



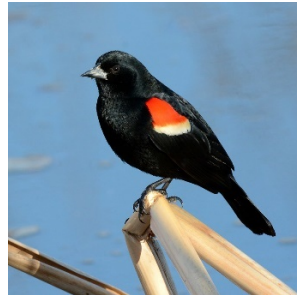
Tips for Identifying Birds

Birds come in so many shapes, sizes and colors. Using your nature detective skills of being curious, making careful observations, being patient, and being quiet will help you gather clues about the birds you see and hear. Here are some clues you can look for to help you decide which bird you've discovered!

Color

Sometimes the colors we see on a bird will give us a hint right away. For example, male wood ducks have brightly colored faces that don't look like any other duck in this area. Red-winged blackbirds are the only black bird that has bright red and yellow patches on their shoulders, which you can often see when they spread their wings to balance on the tops of plants in wetlands. Great blue herons are the only long-legged water bird that have blue-gray feathers. Other times, the colors may be harder to find, but still important. Yellow-rumped warblers are named for the bright patch of yellow above their tail feathers. They're a small bird and the yellow can be hard to see if they're moving, but as soon as you do see it, it's a pretty distinct clue!

It's also okay if there's not a color that stands out to you – color can be hard to see without binoculars or hard to see clearly when it's really sunny or really cloudy outside. Read on for other clues that can help you too!



Shape and size

The general **shape** of a bird also gives us clues as to what larger group of birds it might belong to. Characteristics like how their beak is shaped, how long or short their tail feathers are compared to the length of their bodies and if they have short or long wings might help you figure out which general family of birds you're looking at.



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The pictures below show the shape of a finch, a woodpecker, a hummingbird and a crow. Birds in the finch family have a short, small beak that helps them to eat seeds. Their bodies are thinner and their beaks are smaller than their closest look-a-like, the sparrow. All woodpeckers have long, pointy beaks that they use to drill into tree bark to eat insects or drink sap beneath the bark. All hummingbirds have long, skinny beaks that look kind of like a straw, which they use to drink the nectar from flowers. Crows have a long, thick beak and a body shape (thick chest and long wings) that looks different than most other families of birds.



The **size** of a bird can be hard to judge from far away, but it helps to compare it to a bird you've seen many times before. Deciding if the bird is bigger or smaller than a sparrow (like the song sparrow in your backyard birds guide), a robin, a crow, or a goose can help you decide which family of birds it might belong to.

Habitat

The type of habitat where you saw your bird also helps narrow your choices of what kind of bird it could be. Along the Mississippi River, we have forest, prairie, river and wetland habitats and see birds in the farm fields, city parks and neighborhoods where we live. Some birds are more common to see in one of these habitat types than the others. For example, we don't usually see woodpeckers in prairie habitats, since they need trees to survive and there aren't a lot of trees on the prairie. We also wouldn't be likely to see ducks in the forest unless there's water nearby.

If you know what family of birds you're looking at, the habitat you're in can also help you rule out different species of birds in that family. Sparrows almost all look brown from far away. But, some sparrows prefer only one type of habitat. The song sparrow in the picture on the left can be seen along the edges of wetlands, forests, or in neighborhoods. The clay-colored sparrow on the right looks similar to the song sparrow, but only lives in prairie areas and fields with small shrubs. If you see a sparrow near a wetland, it's not likely to be a clay-colored sparrow.



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The time of year also influences which birds we see in which habitat types. Trumpeter swans and tundra swans look really similar, but tundra swans only visit this area in the fall as they fly south for the winter, and for a short time in the spring as they stop here before continuing further north. If you see a pair of swans in January, they're much more likely to be trumpeter swans. Trumpeter swans live here all year. The photo below shows a trumpeter swan swimming in front of a tundra swan in late fall.



Behavior

Even though birds' behavior can take the most patience to watch for or listen for, it can give us some really great clues! Some birds have easy to recognize calls that we can hear even when we can't see the birds. We've labeled some of those calls on your field guides, and if you have time before you go outside, ask an adult if you can listen to the calls online; you can find many videos of birds' calls on allaboutbirds.org.

Paying attention to how birds move and what they're doing also tells us a lot about the bird! Some birds prefer to eat food they find on the ground: robins are famous for running around on grassy lawns looking for worms; white-breasted nuthatches are one of few birds that can move upside down on the branches and trunks of trees; Canada geese are known for flying in a "V" formation in the sky.



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We hope these tips are helpful for you as you get out and explore. Don't worry if you're not able to identify all the birds that you see – it's way more important to have fun watching them than it is to know their specific name. You could even make up your own names for the birds that you see!

Seeing birds come back each spring offers little celebrations of the cycle of life. We find a little bubble of happiness in hearing the first red-winged blackbird call of the year and listening to the geese flying overhead, knowing that this means the days are growing longer and warmer, plants will begin growing again, and the birds will start making nests and preparing to lay eggs. We observe these natural happenings at about the same time every year and find something comforting in the patterns of nature.

Happy birding, naturalists!