

DIY Library Program

Discover the Birds!

An introduction to birdwatching

Recommended for Adults

We've all encountered various bird species throughout our lives and often observed them with a sense of wonder (and for some, envy). Some of us have developed such an above-average avian affinity as to engage in the academic study of birds, a scientific field known as ornithology. Many, many more have pursued their interest in these diverse and fascinating animals by way of birdwatching, or birding. As an introduction to this popular hobby, we will take you through a number of helpful tips to start you off in the birding community. First, we'll review information on what features and behaviors to observe to begin identifying the birds you see. Then we'll provide a review of some popular smart phone apps that will become valuable tools to help you learn more about bird species in your area, track your observations, and make successful identifications. Finally, we'll show you some live streams where you can get started observing birds and making IDs right from your home computer or smartphone!

Getting Started as a Birder

First thing to learn is the lingo, a birder is a birdwatcher, and birdwatching is also called birding. As you enter the world of birding, you will come to realize that the people engaged in this shared passion are as diverse as the bird species they observe. According to Kenn Kaufman's *Field guide to Birds of North America* (2000), "Birdwatching or Birding, is among the most rewarding pursuits in the world. It can be mentally challenging and physically strenuous, or it can be relaxing and casual. At any level, it gets us away from stressful and trivial parts of modern life, putting us back in touch with the real world of nature" (pg. 7). There are also volunteer opportunities to be part of a broader community, The National Audubon Society (NAS) hosts an annual Christmas Bird Count (CBC); this event has been going for over 100 years. Think of the bird count as a census for birds. However, there is another event like the CBC, the Great Backyard Bird Count (GBBC). Unlike the CBC, the GBBC can be done anywhere in the world in February. Our goal is to ignite a new passion and introduce you to the world of Birding at any level. Furthermore, to promote the beneficial aspects of birding for you and the conservation of birds. Here are some benefits to consider:

- Experience nature
- Improve your health
- Patience and mindfulness
- Improve your reflexes

- Be part of a community

I see the birds, now what?

- Bird Classification
 - There are a lot of different types of birds, and the chances of confusing one bird for another is high. Even if two birds are part of the same species, they may not look the same. There is also the possibility of changes in how birds are classified. Over time, ornithologists continually refine their classification of birds as their understanding of each unique species improves, sometimes causing species to be renamed to better fit within the taxonomy of related species.
- Bird Song and Calls
 - Another enjoyable path to birding is to identify bird song and calls. With individual birds, it is the only way to determine the bird. But not all birds can have a song or call, and some can be subtle.
 - Songs - Mostly for males and it can be seasonal, for territory purposes and, of course, to attract a mate
 - Calls - Not all birds have a call, but it can occur during any season.
 - Some calls are subtler than others.

