
Tips for Improving Your Bird Identification Skills

Identification Skills

- As a Master Naturalist, you probably want to have reasonably good ID skills
 - ❑ To increase your own enjoyment of nature
 - ❑ To be able to share information with others
 - This presentation covers some tips that will help improve your bird identification skills
 - ❑ How to look at birds
 - ❑ What to notice
 - ❑ Where to find birds
 - ❑ How to use your equipment
-

Look at the Bird, Not at the Book

- Don't go to your field guide until you have spent as much time as possible looking at the bird
- If you just glance at the bird, and then start looking for the picture in the book, the bird will probably be gone by the time you find the picture



Roger Tory Peterson said...



Birds have wings and tend to use them.

- **Watch the bird for a long as it lets you**
- **The longer you look, the more you'll notice and remember about the bird's field marks and behavior**
- **Then, when you do open your field guide, you'll be better prepared to make your identification**

- What if you only noticed these characteristics:
 - ❑ Shorebird
 - ❑ Long legs
 - ❑ Long bill
- There are dozens of birds in your field guide that match these descriptions



What are Field Marks?

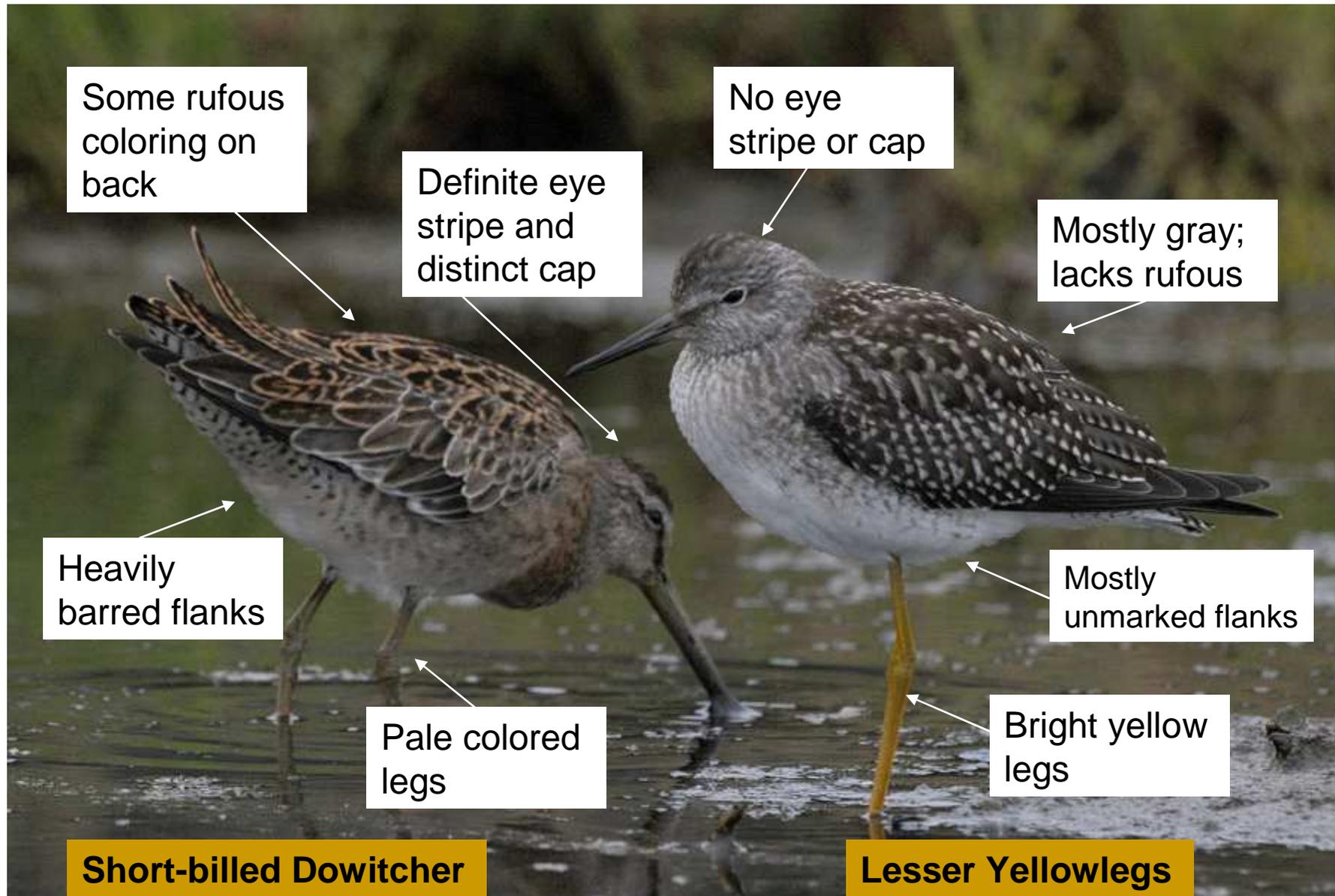
- The characteristics of a species that distinguish it from another species
 - Usually field marks are plumage features
 - Distinctive field marks are typically found on the bird's
 - Head
 - Rump
 - Outer tail feathers
 - Wings
-

