



Brunswick Wildlife Basics of Bird Identification

My friends who play golf ask me why I am a birder. The answer is easy. I gave up golf because it wasn't frustration enough.

On most any field trip, a bird will humble you! For a given year, over 400 birds may be seen in North Carolina including rare visitors from the west, birds migrating through our area in spring or fall, or birds that wander up from the south during post-breeding dispersal. The number of species plus other variables makes identifying birds a daunting activity!

With bird identification, the devil is truly in the details. The details of appearance are called "field marks" and a beginning birder must look at field marks and mentally note as many as possible. If nothing else, note bill and head characteristics because these are usually strong clues to a bird's identity.

Equally important, everyone should study a bird while it is in their binoculars and not go quickly to a field guide! If you take your eye off a bird and start flipping through the book, there is a very good chance the bird will be in another zip code when you look back. Just kidding about the zip code...but not about the bird disappearing.

Beginning birders need to learn how to identify families and genera as soon as possible. Finding the exact species through a process of elimination is easier if you know your bird is a vireo instead of a warbler or sparrow.

When looking for birds in trees or brush, search for motion with your naked eye. Try to anticipate where a bird might pop out and, given the habitat, the probable species. It is best to have your binoculars up near your chin and pre-focused. Your field of view will be much wider by keeping your binoculars down until you see the bird again.

Many aspects of appearance are useful. Obviously, color is important. Then there are those details such as breast streaking and spots, wing stripes, eye rings, head stripes, wing bars, etc. Also, the shape of a bird's bill or its wings and its silhouette may be important field marks.

Arrows in the pictures above indicate “diagnostic” field marks. For the gnatcatcher, its white eye-ring, wing stripe, and outer tail feathers should lead to its identification. For the sparrow, the white throat and yellow lores just above its beak should give it away. Note that these photos demonstrate that your view of a bird may be very different from pictures in a field guide.

Adult males, adult females, and juveniles may have different plumages for a given species. For birds like gulls, that do not reach adult plumage after one year, there are usually different plumages for different ages.

Birds gradually molt all of their feathers once a year (called the pre-basic molt) yielding their basic plumage. This is generally their non-breeding plumage and, for many species, their winter plumage. However, many birds molt only once a year so their basic plumage is their breeding as well as the non-breeding plumage.

Months later birds that have an alternate plumage for breeding go through a partial, pre-alternate molt. Males in alternate plumage, such as many warblers, are generally very colorful.

It gets more difficult! Molting takes time and a bird you see in the brush may be in mid-molt and look different from photos or illustrations in your field guide. Birds replace their feathers due to feather wear and a worn plumage may also provide a different look.

Wait, it gets even more difficult! The amount of sunlight and distance from the observer to bird must also be factored in when comparing your mental notes to a field guide. Different field marks may be required for more distant birds. Also, judging size may be problematic due to distance and the magnification effect of binoculars. It helps to associate size with the size of common birds like sparrows, crows, etc.

Noting other behaviors such as how a bird flies, how it moves through a brush, and how it forages may aid identification. For example, woodpeckers have a distinctive flight pattern and you can usually place a bird in the woodpecker family by just watching it fly overhead.

My best advice to beginning birders is to take it easy and think “five-year plan”. Remember ALL birders learn something new on every trip. Birding is frustrating at times but never boring!

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