

ABCs of Avian ID

With a little reading, writing and arithmetic, you'll graduate from bird-watcher to bird-identifier.

By Clay and Pat Sutton

When we begin backyard birding, most of us feel a need to put names to the feathered visitors attracted to our yards. This remains true for beginners looking at their first perky chickadee and for those who have birdwatched for many years.

Even Experts Get Stumped

My husband, Clay, and I don't recall the first "yard bird" recorded at our home of 30-plus years, but the last one was as puzzling as any bird during our career — and we wanted to put a name to it. From the back yard, we heard a high-pitched, long, thin whistle high overhead in the dark. We agonized for a week over this nighttime transient until a friend suggested the obvious: Black Scoters migrating through the night.

We'd heard these sea ducks many times but just couldn't place this call in such an out-of-context setting, miles from the ocean. Even after 35 years of birding, we still appreciate the satisfaction of identifying an unexpected avian visitor!

Clay grew up in a family that recognized and enjoyed the common birds around its Jersey Shore home. His mother pointed out Northern Cardinals, Blue Jays, Baltimore Orioles and the like, giving him a head start on bird identification. When he was 13, his grandmother gave him a copy of naturalist Roger Tory Peterson's "A Field Guide to the Birds" (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt). He remembers feeling bewildered by the book; it contained so many birds. "There's no way I can see or ID so many birds," Clay thought. A few days later, however, he used the guide to ID his first "life bird" (a bird seen for the first time): a Black-and-white Warbler in a neighbor's back yard.

To ID the warbler, Clay did what most of us do the first time we are confronted by an unfamiliar bird: He frantically paged through the guide until the picture matched the bird in front of him. There is nothing wrong with this method (we even used it a couple of times when daunted by tropical birds while visiting Costa Rica), but it has huge shortcomings:

It only works for boldly marked birds at which you get a good, lengthy look.

It breaks down completely for subtly patterned birds at which you don't get a good, lengthy look.

Had Clay's first "life bird" been a female Blackpoll Warbler — a bird often very difficult to identify in its drab fall plumage — this story might have had a different outcome.

Read Up

There are alternatives to merely thumbing through the field guide and looking for a match. One of the most important parts of any field guide, the introductory material covers how to use the guide and how to ID birds. We all want to skip to the pictures, but a key part of birding is to understand the various types or groups of birds, how they appear similar and how they differ.

The guide's introductory section describes plumage (the covering of feathers) and how it changes through the seasons (altering the look of a bird) as well as how to learn bird songs and calls — not only for pure enjoyment but also for help in ID, as every bird species has a unique song. For example, once learned, the Carolina Wren's exuberant "tea-kettle, tea-kettle, tea-kettle" is unforgettable. Numerous individual and regional variations in bird song do exist, however.

Bird topography (the parts of a bird) is particularly important. A key feature in separating groups of birds, the bill is sometimes called the beak. Bills vary in length, thickness and shape. Sparrows have thick, conical bills, for example, and warblers' are thin and pointed. While length of the tail and legs and the shape of the bird play important roles in ID, the size, shape and color of the bill offers a good starting point when categorizing a bird.

The overall size and the general shape of the bird remain important aspects of bird ID. Jays appear far larger and sit more upright than sparrows, for example, and some (but not all) jays have a crest: a semiplume of feathers that makes a prominent feature on some species' heads.

Once you have an idea, or at least a guess, as to which group of birds your mystery bird belongs to, color and pattern play

a huge role. Many birds have unique coloration and diagnostic patterns; these are highlighted in field guides and classically known as “field marks.”

Identifying birds by field marks was popularized by Peterson, the “father of American birding,” with his 1934 field guide. Since that publication, bird guides have used arrows to highlight features to look for when IDing a bird — features that will confirm the ID of any species.

