

Mecklenburg Audubon Society

How to Choose a Field Guide

Birding field guides have to solve a complex problem. They need to be able to organize what is essentially visual information so users can identify a specific individual bird. This is not as easy as it sounds. So choosing a bird identification field guide can be as confusing and difficult as choosing binoculars. But with a little bit of information and forethought you can find one that meets your needs.

Arrangement:

Like trying to find a word in the dictionary when you don't know how to spell it, it's difficult to find a bird in a field guide if you don't know its name. Therefore the arrangement of the book is critical, it needs to make sense to the user. Arrangement by size, shape and/or color may be helpful to beginners but can cause some confusion because females, males and the young of the same species can vary drastically. The user will have to look in a number of different places to learn about one species.

Another arrangement that can be helpful is arranging birds by location or where the bird is found. The drawback here is birds move around and might be found in several different habitats depending on the season. Or the bird you are looking may just be passing through and doesn't belong in the habitat you see it in at all.

From a biologist's point of view arranging the birds by taxonomic order, based on the bird's evolutionary history, is the most logical. This means all the birds in the same family are located together. So one will find all the woodpeckers or warblers in one section of the book. There are two drawbacks to this arrangement. First, most novice birdwatchers don't have a clue as to what family a bird belongs

to or where it is on the evolutionary continuum. Second, the scientific community (i.e. the ornithologists) can't seem to make up their minds on the order!

There are currently in print field guides that use each of these arrangements and a couple that combine all of them. So new birders shouldn't assume because they have learned how to use one book they will be able to easily find a bird in another book.

Graphics:

The second major consideration and most debated issue of field guides is the graphics. Graphics are essential to identifying a bird. They should clearly show the key field marks such as size, shape of the bill, color pattern, etc. The great debate is over whether photographs are better than illustrations. As with the issue of arrangement both sides of the debate have pluses and minuses.

Illustrations are a composite visual representation of a species. They have been created to show all of the critical field marks that will help identify a bird. You will probably never see a bird exactly like the illustration.

Photographs on the other hand are visual representations of an individual bird within a species. The photo tries to convey the characteristic of the species but things like lighting, positioning and background may cause problems. All the field marks may not be visible. Usually a guide falls into one or the other category. One guide, however, has taken digital pictures and enhanced them so they are more characteristic of the species.

The number of illustrations for each species is important as well. Some



guides only provide summer or breeding plumage, others include winter plumages as well but not juvenile ones. Some also include illustrations of the bird flying. This is particularly helpful for identifying species more likely to be seen in the air such as hawks, shorebirds and ducks.

Finally, the quality of the illustrations is very important. Size and color can be a problem for beginners. Different printings of the same book can vary greatly in color. Both photographs and illustrations can give the viewer a false sense of the size of the bird. For example a piping plover can appear on the page to be the same size as an eagle. Make sure you check the text for the real size of the bird. Besides the illustrations of the birds, the graphic depicting the bird's range should also be clear and easy to read.

Additional Considerations:

Since these books were created as field guides they should be compact and light enough to be carried into the field! This isn't always the case. They should also be durable and easy to read. Quick access to an index is also important for beginners.

Many field guides include additional information such as how to go about identifying a bird, an explanation of the field marks, a glossary of terms and diagrams/charts comparing sizes or showing the anatomy of a bird.

These extras can be very helpful to novice bird watchers.

Another thing to consider when purchasing a field guide is why you are purchasing it. If it's going to be the first field guide for a new birder, it is strongly recommended that the guide include only birds the user is most likely to encounter in his or her backyard or neighborhood. For example getting an eastern edition of a Peterson or Stokes guide is better than getting the National Geographic, which covers the entire United States. Most of the publishers of the major guides also have speciality guides for children

and/or beginning bird watchers that look like the original guide.

On the other hand if you are going to Arizona or Texas you might want to get a guide specifically for that area. Or perhaps you struggle with a specific group of birds like warblers or shorebirds. Then consider purchasing a guide for that specific group of birds. Speciality field guides go into more detail by providing more graphics and additional information on plumages, behaviors and habitats.

It is safe to say that to date there isn't just one field guide that does it all. All of them have advantages and

disadvantages. That's why it's helpful when out in the field with other birders and you come upon a bird you can't identify, to compare the different field guides folks are carrying to make the most informed decision about the bird's identity. If you are a beginner, start with one that makes sense to you. Eventually, you will want to expand your library and wind up buying a number of them for comparison. Just remember you can never have too many field guides!!



Quick Comparison of Major Field Guides

Book Title	Publisher	Arrangement	Graphics	Coverage	Comments
<i>All the Birds of North America</i>	American Bird Conservancy	Unique keying system	Digitally enhanced artwork	North America; Also a number of specialty guides	The arrangement can teach you a lot about identifying birds
<i>Birds of North America</i>	Golden Guide	Taxonomical*	Illustrations	North America	A newly revised classic
<i>Kauffman Field Guide to Birds of North America</i>	Houghton Mifflin	Unique keying system	Digitally enhanced photographs.	North America	Available in Spanish
<i>National Geographic Field Guide to the Birds of North America</i>	National Geographic	Taxonomical*	Illustrations, some editions/printings are very dark	North America; Many smaller editions for individual states	New edition has some very nice features like thumb tabs and quick index which make it very easy to use.
<i>North American Birds</i>	National Audubon	Taxonomical*	Photographs	Separate east & west editions	Very durable
<i>Peterson Field Guide to Birds of Eastern and Central North America</i>	Houghton Mifflin	Taxonomical*	Illustrations	Eastern & Central NA; Also has western edition and specific regions	Also has a series of First Guides
<i>Sibley Guide to Birds</i>	Knopf	Taxonomical*	Illustrations	North America	Much too big to take into the field
<i>Sibley Field Guide to Birds of Eastern North America</i>	Knopf	Taxonomical*	Illustrations	Separate east & west editions	Maps are very small and hard to read
<i>Stokes Field Guide to Birds</i>	Stokes	Taxonomical*	Photograph	Separate east & west editions	Also have a lot of beginner and specialty guides

***Note:** All taxonomical listings are not created equal. The scientific community is not in agreement as to how the birds should be grouped. For example if you look at the 5th edition of the National Geographic guide you will find that the ducks are now at the beginning of the book. To complicate matters a couple of guides have chosen to deviate from a given order by grouping some birds that look alike, such as placing the swallows and swifts together.