Audio CDs/Cassette Tapes

- Birding By Ear.- A Guide to Bird-song Identification: Eastern.* Houghton Mifflin, 1989.
- More Birding by Ear - Eastern/Central.* Houghton Mifflin, 1994.