Bird Watching
Bird Watching Basics

These characteristics will help you identify birds.

Size & Shape

Color Pattern

Behavior

Habitat

Great Blue Heron
Size & Shape

How big is this bird?

Determine the relative size of the bird compared to common birds that you are familiar with.

These are just general size categories.

There are lots of birds larger than a crow!

Waterfowl (ducks & geese), waders (herons), and most raptors (hawks, owls) are larger.
Size & Shape

The shape and size of a bird’s beak and feet provide important clues as to its lifestyle.

Beaks & Feet

- Swimming
- Swimming/Walking
- Walking
- Perching
- Seizing Prey
- Climbing
- Filtering
- Probing
- Catching Insects
- Cracking Seeds
- Tearing Meat
- Drilling Holes
Color Pattern

Is it one solid color?

Does it have wing bars or head markings?

Two or three colors?

Is it an LBB (little brown bird)?

Does it have streaks or speckles?
Behavior

Sometimes what a bird does helps you determine what it is.

Nuthatches commonly hang upside down on trees and feeders.
Habitat
Where did you see the bird?

At a bird feeder?

In the water?

On a tree in the forest?

In an open field?

On the shore?
Bird Watching Advanced Skills

Sometimes field guides mention specific parts of the wing.

So here they are:
What this looks like on a real bird.
Bird Anatomy

The most commonly used body regions for identification are: 

- cheek
- eyebrow
- crown
- eye
- scapulars
- back (mantle)
- nape
- eye ring
- bill
- malar
- throat
- breast
- flank
- belly
- undertail coverts
- uppertail coverts
- tail
- wing
- tibiotarsus
- toes

From *The Sibley Guide to Birds*
Bird Watching Advanced Skills

Stillness

Patience

Silence
Common Birds

These species typically come to feeders or are otherwise quite abundant.

We are VERY likely to see these birds.
Small Birds

approximately 7” long (or less)

reference bird = sparrow (6”)
Carolina Chickadees and Black-capped Chickadees look nearly identical, and their ranges overlap in Indiana. However, we are most likely to see Carolina Chickadees.

**Black-capped Chickadee**

- black crown
- white nape
- white cheek
- grey back
- white edges on secondaries
- buffy belly and flanks

It is very difficult to tell a white nape from a pale grey nape.

**Carolina Chickadee**

- grey nape
- black throat
- white nape
- white edges on secondaries

Black-capped Chickadees are also about an inch larger than Carolina Chickadees.

Chickadees are very small birds.
American Goldfinch

This is what we will see in winter.
Juncos are common birds that occur across the US. Populations in the west and east look quite different. Western birds (Oregon variant) have a black hood, white belly, and and rusty grey back and flanks. Eastern birds (slate-colored variant) are uniformly dark with a white belly: males are grey-black, and females are grey-brown.

Indiana has the slate-colored variant.

Occasionally we see juncos that look like a cross of the two varieties. These are called the cis-montana variant.

In the cis-montana form, males look like they are wearing a black hood, the back is brownish-grey, and the flanks are buffy.
House finches tend to move in small groups.

Males:    red crown, breast, malar, throat; red rump patch
          brown streaked flanks, belly

Females:  head plain
          brown streaked breast, flanks, belly
          a very plain LBB
Purple Finches have more extensive red coloration. Red color extends all the way down the back, includes the coverts on the wings, goes entirely across the head, down the breast and into the belly region.

Purple Finches are also found in Indiana, though they are not as common as House Finches.

Purple Finches and House Finches look VERY similar.
Purple Finches have **darker brown coloration**, the breast and belly streaks are short, almost spotty, and there is a pale stripe that extends above and behind the eye.
Red-Breasted Nuthatches are smaller than White-Breasted Nuthatches.

Nuthatches often hang upside down while feeding.

Marked like a badger: white and black head stripes.

Note the long, narrow bill.
Males and females look identical except for the red patch on the crown of the male.
Hairy Woodpeckers and Downy Woodpeckers are almost identical, except:

Hairy Woodpeckers are larger (2”- 3” longer); they are robin-sized.

Hairy Woodpeckers have a relatively longer bill.

Hairy: bill is long; about as long as the head.

Downy: bill is short; less than half as long as the head.

Hairy Woodpeckers lack nasal bristles (fuzzy feathers bordering the bill).

Downy Woodpeckers white tail feathers have black spots; white tail feathers of Hairy Woodpeckers are unmarked.

Hairy Woodpeckers have a comma shaped black mark over the shoulder.
Tufted Titmouse

Looks like a tiny grey-orange-white Cardinal.
Carolina Wren

Wrens hold their tails in a distinctive way that makes them look like a Nike swoosh.

White stripe above eye (VERY distinctive).

Narrow bars along edges of wings, tail.

Darker red-brown on head, back, wings; lighter orangey-brown on breast, belly, flanks.
American Tree Sparrow

bill is two-toned: black above, yellow below

rusty brown crown
grey stripe above eye
rusty brown stripe behind eye
grey cheek

pale grey breast and belly
buffy flanks

black spot in center of pale grey belly
Female House Sparrows and female House Finches look very similar. The House Finches have brown streaks on their breast and belly; the belly and breast of the House Sparrow is plain.
Song Sparrow

crown is brown with grey stripe in the center

breast and belly white with brown spots/short streaks

irregular dark spot in center of breast
White-throated Sparrow

- Black crow with central white stripe
- Black stripe behind eye
- White throat patch (distinctive)
- Grey breast
- Paler grey belly
- White stripe above eye
- Grey cheek
- Yellow mark not as distinct in winter
Medium-Sized Birds

approximately 8-14” long

reference bird = Robin (10”)

Both male and female Cardinals have a crest.
Blue Jay

There are very few birds that are blue: Blue jays are one of them.

Like Cardinals, Blue Jays (both male and female) have a crest.

Red-bellied Woodpecker

red crown and nape
white breast and belly
black back with white spots and speckles

The red crown and nape are very distinctive.

You will not likely see red on this bird’s belly. Only males have red on the belly, and then it is only a small patch of red.
Medium-Sized Birds Typically Found in Groups

A number of species tend to congregate in groups. These flocks can become quite large (hundreds of birds) and often consist of a mix of species.

Common Grackle
European Starling

Similar to Grackles, but can be identified by its gold speckles and very short tail, as well as the red legs.
Brown-headed Cowbird
Red-winged Blackbird
Large Birds

greater than 15” long

reference bird = American Crow (17”)
BBB: Big Black Bird

American Crow
Other Birds We Might See:

Raptors
Cooper’s Hawks and Sharp-shinned Hawks look identical.

The easiest way to tell them apart is size.

Cooper’s Hawks are larger (17.5”)

Sharp-shinned Hawks are smaller (11”)

grey crown, back, wings
breast and belly tawny with white specks
tail long, barred
Red-tailed Hawks are highly variable in appearance. Juveniles don’t have the red tail – they look a lot like Rough-legged Hawks.
Other Birds We Might See:

Waterfowl & Waders
Canadian Goose
Black Ducks (males and females) look very similar to female Mallards.

Mallard female is identified by their **orange bill with a black mark** in the middle.

Black Ducks have a yellowish, unmarked **bill**.

Mallards and Black Ducks hybridize.
Great Blue Heron