

# SIX CLUES TO BIRD IDENTIFICATION

Courtesy of the Cornell Lab of Ornithology's "All About Birds" web site  
[www.allaboutbirds.org](http://www.allaboutbirds.org)

## 1: SILHOUETTE

Birds in the same general group often have the same body shape and proportions, although they may vary in size. Silhouette alone gives many clues to a bird's identity, allowing birders to assign a bird to the correct group or even the exact species. In the illustration at right are 23 different birds. How many can you recognize just by their silhouettes? Look carefully – don't miss the ones hiding in the leafy tree!

Pay attention to the following:

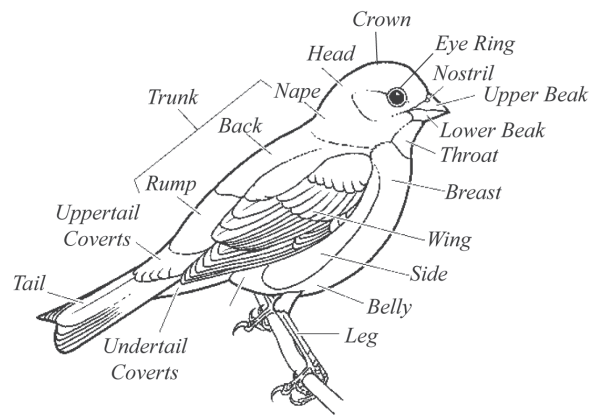
- **body shape**
- **proportions of the head, legs, wings, and tail**
- **shape and length of the bill**



## 2: FIELD MARKS

In order to describe a bird, ornithologists divide its body into topographical regions: beak (or bill), head, back, wings, tail, and legs. To help with identification, many of these regions are divided still further. This diagram of **regions of the bird's body** shows some of the commonly used descriptive terms.

Birds display a huge variety of patterns and colors, which they have evolved in part to recognize other members of their own species. Birders can use these features - known as **field marks** - to help distinguish species.



Pay particular attention to the **field marks of the head** and the **field marks of the wing**.

## 3: POSTURE

### Vertical Posture

Certain bird groups have distinctive vertical posture when perched on a branch. Flycatchers, hawks, and owls typically sit in an upright pose with tails pointing straight down.

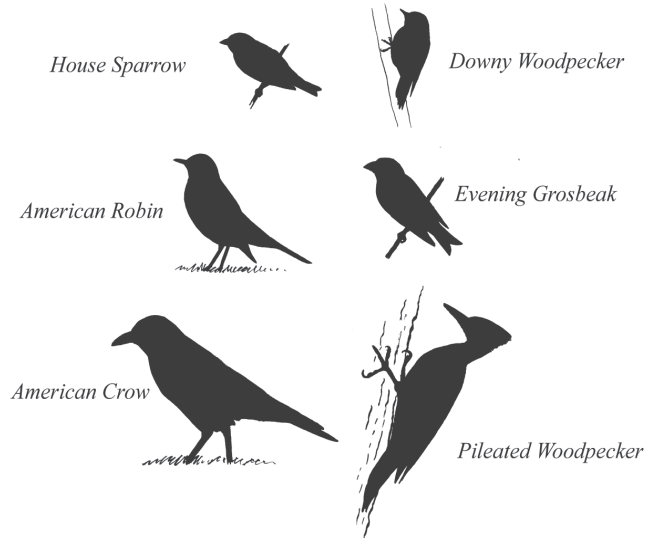


### Horizontal Posture

Other birds perch horizontally on vegetation with tails pointing out at an angle, for instance vireos, shrikes, crows, and warblers.

## 4: SIZE

Once you have assigned a bird to its correct group, size can be a clue to its actual species. Be aware, though, that size can be difficult to determine in the field, especially under poor lighting conditions or at a distance. Size comparisons are most useful when the unknown bird is seen side-by-side with a familiar species. In the absence of that, you can use the sizes of well-known birds, such as the House Sparrow, American Robin, and American Crow, as references when trying to identify an unfamiliar bird.



## 5: SOUND AND VOCALIZATIONS

Identifying birds by their call or song is very helpful when you can't actually see the bird. Experienced birders can identify a bird by sound just as accurately as if they were seeing it because each species has unique vocalizations. Becoming familiar with bird songs takes a lot of practice; usually birdwatchers first learn to identify the bird by sight, then by sound. When possible, try to track down a singing bird and watch it as it sings its song. Another good exercise is to listen to bird recordings on tape, CD, or video.

Identifying birds by sound is fun and challenging! Some birds such as the Winter Wren have several different songs of different lengths. Remembering calls is easier if we use phrases associated with our spoken language. For instance, when the Barred Owl calls it often sounds like it's saying "Who cooks for you?" The Eastern Tufted Titmouse's call sounds like "Peter, Peter, Peter." These kinds of phrases are called mnemonic devices and are helpful to remember bird songs you hear.

## 6: HABITAT

In general, each species of bird occurs only within certain types of habitat. And each plant community - whether abandoned field, mixed deciduous/coniferous forest, desert, or freshwater marsh, for instance - contains its own predictable assortment of birds. Learn which birds to expect in each habitat. You may be able to identify an unfamiliar bird by eliminating species that usually live in other habitats. (Be aware, though, that during spring and fall migration birds often settle down when they get tired and hungry, regardless of habitat.)