Look at the Bird in an Organized Way

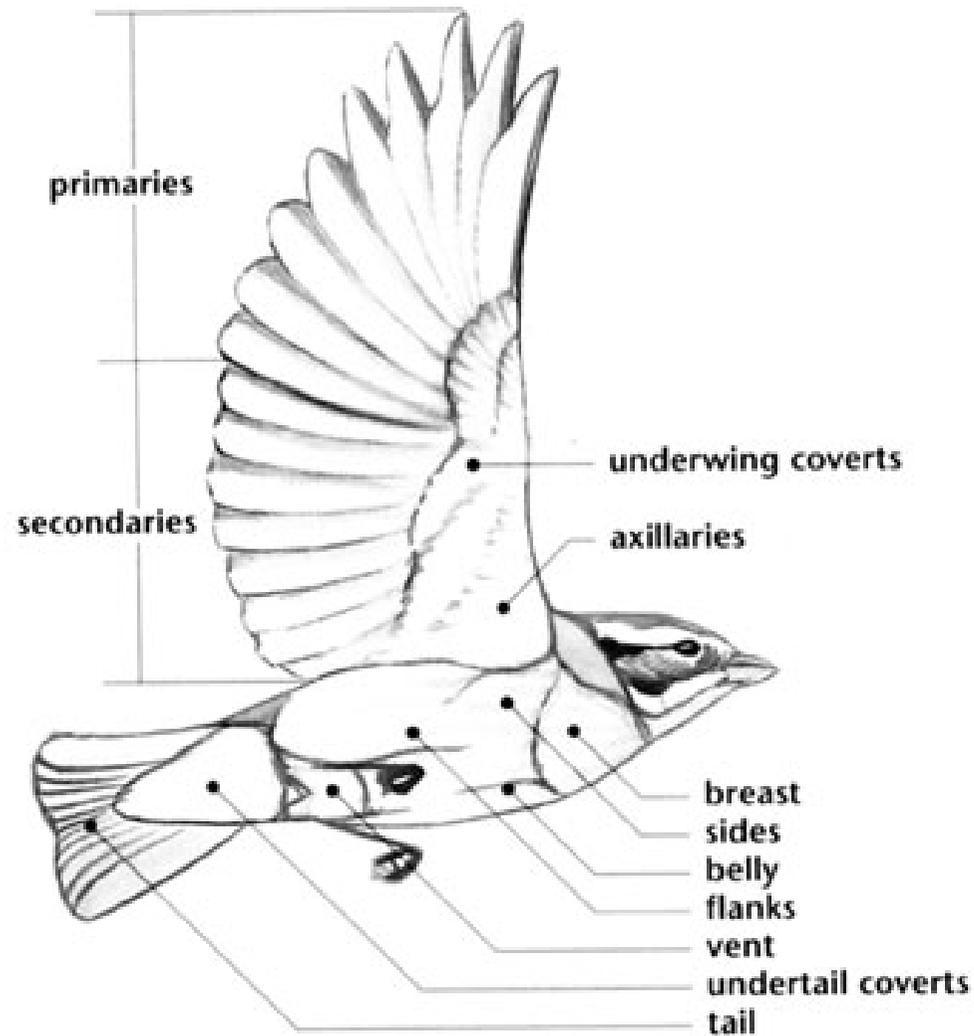
- Start at the top and work down and back
 - The head is the best place to start, provided you can see it
 - Many North American birds can be positively identified by the shape of and markings on their heads
 - Start at the crown, work down toward the breast, and then back toward the tail
 - By the time your eyes get to the bird's tail, you will probably have noticed at least three key field marks, and these should be enough to nail an identification
-

