

# *Backyard Birding Guides*

## **#5 - How To Watch Birds**

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It may seem a little unnecessary to talk about how to watch birds. All too often, however, beginners, and even some experienced birdwatchers, fall into the trap of not looking at all of the bird. They only look at the general coloration of the bird. With many species of birds in several groups attention, to little details like leg color, bill color and wing length in proportion to tail length, is critical. Following are some helpful tips to become a better observer of avian wildlife.

### ***The Basics***

1. To start watching go out with your binoculars, pad of paper and pencil.
2. Leave the bird book at home. Write down details of the birds you know. With birds you know, write down the characteristics that help you identify them. For example, a cardinal is about the size of a robin. The male is brilliant red with an obvious crest and a black face, and the thick bill is red.
3. After your birding outing, sit down with your field guide and see if you can identify the birds you saw from your descriptions. While it may seem easier to take your bird book with you to the field, you will spend more time looking at the book, trying to match what you see to a picture, than you will looking at the bird.
4. Become familiar with your field guide. Spend time before - and after - you go birding looking for key characteristics, which are important in large confusing families, i.e. like warblers and sparrows. The Peterson Field Guides are excellent at pointing out key identification characteristics.
5. Make some basic sketches to go with your notes. Record all details you can see, such as bill shape and size; coloration; any field marks, such as eye rings, wing bars, barring in tail, leg color, plumage coloration and patterning. Remember details, details, details!
6. Use identification tools available; visual; habit; time of year; song; checklists; and other birders. No matter how long anyone has been a birder they are still learning!
7. Keep lists. I recommend a list on every birding trip of significance. A yearly list which may include the date you first saw a particular bird and also a life list of the species you have ever seen. Avid birders will even keep separate state lists, county lists, etc.!
8. While you are watching birds, learn to watch and appreciate the rest of nature: other animals; vegetation; geology; history; etc. Start collecting field guides to plants, reptiles, mammals, etc. and then you can start lists of these also.
9. Don't worry if you can't identify every bird you see. Even if you can't identify a bird, learn to just appreciate it for what it is. Above all else, just spend as much time as you can watching the bird and taking notes.

## ***What to Look For***

In addition to the list just covered, there are additional patterns and characteristics that simplify identification.

1. Different bird families tend to have similar characteristics, such as shape, in flight or perched and how it flies. For example, robins and bluebirds are both in the thrush family. Their upright posture on wires and their flight patterns are very similar. Based on this you can learn to distinguish a bluebird from a sparrow as it flies off a wire.

The large-bodied hawks, like Red-tailed Hawks (buteos), fly and soar much differently than the falcon group, like American Kestrel (Sparrow Hawk). Buteos have straight broad wings; falcons have narrow wings that narrow towards the tip and are often bent at the "elbow" or "wrist."

Watch birds you know and learn their flight patterns. Crows seldom glide - they usually keep flapping their wings. Most hawks will glide at some point in their flight. Ravens glide like hawks.

2. Coloration and plumage patterns are some of the first things we all learn to look for. Learn to distinguish more subtle differences of plumage and coloration. Avoid trying to exactly match the color in the bird book to the bird you are trying to identify. Color printing processes are not perfect and birds, like all natural things, will exhibit normal variation patterns based on environmental pressures, food and heredity. For example, House Finches are generally a rosy red color, but can range from very red to a goldish/orange.

Learn to look for the pattern of the color. Does the color extend down the back of the neck or is it only on the top of the head? Does the rosy striping of the upper breast go down the belly and the sides or does it stop or change color?

3. Look for key characteristics and field marks such as eye stripes; wing bars; and tail patterns. Is the tail notched, square, or rounded?

Size is not a good guide, unless you have a known reference. If an unknown bird is by itself, don't get too bogged down on whether it may have been 12 to 14 inches long or 14 to 16 inches long.

Note other characteristics. If it is next to a known bird, then you can determine that it was larger or smaller or the same size as a robin, crow or other reference.

4. Details that are often ignored include beak, leg and foot color and characteristics. Ring-billed Gulls and Herring Gulls can look similar from a distance, yet Ring-billed Gulls have yellow legs and feet and Herring Gulls have pink legs and feet. Size differential can be difficult to determine without a reference.

Female House Finches and Pine Siskins may look similar at first glance, but the siskin has a dainty little beak, while the House Finch has a much more massive bill. Downy and Hairy Woodpeckers are almost carbon copies of each other in plumage, yet the Hairy is twice as big which is no help when there is only one at your feeder. Look at the bill. The Downy's bill is a dainty needle, the Hairy's is like a big old chisel.

5. Once again, remember to write down notes on species you don't know. You may only get to see the bird for a few minutes - memories start to change the minute you look in the bird book.

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