

Get Started Birding

 getintobirds.audubon.org/get-started-birding (accessed 3/24/14)

You might be surprised to discover how many bird names you already know, but whether it's five or 50, you can take your knowledge to the next level with the tips on this page and a birder's most important tools: [binoculars](#), a [field guide](#), a notebook, and practice!

Become a note taker: When you see a bird you don't recognize, try to jot down a few notes or sketch the bird before it flies away. If you don't take notes, you may find you've forgotten important details when you are looking at your field guide later. Taking photographs also gives you something to look at later, of course, but writing notes or sketching a bird by hand will force you to pay attention to details of the bird's appearance and behavior while you are watching it.

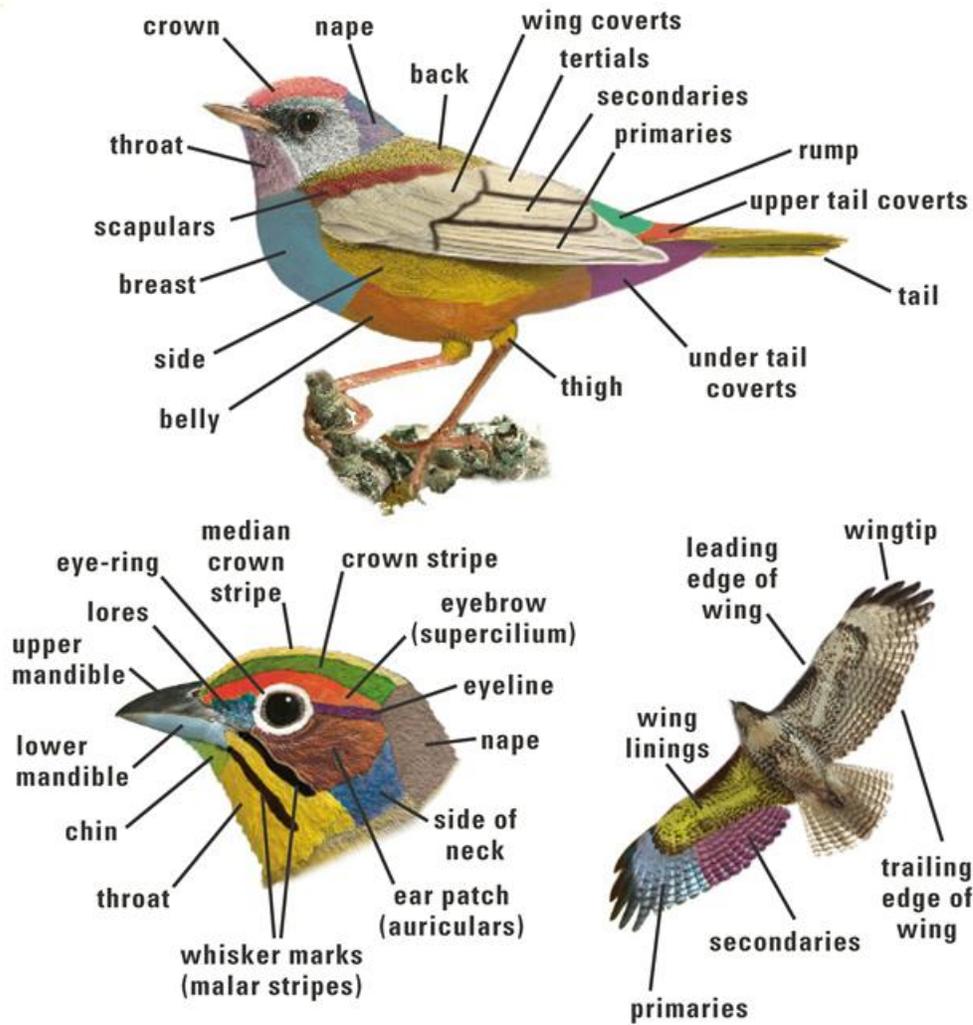
Learn some bird anatomy: Birds come in an amazing variety of colors, shapes, and sizes, but they generally all share the same basic body parts, which are identified on the diagram on this page. Try to familiarize yourself with the names of these body parts and feather groups because field guides use them to describe each bird and make distinctions between similar species. Knowing basic bird anatomy will also help you take better notes and draw better sketches.

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, 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: Many birds look very different in male and female plumage, adult and immature plumage, and summer and winter plumage, so 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. And on top of that, birds drop their feathers and regrow them at certain times of year, temporarily changing how long their tails look, for example.

Listen, listen, listen: Listening for the songs and calls of birds can help you find birds and also identify them, even before you see them. And some birds that look similar to each other have very different voices, so paying attention to how they sound can help you separate the 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 (including [Audubon's mobile apps](#)) include recordings that can help you learn songs and calls too.



Bird Topography (Kenn Kaufman)

Parts of a bird. Adapted from the Kaufman Field Guide to Birds of North America (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, Boston, 2000). Used with permission. Click to enlarge.

Choosing and Using Binoculars

Binoculars get you up close and personal with birds, revealing their intricate colors and opening a window on their lives. But with so many kinds of binoculars on the market, how do you find the pair that's right for you? Don't panic. Here's some advice from our experts (and for even more information, don't miss [The 2014 Audubon Guide to Binoculars](#) from Audubon magazine).



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General requirements: For many beginning birders, the first problem is simply *finding* the bird with binoculars. So, you want to choose binoculars with a **wider field of view**, which makes it easier to locate a bird and follow its movements. Additionally, a good pair of binoculars should provide a **bright enough image** to allow you to distinguish subtle features, particularly in dim light, and should also **focus quickly** so that you can get a sharp image of a fast-moving bird. If you wear glasses, look for binoculars that have **adjustable eyepieces** so you can enjoy an unrestricted view.