Write it Down

Your field guide might not be handy at the very moment that you encounter an unfamiliar bird. In such instances, a photographic memory helps. Try to commit to memory the bird’s size, shape, colors, patterns, and bill size and shape. Sketch the bird, however crudely, using arrows to highlight colors and patterns. Drawing the bird forces you to look at it more closely and notice more details. Your sketch will give you something to compare to the pictures in the field guide.

After the bird leaves your view, it’s important to consult the guide ASAP; memory fades, but sketches remain and will jog your memory. Even highly experienced ornithologists use field sketches when confronted with an unfamiliar bird. Don’t worry about your drawing ability; focus on highlighting key colors, patterns, features and proportions.

Beyond size, shape and color, also note behavior; each group of birds exhibits distinctive behavioral traits. Sparrows scurry on the ground and through dense vegetation when feeding. Flycatchers generally perch conspicuously and sally forth to chase flying insects. Nuthatches frequently hang upside down on tree trunks or under tree limbs.

Some individual species have highly specific traits. A Palm Warbler might look very similar to other warblers, but it is often found on or near the ground and bobs its tail constantly. Similarly, an Eastern Phoebe might, at first glance, look like other flycatchers, but it uniquely flicks its tail constantly while perched. Some birds remain mostly silent except during the early morning and in springtime. Other birds are highly vocal. Wrens might even sing during all seasons and at all times of the day.

Even given all of the above methods and advice, many birds are “look-alikes,” subtly patterned and somewhat devoid of obvious field marks. To a beginner, most sparrows look alike and can become exasperatingly difficult to identify. Remember that an experienced birder who can distinguish a Lincoln’s Sparrow out of a flock of Song Sparrows doesn’t have any better vision or more special skills than you. It’s not voodoo or magic; an experienced birder simply has more experience.

As in sports, nothing takes the place of repeated practice and dedication. The more familiar you become with Song Sparrows and their subtle plumage variations, the more likely it is that a Lincoln’s Sparrow will stand out as different from other species. Study the common, everyday species, and you will become more prepared to pick out and identify something new and different. A related recommendation: Study your field guide leisurely and often — not just when you head outdoors or see a new bird in front of you.

There is an old saying that experience only comes from making mistakes, and this remains somewhat true of birding. You can accelerate the learning process by venturing beyond the back yard, however. Jump-start your birding skills by attending organized bird walks, birdwatching courses and other opportunities taught by longtime local birders. These offerings are available throughout the United States at nature centers and through bird clubs. Learn from and with others. Ask questions; leaders love to share. During one bird-filled spring bird walk, you can learn and absorb more than you could in possibly many years by yourself in your back yard.

Add it Up

Learning to ID birds feels much like putting together the pieces of a jigsaw puzzle. It can feel overwhelming at first, but with practice comes speed and skill. Make sure to note the pieces of each bird puzzle: size, shape, color, pattern, behavior, habitat, season and so on. Add together all those pieces, and you form a picture — a picture of a new bird!

One time during a nature outing, my husband’s nephew asked, “Uncle Clay, how can you identify so many birds? They all look the same to me.” He asked this question after he’d just finished identifying every passing car and truck on the highway, assigning make, model, year and often engine size. His nephew used the same set of skills that Clay used for bird ID, noting size, shape, pattern and unique features, deciphering clues and making choices until a solution became possible. We all do it every day, whether we’re recognizing actors, logos and brands or collecting rare coins or stamps. Bird ID consists of processing information, gleaming clues until a correct choice becomes obvious.

Some people might have their very first birding adventures while on vacation, on a cruise or during a school field trip. For most of us, however, that first spark of interest occurred in our back yards. Do not let difficult-to-ID birds dampen your



enthusiasm. There are many, many tools available — field guides, birding basics or “how-to” books, DVDs, Internet resources and local nature centers — to help you get over the initial identification hurdles.

Even if at first you can't identify every bird, the most important thing is to enjoy yourself. Revel in the songs, sounds, behaviors, colors, movement and very life that birds can bring to your yard. All the rest will fall into place.