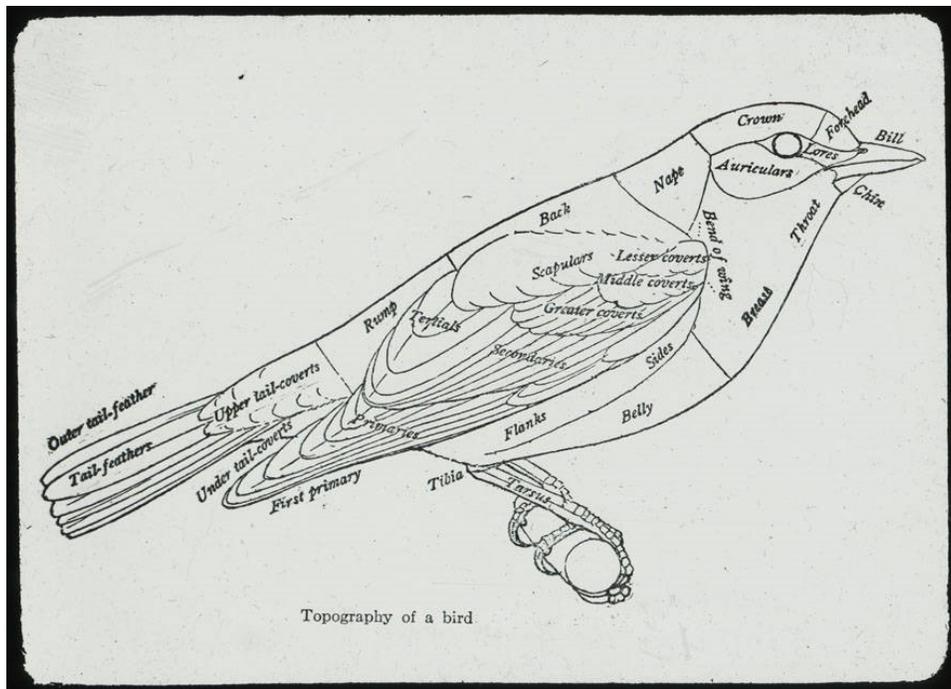
Identifying Birds

Birding can be calming and relaxing to experience in solitude or as part of a community but there is more to birding than looking through binoculars. The next part of this endeavor you'll seek to master is *identifying* birds. Many birds such as hummingbirds or sandpipers have more than one look and many related species. Knowing very particular features and behaviors can help immensely when identifying the birds you observe.

Features to consider:

- Size
 - From the tip of the bill to end of the tail
 - Wingspan
- Bill Size
 - Thin or thick
 - Long or short
 - Influences the type of foods they eat
- Shape and posture
 - Helpful to identify at a distance
 - Slim or chunky

- Short-tailed or long-tailed
- Behavior
 - Identifying a bird is not only about their physical traits. Some behaviors are unique to a bird, so it is good to be aware of different behaviors.
 - Here are some examples of questions you can ask yourself:
 - Is the bird solitary or part of a flock?
 - Is the bird walking or hopping on the ground?
 - Does the bird's head scan back and forth as it moves or does it focus on the ground searching for food?
- Habitat
 - Variation in birds
 - Apart from the differences between male and female birds, there can also be subtle changes in their look throughout the year and in juveniles before reaching maturity.
- Bird Topography and Field Marks



Credit: [Palisades Interstate Park Commission Archives](#)

A bird's topography refers to the different areas of its body. By understanding the bird's topography, it brings you one step closer to distinguish the bird's field marks, considering that adult and juvenile birds of the same species can appear different. Knowing the topography is about recognizing the bird from different angles.

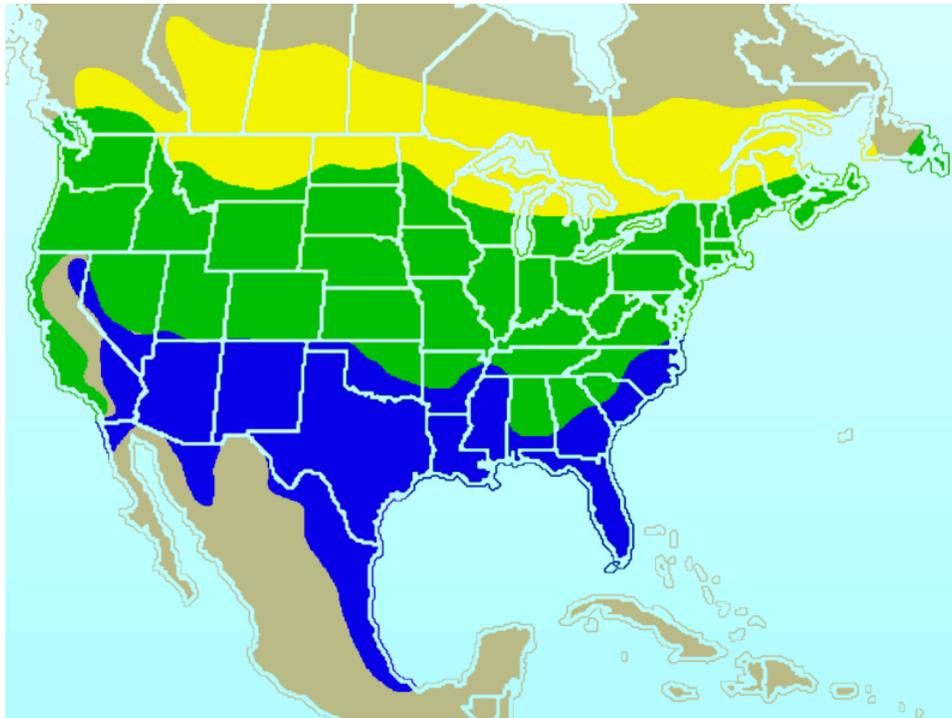
- Field marks

- Notice markings that will help distinguish from other birds. Things to recognize on a bird's crown, throat, belly, wing, tail, or nape.
 - Stripes
 - Patterns
 - Spots
 - Colors
- Pitfalls to misidentifying a bird
 - Misidentifications can happen due to discoloring, lighting, molting, or even the affects water has on a bird. This can be frustrating, but know that this happens even to experienced birders. Remember, to be a great birder, all you need to do is enjoy it.

