

Helpful Hints for Identifying Birds

By Kirk Waterstripe

In the world of birding, encounters may range from an hour to less than a second. One of our goals during that time is to figure out just what kind of bird we're looking at. This can be easy or it can be extremely challenging. Identifying birds is like detective work. From each encounter with a bird, you will glean clues that lead you to its identity. When you first spot the bird there are several questions to ask yourself and answer: How big is the bird? What kind of habitat is it in? Does it have any particular shape? Any particular behaviors? What colors are present and where are they? The information from your answers will help you sort out the useful clues, from the useless information and this will help identify your bird.

HABITAT

Habitat is an important key that you can be aware of even before you see the first bird. Keep track of what sort of plant community you're standing in - is it a deciduous forest, a coniferous forest, a swamp, a cattail marsh, a lakeshore, a field, the edge of a field, or a suburban neighborhood? Of course, there are many other types of habitats, but these are perhaps the most common in the Grand Traverse region. Also, remember that some birds will spend time in several different habitats. For example, Common Grackles are often found in backyards but they are also at home along brushy edges of streams and swamps. Most field guides provide concise information about birds' preferred habitats.

SIZE

A bird's size is very often important in identification. When you describe the size of a bird, it is often convenient to compare it to a common species: Is the bird sparrow-sized? Smaller than a robin? Bigger than a crow? Watch for similar species of different sizes, such as Downy and Hairy Woodpeckers, Sharp-shinned and Cooper's hawks, and the gulls.

SHAPE

Another very important clue is the shape of the bird. Is it long and thin like a mockingbird, or short and plump like a starling? Does the bird have long or short legs? Is the tail long or short? Does the bird have a crest? Remember birds can raise and lower their crests so it may not be evident, or a crestless bird may appear to have one. Are "horns" or tufts near the ears present? Posture is also important. Does the bird perch in an erect manner (like a flycatcher), hunched over (like a bluebird), or more horizontally (like a vireo)?

The bills and feet can provide very useful information. Since a bird's bill is adapted for obtaining certain kinds of food, this feature can tell an observer a great deal about the bird's diet and lifestyle. Examples include hooked meat-eating bill of hawks, owls, and falcons, the

conical seed-cracking bill of finches, the serrated bill of mergansers for catching fish and the long probing bills of sandpipers.

Generalist species such as blackbirds and gulls have bills that serve in obtaining a great variety of food. Make a note of bills that curve downward (decurved) or upward (recurved), are chisel-like, or have crossed mandibles; these can be indicative of certain groups of birds. Each group or family of birds has its own unique combination of body and bill shapes. Study these combinations, and take notes of them when making observations in the field. These clues can often narrow the choices down to 5 or 6 species.

BEHAVIORS

The way in which a bird behaves can often be a big help in the identification of the bird. When watching a bird notice how it acts, most of the time. For identification, watch for “personality traits” instead of behaviors that relate to maintenance or mating. Here are a few behaviors that might aid in identifying:

Does the bird swim? If so, does it dive under the water, or just dip its head to feed?

Does the bird wade along the shoreline? In deep or shallow water?

Does the bird flick its tail up and down while perched?

If the bird climbs tree trunks, does it climb up (like a woodpecker), or go down headfirst (like a nuthatch)? Does it feed on the trunk or just in the branches?

Does the bird fly constantly, or only briefly from perch to perch? Does it hover? Does it soar without flapping? Does it swoop up and down like a roller coaster as it flies?

Is the bird alone or with others of its kind? Is it in a single-species group or several species?

Remember: When a bird is flying away from you its behaviors won't tell you very much. It's best to watch the bird without disturbing it.

COLOR

Most of the time, the first thing we notice about birds is their color. Why wasn't it mentioned before? Color is not the best attribute when identifying a bird. Color can be a very undependable factor when identifying a bird. When the light is bad or the sun is directly behind the bird, all you might see is a dark shape. Plumages, the color of the feathers, can vary greatly at different times of year. Winter plumages may mix with breeding colors, and immature birds can be very different from adults. In many species, males and females wear different plumages. Still, when the light is good, color can be a very useful tool.

A bird's color, or pattern of colors (often called “field marks”) are most useful when you have determined to what group or family a bird belongs. For instance, if you think you are looking at a sparrow, check for stripes on the head, or crown . If the crown has black and white

stripes, you may be watching a White-throated Sparrow, but if the stripes are brown and gray, the bird may be a Song Sparrow. Here are some other field marks to watch for:

Are there streaks, bars or spots on the breast?

Are there white streaks (bars) or patches on the wings?

Does the bird have a rump patch of a different color?

Does the bird have a band across the tip, white spots at the corners or white feathers at the edges?

Does the bird's eye have a light-colored ring around it? A stripe running through it?

Are there any other markings on the face such as a moustache-like marks at the base of the bill, patches of color in the front of the eye or on the chin?

Does the wing have a patch of color near the body? This is a common feature in duck wings.

As mentioned before, plumages can be deceiving. Birders must be alert from seasonal variations. For example, the male American Goldfinch sheds his bright yellow breeding colors in the fall and takes on a yellowish green plumage, similar to the female. Males of several duck species change to a camouflaged plumage that resemble the female during the "post-nuptial molt" at the end of breeding season, since they lose all their flight feathers at once, and are grounded at this time.

Several species, such as hummingbirds, Tree Swallows and grackles have iridescent feathers. The structure of the feather creates colors when the light hits the feather at the correct angle. Male Ruby-throated are known for their bright red throats and male Indigo Buntings are a stunning blue, but both colors may appear black in the wrong light. If you find a feather, it can be interesting to compare its pigmentation to the color created by the light reflected from its surface.

In the beginning of your birding adventures, concentrate on the birds that sit still and let you observe them. After a short time, your eye will become trained to take note of shapes, colors, sizes and behaviors. With experience, you will become familiar with the shapes and behaviors of each group or family of birds. You will learn to look for key features which separate similar species. Studying your field guide can be very good practice but read the descriptions of species while you look at the pictures. Remember, while the bird is in front of you, study it, and reach for the field guide after the bird has left.

ONLINE RESOURCES

There are hundreds of online resources to guide you through the process of bird identification. The Cornell Lab of Ornithology has a series of short videos called "Inside Birding"

on their YouTube channel. There are several smartphone apps like Merlin from Cornell, Audubon from the National Audubon Society (both free), and field guide apps like Sibley Birds that will help identify birds based on your answers to questions related to the material above. They also provide links to recordings of songs and calls, which can be helpful in the field.

If you have the capability to photograph the bird, you can post your photos to one of many groups on social media and ask for identification help. A word of caution: try to make the identification yourself first. If you post a photo, let others know what species you have ruled out. These groups can be almost as good as having an experienced birder at your side, but don't let them become a substitute for effort. In the end, you'll remember the species you had to work out for yourself.

Going birding with someone with lots of experience is a great way to learn almost anything. Find a mentor! But make sure this mentor is interested in teaching. You can tag along with a fast-moving group of experts who name birds from a single chip note or flash of a wing, but you might come away even more frustrated. Make sure your teacher will slow down and give you time to get a good look.