Bird Identification Tips

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Bird watching is a hobby that is enjoyed by the young and old alike. But sometimes you may find that identifying wild birds can be a challenge. You may have a few birds in your area that you can identify by appearance or song, but what about the bird casually eating from your birdfeeder that you've never seen before? Here are a few bird watching tips to help you sharpen your bird identification skills.

Watch Closely: When you see an unfamiliar bird, get a good, long look at him. Having a handy and reliable field guide along will help. When you find an interesting bird, start your observation at the top of the bird and work down and back. After the bird has flown away, write down as much about your observation as possible. This will ensure that you don't forget any important details (song, color, behavior, etc.).

Study Bird Anatomy: Bird anatomy will help you describe a bird more specifically during observation. Most field guides use anatomical descriptions when explaining wild bird conformation. If you are familiar with what each part of a bird is called, the more likely you are to successfully identify an unknown bird.

Shape & Size: The idea behind identifying the shape and size of a wild bird is to get a general overall impression of the bird's build and body proportion. How big is the unknown bird? What does its silhouette look like? Are the wings pointed, curved, broad or angled? Is the tail broad, short or long? How about the bill?

Color: Each species has a unique pattern, color or marking, known as field marks, that make a particular

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species different than any other. Many wild birds have distinct field marks on their head and tail so try to get an extra good look at these areas when you spot a mystery bird.

Behavior: It is helpful to take notice of specific bird behaviors. Eating habits give a good insight into a bird's behavior. Does the unknown bird visit seed feeders or does it prefer suet? Does the bird hog seed? Does the bird wag or bob its tail or flick its wings? What other characteristics do you notice? For example, the nuthatch stores food under the bark of trees and in crevices and also moves headfirst down trees, a behavior not seen in many other birds.

Sounds & Song: Sometimes you will find that you can see more with your ears than you can with your eyes. Song and basic bird communication reveals a lot about a particular wild bird species. With practice and persistence, you can train your ear to distinguish a particular bird species even before you are able to see it.

Practice: As the old saying states, "Practice makes perfect." You will notice the more you get outdoors and practice observing wild birds, the more quickly you are able to identify them. Be patient and don't get discouraged. It takes time to focus in on what to look for when you attempt to identify a mystery bird. As time passes, you will find that you are able to pick out distinguishing details more and more quickly.

Birding is an exciting and entertaining hobby that gives us insight into the wonderful world of nature. Use these tips as a guide while you bird watch. You will find that the more time you spend outdoors, the more successfully you are able to identify backyard visitors that were once unknown.

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