Understanding Range Maps

Each field guide you encounter may use slightly different colors and represent different information on range maps. Still, they all serve the same purpose of giving bird watchers clues where a particular bird is expected and seen during various times of the year. These maps include areas of permanent residence and year-round observation. The vital information to gather from these range maps is their migratory patterns, and how that impacts the likelihood of the bird you are observing is the species noted in your field guide. Range maps will provide a geographic reference point indicating a particular species is commonly found in a region during a specific part of the year (usually making a distinction between winter and summer) as well as regions where they would be rare to find. Just because the bird your observing is considered rare for the time of year doesn't definitively mean that it's not the species described in your field guide, but it can give you an easy way to exclude the less likely candidates. At the same time, you can look for other features that will help you positively identify the bird you see. Less complex range maps, such as those shown below, may provide less detail but will still provide information the species range as it relates to their migratory behavior.

American Gold Finch Range Map



- Breeding visitor
- Non-breeding visitor
- Resident
- Introduced range

Credit: [Ken Thomas, available via Wikimedia Commons](#)

The Importance of Seasons in Birding

Bird behavior changes throughout the year in line with seasonal changes in weather. Their breeding and migratory behavior, though varying from species to species, fall into cycles that birders should take notice of when seeking to make identifications. In winter, you'll often notice birds in flocks as they migrate, breaking up by late winter as individuals seek their own nesting grounds. Males are often seen in their breeding plumage, and the air will carry their songs as they seek a mate. By spring, some birds will continue on their migration though others may be actively nesting. By summer, nesting is in full swing. Faded plumage and the proliferation of juvenile birds, whose plumage is also often drastically different than adults, brings about a variety of shapes and colors that can make bird identification difficult. By late summer and fall, bird songs have died down, and some birds will begin to molt into new plumage, either making them more easily identifiable or introducing another odd contrast from their look earlier in the year. The more extended migration period will have different species settling into their wintering locations at different times. However, by late fall, most species are settled until they begin the process again for the next year.

These are only an overview of the seasonal considerations that birders should take note of for a better chance of correct identifications. Understanding the behavior of specific species within this more general cycle can help birders easily exclude look-alikes and improve successful identifications.

App your Birding Experience

Here is a short list of some popular birding apps available for mobile devices. Since birding is such a popular hobby these are just a starting point when it comes to birding applications:



Merlin Bird ID: This will be one of the go-to apps to quickly and easily ID birds in the field. After downloading the bird lists based on your geographic location, Merlin Bird ID can populate species based on your response to simple questions like size, color, and behavior to narrow down the possibilities of the bird's identification. You can also make identifications by uploading a photograph of the bird you've observed and allowing the app's AI to generate likely matches to select from. This app will function as a customizable field guide within your phone, allowing you to expand the available bird lists when you travel, and deactivate them at home to filter out unlikely candidates.



eBird: Birders have long maintained lists of the various species that they have observed. Some create shortlists for particular outings or seasons, while the true enthusiasts maintain "life lists" of all of the species they have identified throughout their lifetimes. The *eBird* app, also developed and maintained by the Cornell Lab of Ornithology, will act as your digital bird list. It will track past observations, allow you to share your work with the broader community of birders, and provide additional information on identified species to expand your knowledge. The app can also track the path you walked during your birding excursions to provide more accurate location information for your bird sightings.



Audubon: Another excellent free app for bird sightings on-the-go birdwatching. As mentioned, the app is free, but an email login is necessary, and a second registration with an email or Facebook is needed to access bird sighting service. The app connects to Merlin Bird ID for identifying unknown birds. The app also provides an opportunity to explore other sightings, and you can view the uploaded pictures as well. If you would like to connect with Audubon's information, the app does redirect you to their website. Furthermore, the app does provide Audubon's latest news on its home page. Another great feature of the app is their access to their field guide, which can be downloaded for when WiFi is not available.



Explore.org: This is a website and app where you can view different animals, including birds, in nature. It is free to access their live feeds, but if you register, it opens the opportunity to interact with the community and save your favorites. The good news is that joining is free. Explore.org dedicates its efforts toward continual learning and exploration. It also provides a great source of media to start practicing your bird identification.

