

Birding Basics

By Chris Schnurbusch

The hobby of bird-watching, or birding, is increasing in popularity because it requires little to no equipment and can be done outdoors anywhere. While equipment isn't required, birding will be easier and more engaging with a simple pair of binoculars and a field guide—this way you have a closer look at these birds and a great tool for identification. Binoculars come in all kinds of designs and price ranges, so you'll be able to find a pair that works for you and your budget.

Field guides vary based on layout and information, and everyone has their own preferences and recommendations. I recommend going to your local bookstore and browsing the various field guides to find which one flows easiest to you. Remember to get the latest edition though, because bird classification changes throughout the years! There are also a few apps you can download on your phone that are great birding tools, such as Merlin and eBird.

Identification of birds can be really tricky—especially when so many birds look alike! I recommend focusing on these four characteristics: bird size, feather color, behavior, and location. These will help narrow down the bird you're looking at and help make identification easier.

Blackbirds are bigger than chickadees, Blue Jays bigger than blackbirds, and hawks are bigger than Blue Jays. Seems simple enough, but it's crucial for narrowing down choices. Some birds look similar but are different sizes, like the Cooper's Hawk and the Sharp-shinned Hawk. Notice the color of the bird; for example, a Black-crested Titmouse looks almost identical to the Tufted Titmouse, except it has a black crest on top of its head.

Birds can also have drastically different behaviors; a kinglet will bounce around between branches, barely sitting still, while a woodpecker will bob its head while climbing up the sides of trees. These differences can help you identify the bird even when you can't get a good look at the plumage.

Location can refer to geographical or local. Species will be found in varying parts of the country, so it's good to know which ones are in your location. Local location refers to sitting on a wire, soaring in the sky, or feeding in the water. All these clues can help determine which species you're seeing.

This is a great time of year to pick up the birding hobby, as we're beginning to see migrants flying in. The Texas coast is a great rest spot for migrating birds, as they've just finished crossing the gulf and need a place to recover. Migration provides a great chance to see species that reside farther North in the summer. They won't stick around long, so go on out there and start watching birds!

If you're interested in learning more about species around Texas or want to know how birds are studied, here at Gulf Coast Bird Observatory we band songbirds every third Saturday of the month. Our program is free and open to the public, and you'll get an up-close view of our local songbirds and have an opportunity to take photos. We're happy to answer any questions you may have about birding or the research we do.

Photo: Middle Schoolers going on a birding walk, practicing with their binoculars. Photo by Celeste Silling