Field Marks

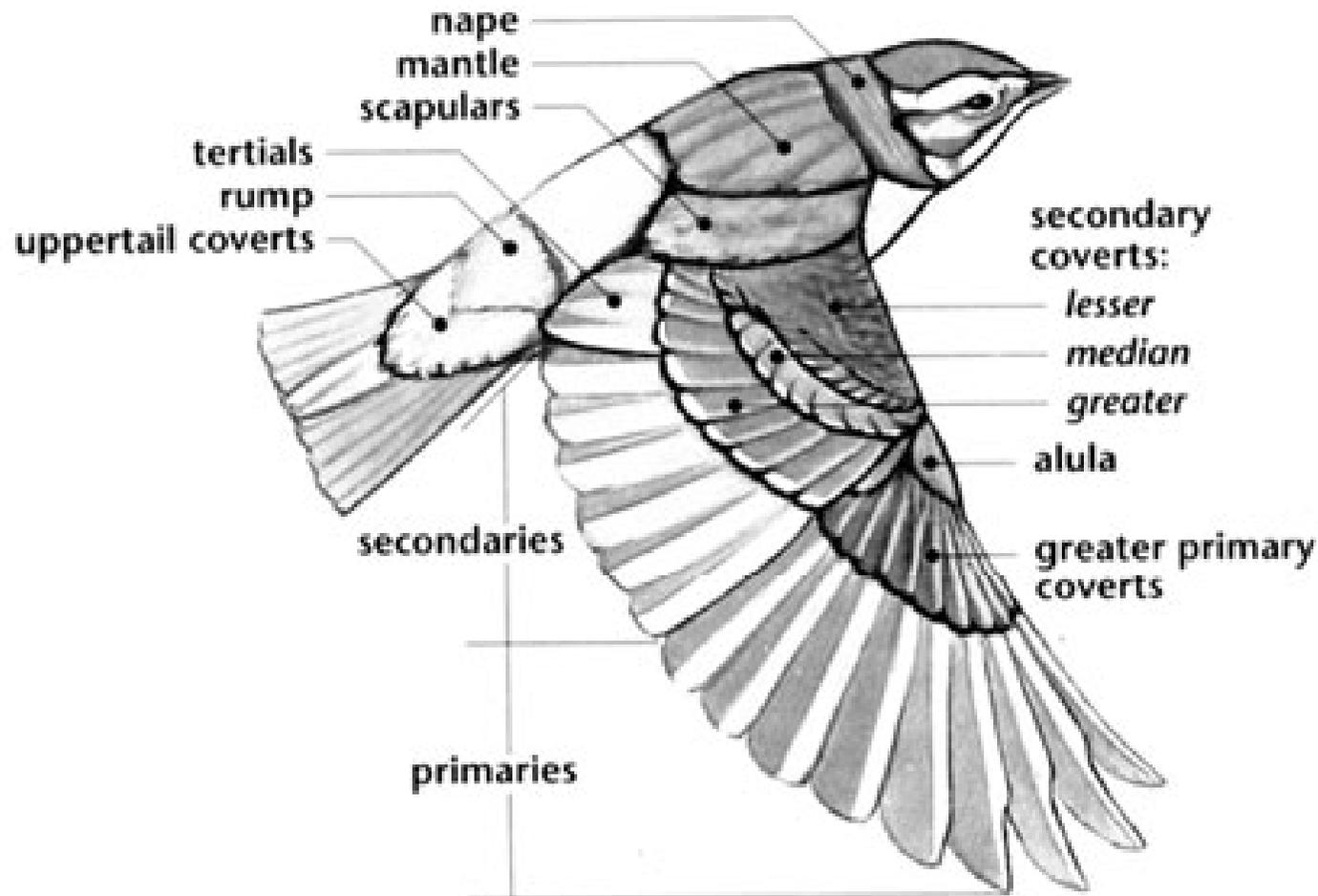
Photo by Mike Yip



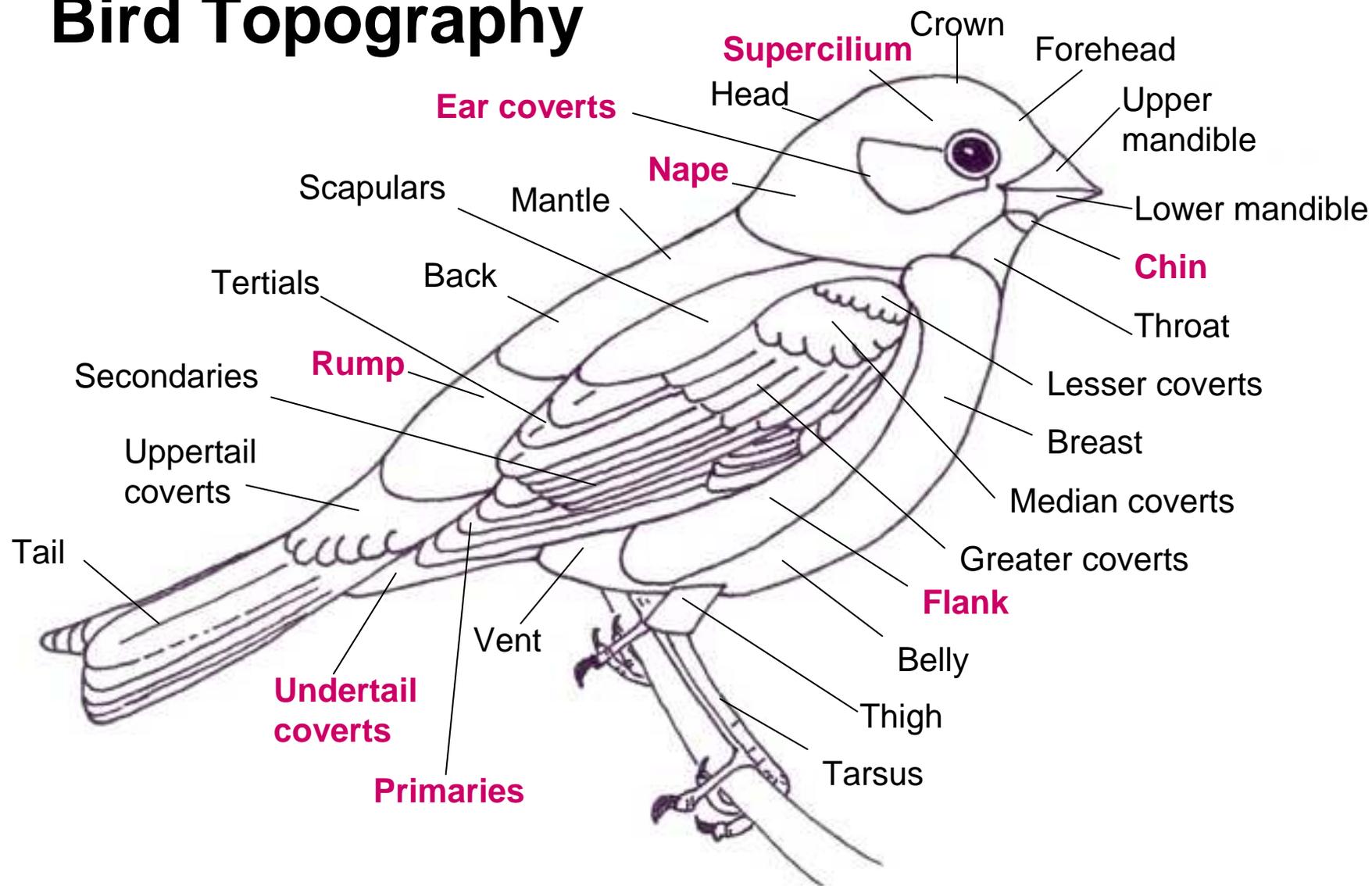
Learn the Basic Parts of a Bird



Learn the Basic Parts of a Bird



Bird Topography



Study Shapes and Silhouettes

- First, try to get an impression of the bird's overall shape
 - Head
 - Is it peaked, flat, rounded, or crested?
 - Tail
 - Is it long, forked, fanned, or pointed?
 - Bill
 - Is it decurved, upturned, pointed, blunt, thick, tiny?
 - Wings
 - Are they short, long, broad, pointed, angled, or straight?
-