Specifications: Binoculars are described by two numbers, 8x32, or 10x40, or 8x21, for example. The first number tells you the **magnification** power, and the second tells you the size of the objective lens in millimeters, which affects how much **light** can enter the binoculars. The bigger ratio of the two numbers, the sharper and brighter the image. (For example, 8x42 provides a brighter sharper image than an 8x32 or 10x42.) Most birders agree that **7- or 8-power** is about right for most birding. Some recommend against purchasing 10-power binoculars because they have a smaller field of view and a dimmer image. Binoculars with a bright, wide field will also be much easier to hold steady because higher magnification power also magnifies the movement of your hands. You may want to consider purchasing mid-size binoculars, such as **8x32s** since they are bright enough and easy to carry and pack.

Price and field testing: You get what you pay for - and binoculars are no exception to this rule. Spend as much as you can afford when buying binoculars; you will not be sorry to have purchased high-quality binoculars if you really want to experience birds. Pay attention to what experienced birders around you are using. Better yet, **ask** to look through their binoculars, and question them about the pros and cons. Never buy binoculars before trying the actual instrument you plan to purchase. You want to be sure you are comfortable using a particular brand and model, and individual instruments do vary even within a brand and model.

Practice: Before you go birding, make sure you know how to use your binoculars - it takes practice! Don't try to locate the bird with your binoculars. First find the bird with your unaided eye, then keep your eyes on the bird while you raise the binoculars to your eyes. Focus and enjoy. You can practice this skill with other objects like the top of a flagpole or a flower on a shrub.

Involve the kids! Do you have budding birders in your family? Start them off with their own kid-sized binoculars. Birding is a terrific way for children to bond with nature and with you. Help raise a new generation of conservationists.

And a few binocular don'ts ... which we've learned the hard way so you don't have to:

- Don't rely on compact or pocket-sized binoculars (e.g., 8x21 or 10x21) as your primary binoculars for birding. The size and weight are attractive, but no matter how good the optics, compacts provide a lower quality image than mid- or full-size binoculars. Another drawback is that most compacts have a narrow field of view, which makes it very difficult to locate and follow birds.
- Don't buy zoom binoculars. Their image quality is typically inferior.
- Don't ask hikers, hunters, boaters, or other non-birders for their advice on choosing binoculars. Looking at birds is not the same as looking at other wildlife. Pocket binoculars are fine for looking across a savannah at an elephant or a cheetah, but they are not suitable for birding. Marine binoculars provides a sharp, bright image, but are too big and heavy to carry around all day.
- Don't buy binoculars until you have tried them. Make sure they feel comfortable in your hands. Look through them and be sure you get a clear, unobstructed view. Different models suit different people, and each instrument varies. If ordering by mail or online, make sure that you can exchange them.

Choosing and Using a Field Guide

Choosing a bird guide. The first priority is to choose a field guide that suits your needs.

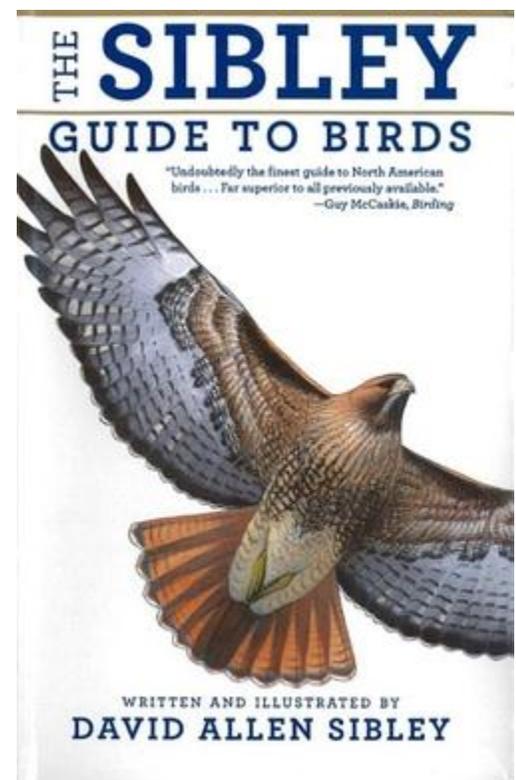
* **Portability:** If you are an avid outdoor birder, you'll want a guide that is easy to carry and flip through quickly. If you are more of a backyard birder, watching local species on your feeders and birdbath, portability is not as important.

* **Specialized/Localized Guides:** If you want to study bird behavior or are searching for more elusive species, a more comprehensive, specialized guide is better suited for you. For instance, a guide based on a certain habitat or region.

* **Photos or Illustrations:** You will also want to take into consideration whether you prefer illustrations or photos. Some guides may also portray different views of a bird, such as how a species looks in flight, close-ups of distinct markings, etc.

* **Read Your Guide.** This may sound obvious, but your guide has much more information than you may realize. It not only has pictures to help you identify birds, but also contains information on bird habitats and behaviors that can help you find the birds yourself. Look for the following information to help you prepare:

* **Bird Topography:** This diagram divides birds into distinct parts such as nape, crown, and vents, for more specific identification.



* **Learn the Terminology:** In relation to topography, there are other terms you will need to know. For example, color names are not as simple as red and blue; the hues can vary widely, so you may see descriptions like rufous and indigo instead.

* **Variations in Appearance:** Identification of certain species can be tricky when it comes to distinguishing marking and coloration of the male and female sexes, or juveniles and immature stages, or summer and winter plumages.

* **Range Maps:** These maps are very helpful for knowing which birds are native to your particular area and which species may be migrating through it at a given time of year.