



Tips for Beginning Birdwatchers

Birdwatching can be fun and exciting. There are over 500 species of amazing birds in Oregon. For a beginning birdwatcher the task of identifying birds can seem daunting. When starting, it can be helpful to concentrate on recognizing groups of birds. Birds are typically grouped by their general shape and physical characteristics. Birds are all around us, and everyone has some basic knowledge of birds. Most people, including children, can recognize ducks, geese, woodpeckers, hummingbirds, hawks or owls. Field guides are organized by bird orders and families. Browsing a field guide can help you learn to recognize other groups that might be new to you, like wrens, swallows, sparrows or nuthatches. When identifying a bird to a group or species there are four key things to focus on: 1. Size and Shape, 2. Color Pattern, 3. Behavior, 4. Habitat.

1. Size and Shape

The silhouette of a bird is the first thing to note. Bird coloring can be different for male and female birds or change with age or season, but their silhouette stays the same. Most birds in a group have similar silhouettes: size, shape, and posture. To judge size, compare the bird to something you are familiar with. Is it the size of a golf ball, a softball, a football or basketball? When noting the shape, pay close attention to the beak, legs, neck, and tail. For example, beaks come in all sizes and shapes, long or short, thick or thin, straight, curved or hooked. Beaks can tell us a lot about what a bird eats and how it forages.

See how many birds you can identify in the following picture.



2. Color Patterns

Many times, all you get is a quick glimpse of a bird in motion. Concentrate on the overall color pattern of light and dark. As you learn more about the species of birds in your area you will learn what specific field marks to look for. For example, to identify a specific species of sparrow you may be looking for wing bars, eye stripes, throat color, or chest spots. That all comes with practice.

3. Behavior

Birds don't just look unique, they have unique ways of acting, moving, sitting and flying. Is the bird you see alone or part of a flock? Is it foraging in a tree, on the ground, at a feeder, or in water? Is the bird in constant motion? Soaring? The best way to learn behavior is by simply watching birds. As you become familiar with your local birds, behavior can enable you to identify some birds at a glance without seeing them close up.

4. Habitat

A good field guide will have a map showing the range of a species of bird and list the habitat they are typically found in. This narrows down your list of possibilities when identifying a bird, and can tell you what birds to expect in a given area.

Here is an example of the 4 Keys in action:

Black-capped Chickadee

Size and Shape: Very small golf ball size bird with a big head, a small thin beak and average perching legs.

Color Pattern: Black cap and throat with white cheeks, buffy sides and grey on its wings and back.

Behavior: Busy, often in a small flock, can be seen hanging upside down while foraging in trees or shrubs. Will visit feeders.

Habitat: Forests, woodlots, backyards and shrubby areas.



Have fun!