

Top 10 Ways to Get Better at Bird Identification (#1-4)

by Bill Thompson, III

Many backyard bird watchers struggle to identify certain birds. This is perfectly natural. Almost every bird watcher – even a seasoned pro – gets stumped once in a while by a fall-plumaged warbler or a confusing recent fledgling. The trick is to not let it ruin your fun in watching birds. Here are a few tips to help you get better at bird identification.

1. Practice with your binoculars. You've got to admit that you've missed a bird or two because you couldn't find it in your binocs. It's frustrating, because the bird you missed might have been something really special. Next time you're out birding, take the time to practice the quick draw with your binoculars. Imagine a bird on a distant tree or power pole. Whip your binocs into viewing position and focus. How did you do? A little slow on the draw? You can't get better at identifying birds if you're not good at finding them in your binoculars in the first place.

2. Leaf through the field guide. Again, perhaps an obvious suggestion, but a few hours spent really looking at the illustrations and reading the species descriptions will help your knowledge base grow. You won't remember everything, but what you do remember will surely help you the next time you are faced with an unfamiliar bird. Not all field guides are created equal, so choose the one or two that you prefer and spend some quality time with them.

3. Listen to bird song CDs and tapes. This really helps. Of all the practicing that most bird watchers do, few of them spend enough time learning bird sounds, calls, and songs. These days this is easy with all the recordings available to us. If you are not sure about which recording to get, ask your fellow birders.

4. Take advantage of cooperative birds. Shorebirds are tough for me, especially the small sandpipers known as "peeps." When I first sit down at a mudflat full of these small brownish shorebirds, they literally all look alike. But after I spend some time looking at one bird and noting its shape, behavior, general field marks, and then another bird, and another, some differences between the species begin to emerge. Taking your time and taking advantage of cooperative birds is a great way to get better at bird ID. As you become a more careful, experienced observer, you will begin to know what to look for among groups of confusing birds, such as fall warblers, sparrows, or even peeps. The next challenge is to have regular encounters with these confusing species so that you don't become rusty or forget what you've learned.

Stay tuned for #5-10 in next week's paper!