

Bird ID—6 Tips

Size & Shape

Birds are built for what they do.

Every part of the bird you're looking at is a clue to what it is.

The combination of size and shape is one of the most powerful tools to identification. Though you may be drawn to watching birds because of their wonderful colors or fascinating behavior, when it comes to making identifications, size and shape are the first pieces of information you should examine.

With just a little practice and observation, you'll find that differences in size and shape will jump out at you. The first steps are to learn typical bird silhouettes, find reliable ways to gauge the size of a bird, and notice differences in telltale parts of a bird such as the bill, wings, and tail.

Color

Every bird you see is in your field guide somewhere.

Focus on patterns instead of trying to match every feather.

A picture – even a fleeting glimpse – can be worth a thousand words. As soon as you spot a bird, your eyes take in the overall pattern of light and dark. And if the light allows, you'll probably glimpse the main colors as well. This is all you need to start your identification.

Use these quick glimpses to build a hunch about what your mystery bird is, even if you just saw it flash across a path and vanish into the underbrush. Then, if the bird is kind enough to hop back into view, you'll know what else to look for to settle the identification.

Behavior

There's what birds wear, and then there's how they wear it.

A bird's attitude goes a long way in identification.

Bird species don't just look unique, they have unique ways of acting, moving, sitting, and flying. When you learn these habits, you can recognize many birds the same way you notice a friend walking through a crowd of strangers.

Because so much of a bird's identity is evident in how it acts, behavior can lead you to an ID in the blink of an eye, in bad light, or from a quarter-mile away. Before you even pick up your binoculars, notice how your bird is sitting, how it's feeding or moving, whether it's in a flock, and if it has any nervous habits like flicking its wings or bobbing its tail.

Habitat

A habitat is a bird's home, and many birds are choosy.
Narrow down your list by keeping in mind where you are.

Identifying birds quickly and correctly is all about probability. By knowing what's likely to be seen you can get a head start on recognizing the birds you run into. And when you see a bird you weren't expecting, you'll know to take an extra look.

We think of habitats as collections of plants: grassland, cypress swamp, pine woods, deciduous forest. But they're equally collections of birds. By noting the habitat you're in, you can build a hunch about the kinds of birds you're most likely to see.

Field Marks

Once you've looked at Size & Shape, Color Pattern, Behavior, and Habitat to decide what general type of bird you're looking at, you may still have a few similar birds to choose between. To be certain of your identification, you'll need to look at field marks.

Field marks are the distinctive stripes, spots, patterns, colors, and highlights that birds have in such abundance and variety. Birds developed these patterns for many reasons, but one way they use some of these markings is to recognize members of their own species. And bird watchers can use them for the same purpose.

Songs & Calls

When a bird sings, it's telling you what it is and where it is.
Learn bird calls and open a new window on your birding.

You can only see straight ahead, but you can hear in all directions at once. Learning bird songs is a great way to identify birds hidden by dense foliage, faraway birds, birds at night, and birds that look identical to each other. In fact, when biologists count birds in the field, the great majority of species are heard rather than seen.

The Nature Park is a wonderful addition to the other delightful parks in San Saba. While enjoying the new park, I hope you will visit the bird blind. Check out the fence erected by Farrel Whitley, his crew and Bird Club members this past week.

Go outside & play!