Backyard Birding

One staying-home option for outdoor leisure and to remain part of the conservation effort is backyard birding. However, if you don't have a backyard, you can still enjoy birding; consider spaces like the front or side lawn, or just looking out of your window. Attracting birds is all about making them feel welcome, and you can do that with a few simple additions. Here are some ways to attract birds to your home:

- Birdhouses
- Birdbaths
- Planting native plants
- Installing a bird feeder
- Consider bird safe glass (to protect the birds from harm)

Let's Practice!

Below are a few links live streams we've found to get you started. Both [Explore.org](https://www.explore.org) and [AllAboutBirds.org](https://www.allaboutbirds.org) contain a variety of other live streams of bird species that we encourage you to explore! Try also using Merlin Bird ID or one of the other apps to find information about birds found in these locations.

Hummingbirds: Explore.org: <https://tinyurl.com/rliqdwk>

All About Birds.org: <https://tinyurl.com/skt84y4>

Hummingbirds have many brightly-colored features that can be helpful for identification however their incredible agility and the pace of their behavior can make it challenging to train your binocular on them for very long. These streams have a variety of hummingbird feeding sites that should provide breathtaking specimen to practice your identification skills.

Panama Fruit Feeder Cam at Canopy Lodge - Explore.org: <https://tinyurl.com/tfvsrvt>

Located on the grounds of the Canopy Lodge in El Valle de Antón, Panama, this stream focuses on a fruit feeder that is replenished regularly to draw diverse birds from this ecosystem throughout the day. This stream may require you to explore resources outside of the North American focused guides provided below, but should provide an astounding array of birds sporting tropical hues you may be unlikely to encounter elsewhere. If you're using Merlin Bird ID, you can download the bird pack for Panama to get information on local species to help with your identification.

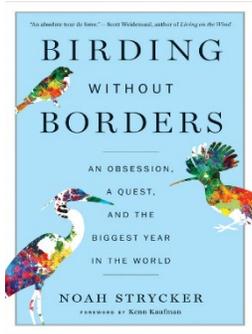
Cornell FeederWatch Cam - All About Birds.org: <https://tinyurl.com/spoayzk>

The Treman Bird Feeding Garden at the Cornell Lab of Ornithology is located at the edge of Sapsucker woods and its 10-acre pond in Ithaca, NY. The location attracts forest dwelling birds as well as those that prefer more open areas. Be prepared for a lot of activity in this stream and expect to observe species you may not have encountered in the Southern California ecosystem.

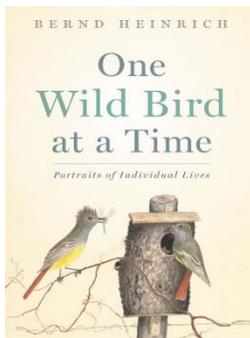
Ontario FeederWatch Cam - All About Birds.org: <https://tinyurl.com/sjudncy>

Located in a residential neighborhood in Manitouwadge, Ontario, this feeder is constructed by the cam's hosts and draws a variety of northern bird species. The cam is situated in a residential backyard with a large birch tree and nearby conifer trees. This stream is often crowded and should provide a great variety of unfamiliar species to practice your skills.

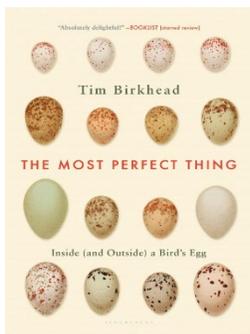
A few books about birds, birding and people who are passionate about both.



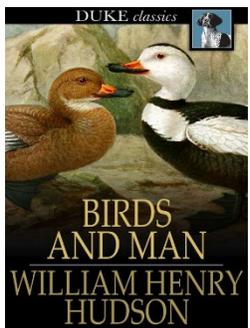
Birding Without Borders: An Obsession, a Quest, and the Biggest Year in the World by Noah Strycker <https://tinyurl.com/qukfsf>



One Wild Bird at a Time: Portraits of Individual Lives by Bernd Heinrich <https://tinyurl.com/vjoanqp>



The Most Perfect Thing: Inside (and Outside) a Bird's Egg by Tim Birkhead <https://tinyurl.com/vdrqh93>



Birds and Man by William Henry Hudson <https://tinyurl.com/qp53h99>