Study Shapes and Silhouettes



Take Note of Size and Shape

- Compare to a bird that you know
 - Is the bird bigger or smaller than a robin?
 - Compare the size of features
 - Take note of proportions
 - Be aware that size sometimes lies
 - The size and proportions of a bird may seem to alter based on the atmospheric conditions
 - A cold bird fluffs its feathers, looking considerably larger than a sleek bird
 - Small dark birds can look larger than they actually are on overcast days
-

Color Can Mislead

- Light can play tricks on birders
 - Beware of sunglasses that cause changes in colors
 - Colors and contrasts can change
 - In bright sunlight, reflections from items can cast a color on a bird that is not really present
 - Iridescent colors are only visible in bright sunlight at certain angles
-

Be Aware of Color Variations



Photos © Bob Fairey

Rufous Hummingbird



Be Aware of Color Variations

- Staining and Worn Feathers

- Geese, cranes, and other water birds often become stained with iron
 - Gives their feathers a rusty or orange color
- Feather wear has two effects
 - Fading of colors
 - Wearing away of the edges



Be Aware of Color Variations

■ Molt

- ❑ All healthy wild birds replace (molt) every one of their feathers at least once a year
 - Generally by dropping a few feathers at a time, with new feathers growing in their place
 - ❑ Males transition from winter plumage to breeding plumage
 - ❑ Birders may not notice the molt unless they look closely
-

American Goldfinch

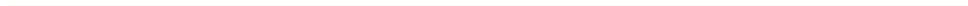


← Nonbreeding plumage
(October – March)

Molting
(March) →



Male breeding plumage →
(March - October)



Be Aware of Color Variations

- In many bird families, juvenile birds have different plumage from adults



Juvenile Ring-billed Gull



Adult Ring-billed Gull

Watch for Distinctive Behavior

- Sometimes the way birds move, feed, or behave leads directly to an identification
- A bird's behaviors can identify it at distances from which other field marks are not visible



Horizontal Posture: Vireo

Perching
posture is
a
behavior
clue



Vertical Posture: Flycatcher



Watch for Distinctive Behavior

- Turkey Vultures soar with their wings held up
- They also tip from side to side frequently while soaring



Distinctive Behavior

- Both the Brown Creeper and Nuthatches climb on tree trunks



Brown Creepers almost always go up the trunk

Photo © Susan Schaezler

Distinctive Behavior

Nuthatches almost always go down the trunk



Photo © Mike Morrison

Distinctive Behavior

Ruby-crowned
Kinglet constantly
shakes its wings



Photo © Mike Morrison

Distinctive Behavior

Black-capped
Chickadee
frequently hangs
upside down
while feeding



Photo © Bob Fairey

Learn the Sounds

- Listening is a key component of birding
 - Because birds often forage and skulk entirely hidden from view, sound is often the only indication of their presence
 - It's imperative that you be able to recognize songs, calls, and chip notes if you want to improve your birding skills
-

Tips for Learning Bird Songs

- Listen to recordings over and over again
 - Train yourself to distinguish an individual song from an entire chorus
 - Learn common birds first
 - Learn by habitat
 - Go out in the field and practice
 - Use gimmicks and mnemonics
-

Red-breasted Nuthatch

Sounds like someone blowing on a tiny tin trumpet



Photo © Mike Morrison



Yellow Warbler 🗣️

**SWEET-SWEET-
SWEET-
SWEETER-
THAN-SWEET!**



Photo © Mike Morrison

Yellow Warbler



**SWEET-SWEET-
SWEET-
SWEETER-
THAN-SWEET!**

Try to imagine
the bird as a
piece of sweet
yellow candy

Know What to Expect

- Start off by anticipating the bird species you are likely to encounter in a given location
 - Consider the habitat and season and make a mental list of the birds you could expect to see there
 - Knowing what to expect gives you an advantage in spotting something out of the ordinary
-

Marsh/Wetlands



Photo © Bob Fairey

Riparian Zones



Montane/Pine Woodlands



Photo © Bob Fairey

Rivers, Lakes, & Reservoirs



Photos © Bob Fairey

Arid Canyonlands



Photo © Bob Fairey

Sagebrush Steppe



Cultivated Farmland



Urban & Backyard



Good Optics Help

- Binoculars are probably your most important piece of equipment for birding
 - Buy the best binocular you can afford
 - Consider buying from a specialty shop rather than a big-box store or discount retailer
 - Make sure they are comfortable, easy for you to use, and light enough to hold steady for several minutes at a time
-

