

Species Profile...

How to be a Better Birder

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People often ask me how they can become better at identifying birds. I tell them there's a tried and proven technique to becoming a better birder. Watch birds often. That's what expert birders do---if you spend time outdoors looking at birds, then you'll become a better bird photographer.

The key to becoming proficient at bird identification is to understand how you learn patterns. You learn patterns from repeated observations. For instance, you can spot a friend in a crowd of strangers because you've observed the physical and facial pattern of that friend many times before. You learn to recognize the patterns of birds the same way. After repeatedly watching birds fly, feed, and make noises, you simply get used to their patterns; then you can instantly call out their names.

Let me share with you the tips I've learned about bird identification over the years. The best tip I ever got was from a professional bird tour guide. She told me

to become a master at identifying the birds in my backyard, to learn everything about them---their breeding and non-breeding plumages, their behavior, and their songs and call notes.

Think about the variety of birds in your backyard. Do you really know them? Can you tell the difference between a male and female downy woodpecker? Do you know the difference between the breeding and non-breeding plumage of a titmouse? Do you know the song of a chickadee? Do you know where a mockingbird feeds, and how it gets its food? Answer these questions by studying the birds in your backyard.

By learning about your backyard birds, you'll easily become familiar with the patterns of several groups of birds. From chickadees and titmice, you'll learn the patterns of the small perching birds of the forest. From cardinals, you'll learn about the grosbeak family of birds that crack seeds in their robust beaks. From doves, you'll learn about ground birds; from mockingbirds, you'll learn about the thrasher family of birds; and from woodpeckers, you'll learn everything you need to know to identify any species of woodpecker.

A tip I learned as a young birder was to study my bird field guide all the time, not just when out in the field. I thumb through my field guide several times a week. I study, study, study. Once I got in the habit of studying my field guide almost every day, my birding skills began to improve at an exponential rate. It goes back to pattern recognition. The more you study the patterns of birds, the easier it is for you to identify bird species.

The introduction to most bird field guides has an explanation of so-called bird topography---a term used to designate areas of a bird's body that have key identification markings. For instance, learn about eye stripes, ear patches, wing bars, wing coverts, and the difference between outer and inner tail feathers. Learn the areas of a bird's under parts that are defined as breast, belly, flanks, and vent. Study as much about the feathers of a bird as you can, especially its flight feathers. Then when you watch birds outside, practice finding those topographic bird features you learned in the field guide.

Some birding experts will tell you to leave your field guide in the car when you're out watching birds. They believe the best training in bird identification is to first describe the bird as carefully as you can in a notebook. Make drawings and take notes of its key markings that were not captured in your photos. Then go to the field guide to try to identify it. In this way, you are forced to pay attention to the crucial characteristics that identify a bird before trying to match the pattern with a picture in your field guide.

Whether or not you carry your field guide with you, you'll improve your birding skill if you jot down a few notes about the bird before you look it up in the field guide. Think to yourself, what if I didn't have a field guide...how would I describe this bird. Write notes in a little pocket notebook or dictate notes into a pocket tape recorder. Either way, you'll improve your birding skill phenomenally.

Get in the habit of observing things about birds other than what they look like. Study their behavior such as how they forage for food, where they forage for food, how they fly, whether they hop or walk on the ground, and where they perch. These observations will enhance your identification skills and help in anticipating behavior when photographing. Take notes on what kind of birds stay around all year versus the birds that stay for the spring and summer, or stay for the winter, or just migrate through the area.

Learn the songs and call notes of a few birds in your backyard, and then expand you knowledge to other birds. Believe it or not, it's easier to find birds by listening for them than it is by looking for them. A friend of mine who's a master at bird identification finds ninety percent of the birds he sees by first listening for their calls and songs.

Finally, learn what you can from other birders. Join a bird club, take a bird watching course, or go on a bird watching field trip sponsored by a bird club or nature park.

Bob Behrstock, an international bird tour leader residing in Houston, said, "There are two things that make a good birder: an inquiring mind and patience. It takes a while to develop skills. But each additional encounter with the same bird can serve as a learning experience."

Birding is a sport that's never too late to learn, and one that always offers new learning opportunities. Therefore, watch birds often and you'll find you become a better birder and a more proficient bird photographer.

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