



Bird Watching Resource Guide



BINOCULARS

Binoculars are usually described by two numbers—for example, 8x32. The first number refers to the magnification power of the binoculars. The second number describes the size of the objective lens (in mm), which controls how much light enters the binoculars. For beginners, we recommend 8x32's or 8x42's. With too much magnification (10 or 12), binoculars will be hard to hold steady. With too small of an objective lens (<32), there will not be enough light to form a clear image in less than ideal lighting, and binoculars with larger objectives tend to be heavier. Remember, you get what you pay for, and binoculars are no exception. A good pair can last a decade or more with proper care and handling. Be sure to try them before you buy them, and plan to spend some time getting used to using them.



FIELD GUIDES

There are lots of decisions to make when selecting a field guide. Do you prefer photos or illustrations? What's more important, portability, or depth of information? Do you want a national, regional, or habitat-specific guide? No matter what your answers, look for guides with easily accessible range maps and illustrations or photos that show seasonal and age variations. Be sure to read the text as well — images are indispensable for bird identification, but the text often contains behavior information that can help you determine what species you are seeing. Finally, consider purchasing a mobile app for your smart phone or tablet. These often contain more illustrations and photos than books, and some even have recordings of bird vocalizations to help you identify them.

GENERAL BIRDING TIPS



Timing is Key

Many species, especially songbirds, are most active early in the morning and in the late afternoon. Try watching then for your best chance at spotting them.

You Aren't the Only One Watching

Birds are constantly watching and listening for predators, so do the best you can to blend into the environment around you. Avoid brightly colored clothing and try to keep noise to a minimum.

TIPS FOR IDENTIFICATION



Take Notes

When you see a bird you don't recognize, try to jot down a few notes or sketch the bird before it flies away. This will help you remember important details when you are looking at your field guide later. Taking photographs gives you something to look at later, but writing notes or sketching a bird will force you to pay attention to details of the bird's appearance and behavior while you are watching it.

Learn Some Bird Anatomy

Birds come in an amazing variety of colors, shapes, and sizes, but they generally share the same basic body parts. Try to familiarize yourself with the names of these body parts and feather groups because field guides use them to describe each bird and make distinctions between similar species. All bird field guides contain charts to help you learn bird anatomy. Knowing basic bird anatomy will also help you take better notes and draw better sketches.



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Judge Size and Shape

Size and shape are important clues about a bird's identity, but they can also be hard to determine, especially when looking at a bird from a distance through binoculars. Try to get a sense of the bird's size in comparison to more common or familiar birds (especially if they are nearby) — larger than a robin but smaller than a crow, for example. Shapes are also important to note, especially the shapes of beaks, wings, and tails, which often tell you a lot about a bird.

Study Behavior

Take a moment to notice how the bird is acting. Is it alone or in a group? Is it stalking prey, standing still, or flitting actively? How does it fly? What is it eating? Some birds are easily recognized by their actions alone.

Be Aware of Variations

Plumage can vary drastically within a species based on age, sex, and the season. If you see something different, first check to see if it is a different plumage of a familiar species. Beyond that, birds can also show unusual plumage variations including albinism, which can make them partly or entirely white. On top of that, birds drop their feathers and regrow them at certain times of year, temporarily changing the length of their tails, for example.

Listen, Listen, Listen

Listening for the songs and calls of birds can help you find and identify them, even before you see them. Some birds that look similar to each other have very different voices, so paying attention to how they sound can help you separate confusing species. As you become familiar with the common songs and calls, you'll start to be able to pick out things that sound different. Many different CDs and mobile apps include recordings that can help you learn songs and calls.



MORE BIRDING RESOURCES:

- **American Birding Association (<http://www.aba.org>):**
A nonprofit dedicated to increasing the knowledge, skills, and enjoyment of birders.
- **Audubon at Home (<http://athome.audubon.org>):**
Practical advice on how to create and maintain a bird-friendly home.
- **Audubon Birds Online Guide (<http://www.audubonbirds.org/>):**
A searchable online guide to the birds of the United States featuring images, descriptions, range maps, and links to the Audubon Guides app series.
- **Audubon Centers and Chapters (<http://www.audubon.org/locations>):**
A useful tool to help you find the Audubon Center or Chapter nearest you.
- **Bird Feeding Basics (<http://getintobirds.audubon.org/bird-feeding-basics>):**
A guide to selecting, placing, filling, and maintaining your bird feeders.
- **eBird (www.eBird.org):**
An online database that lets you record and track the birds you see, explore bird sightings submitted by other participants, and contribute to science and conservation.