Binocular Specifications

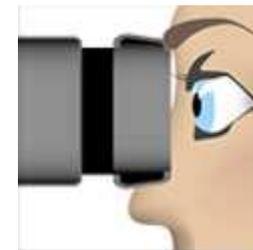
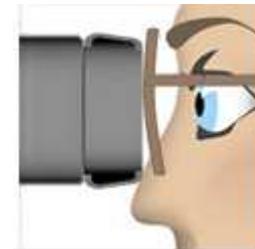
- Described with two numbers with an "x" between them such as 7x35 or 10x42
 - The first number refers to magnification power
 - A power of 7 produces an image as if one were 7 times closer to the object
 - The second number refers to the diameter of the front lens in millimeters
 - A larger diameter lens means more light can enter the binocular and the image should be brighter
-

Tips for Using Binoculars

- If you wear eyeglasses, leave them in place when using binoculars
 - It's hard to find and focus quickly on a bird if you always have to remove your eyeglasses first
 - Plus, if you have astigmatism, you will lose the correction your glasses provide if you remove them, sacrificing image sharpness
-

Tips for Using Binoculars

- Most binoculars have some kind of eye cup – either rubber or some other device that can be pulled out
 - If you wear eyeglasses, make sure that the eye cups are down so that the binocular eyepiece is as close to your eyeglasses lens as possible
 - If you don't wear eyeglasses, pull the eye cups out



Tips for Using Binoculars

- If you see shadowing or two distinct images, the interpupillary distance (IPD) of the binocular is not matching your eyes
- Adjust the position of the binocular barrels until you see one image



Tips for Using Binoculars

- In addition to an adjustment for focus, most binoculars also have a diopter adjustment on the right eyepiece
 - Allows you compensate for differences between your own two eyes
 - If you want to make sure that your diopter adjustment set accurately, you'll need to follow a step-by-step process
 - Find instructions on the internet – a good place to look is on www.birdwatching.com under the section on optics
-

Tips for Using Binoculars



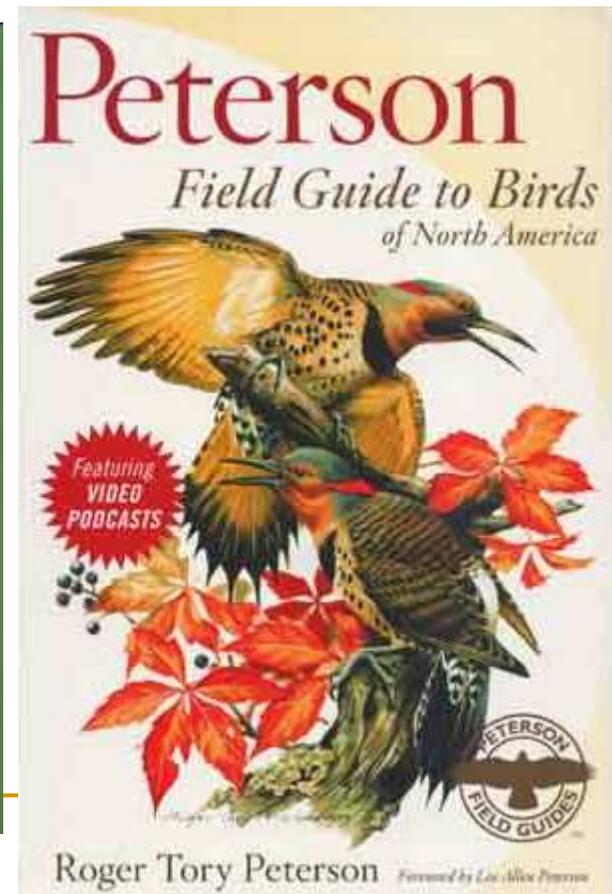
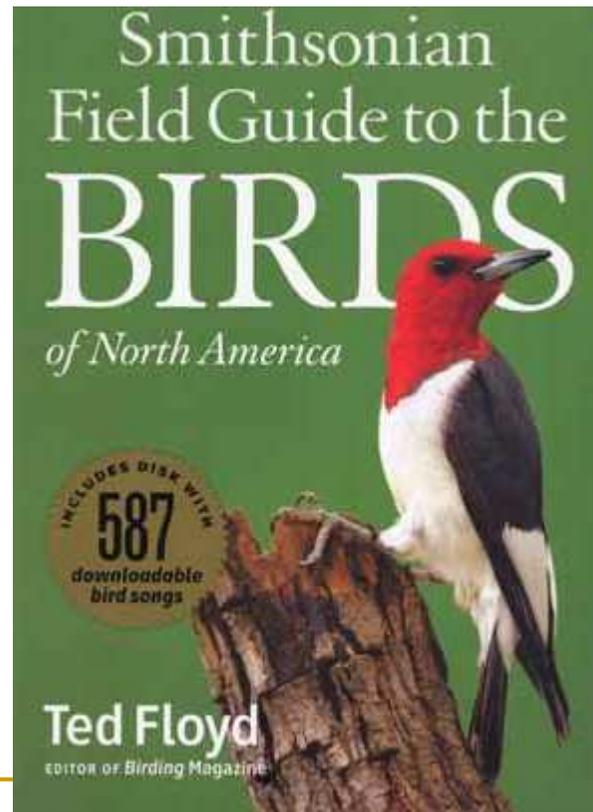
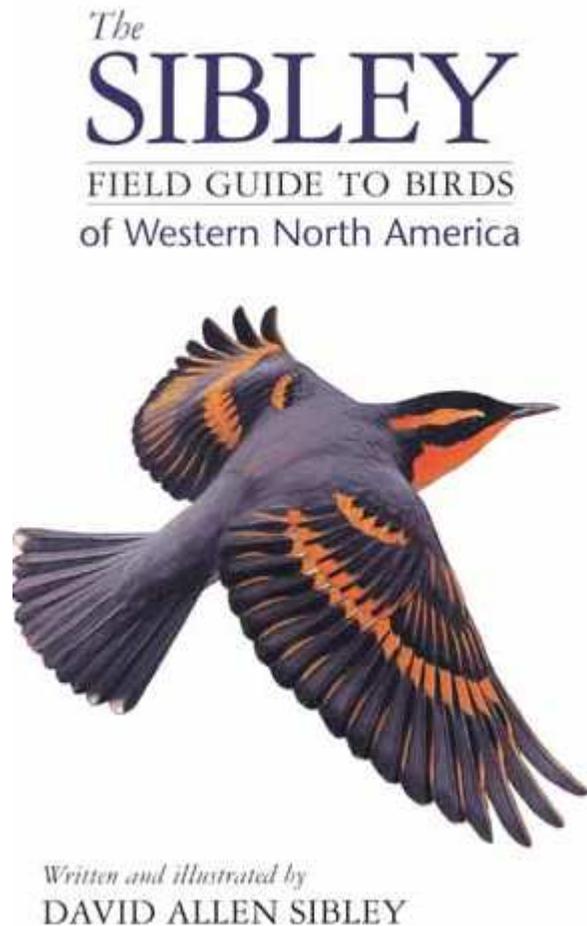
- When you see something that you want to view with your binoculars
 1. Keep your eyes on the object
 2. Raise the binoculars to your eyes without taking your eyes off the object

Good Field Guides Help

- In addition to your binoculars, a field guide is an indispensable tool for birding
 - What is a field guide?
 - A guide to bird identification
 - Designed to be used in the field
-

Field Guides

- A wide variety of field guides are available



Field Guide

- Attributes of a good field guide
 - Portability
 - Content
 - Regionally appropriate
 - Range maps
 - Various plumages
 - Flash marks and field marks
 - Organization
 - Generally arranged in taxonomic order
-

Get Familiar with Your Field Guide

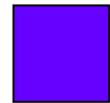
- Range Maps (example from the Sibley Field Guide)



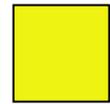
Winter



Summer



Year-round



Migration



Rare



Where a species has been recorded only a few times a year or less

Important Reminder: Birds don't read the bird book!

Get Familiar with Your Field Guide

- Plumages

- Adult

- Male ♂

- Female ♀

- Breeding

- Nonbreeding

- Juvenile

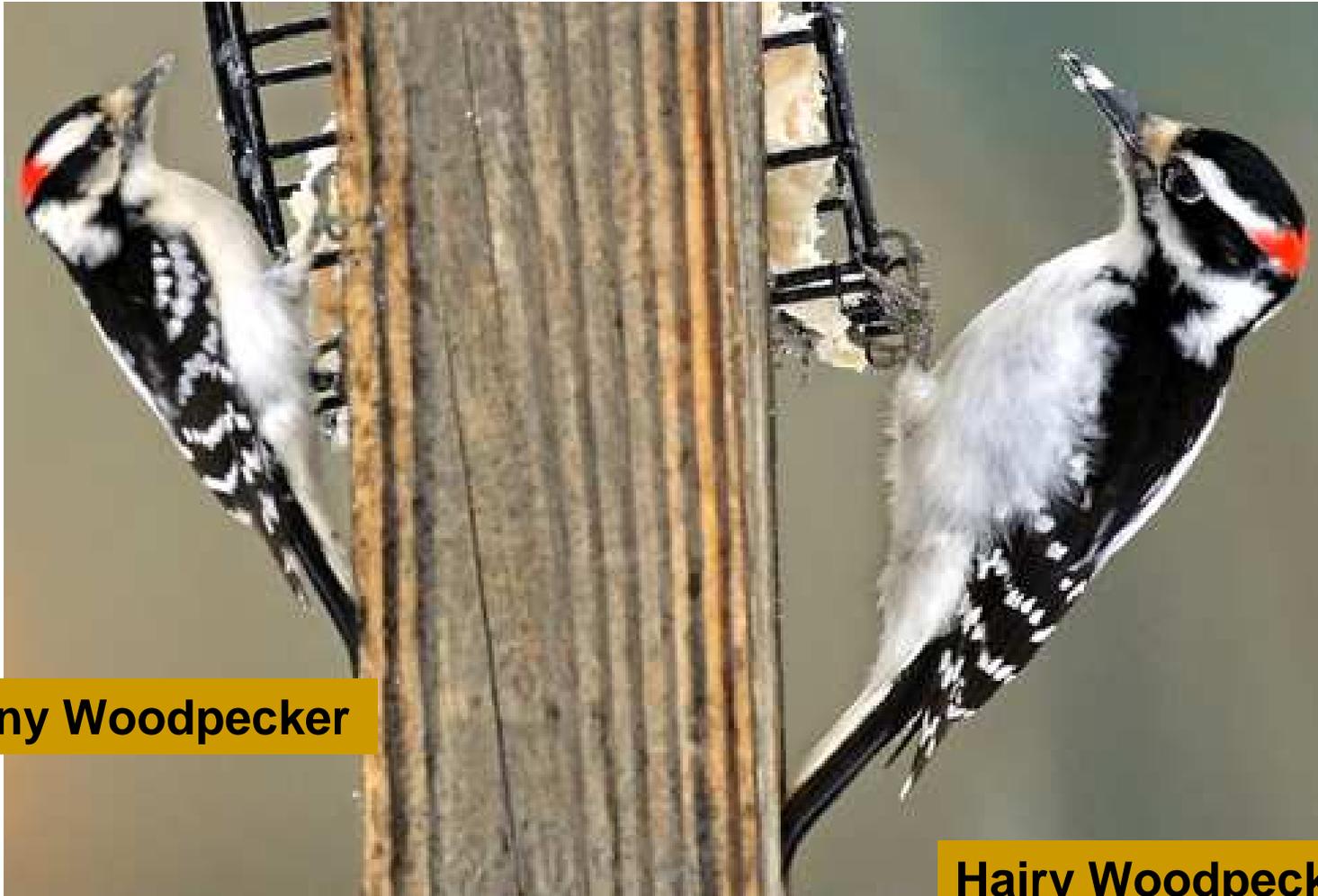
Use Memory Devices

- Bird watching requires you to remember a lot of information

**“Quick! Three Beers!”
is a reminder of the
Olive-sided
Flycatcher’s song**



**“Downy is dinky, Hairy is huge”
for telling the two similar woodpeckers apart**



Downy Woodpecker

Hairy Woodpecker

Photo by Andy Molloy

Study, Ask Questions & Take Notes

- Use the official Idaho checklist as a study guide for the birds of our region
 - Record your sightings on the checklist
 - Consider starting a life list or yard list
 - Record observations in your nature journal
 - Sketches or descriptions
 - Bird with others so you have a chance to ask questions
-

Summary

- Look at the bird, not the book
 - Learn field marks and the parts of a bird
 - Study shapes and silhouettes
 - Be aware that color and size can be misleading
 - Take note of behavior
 - Listen
 - Organize birds according to habitat
 - Get to know your tools
 - Binoculars & field guide
 - Use memory devices
 - Practice, practice, practice...
-