

LIVING

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Finding field marks

*Features of a bird's plumage and anatomy distinguish it from other, similar species**(Third in a series on birding)*

As I discussed last week, the information that is most helpful in identifying a bird include shape, size, habitat, season, behaviour and field marks. This week I'd like to deal primarily with the latter.

At their most basic, field marks are simply the features of a bird's plumage or anatomy that distinguish it from other similar species. Roger Tory Peterson called them the "trademarks of nature."

So, once you have determined an unidentified bird's shape and size, you should then begin to focus on the plumage.

Take a careful look at the wings, underparts, rump, tail and head. If you find mnemonics useful, the first letter of each of these body parts spells WURTH. Start with whatever part of the bird you can see best, but try to look at the entire body before the bird flies away. What you want to do is see as many different field marks as possible. Just seeing one is rarely enough to make a positive identification.

If possible, focus on the head first. Many small songbirds such as warblers and sparrows can often be identified by characteristics of the head alone. Do not move your eyes elsewhere until you've studied the bill, eye region, crown and throat. When looking at the bill, ask yourself the following questions. Is it thick and short like a sparrow or grosbeak or slender and pointed like a warbler? Is it fairly straight like a thrush or curved like a thrasher? Is it dark like the bill of a juvenile cardinal or pale like an adult? With some birds, the relative length of the bill can also be important. This is the main way in which downy and hairy woodpeckers are told apart.

As for the eye region, try to notice if there is a stripe through, above or below the eye, or no stripe at all. This feature is useful in separating the chipping sparrow from the American tree sparrows. A prominent ring around the eye is also a very useful field mark and is used in distinguishing between the ruby-crowned and golden-crowned kinglets.

You can now move on to the crown area of the head. This can be a critical area for differentiating between the various sparrows and is also sometimes useful for sorting out the warblers. Look to see if there are stripes on the crown and what colour they are. The very prominent black and white stripes on the white-crowned sparrow make it stand out like no other sparrow. A bird's crown may also be just one colour. However, it can stand out prominently if the colour is different from that of the surrounding feathers. This can give it a capped appearance. Compare the striped head of the black-and-white warbler with the capped crown of the blackpoll warbler.



Karl Egressy, special to The Examiner
Some classic field marks include, clockwise, from top: The white wing patches of the immature golden eagle, the black 'moustache' of the peregrine falcon, and the black wing patches of the immature rough-legged hawk.



Before moving your eyes away from the head, take a quick look to see if there are any special markings or a different colour on the throat. The whitish throat of the swamp sparrow, for example, separates it from the somewhat similar American tree sparrow.

Now, take a good look at the underside of the bird. Try to determine whether the breast is uniformly coloured and mostly unmarked like that of a male purple finch, or whether stripes are present, as in the breast of the similar male house finch. The presence or absence of spots, too, can be useful. The Swainson's thrush, for example, has a heavily spotted breast, while the veery is only faintly spotted. Sometimes there is a stark difference, too, in the colour of the breast as compared to the belly. The dark-eyed junco is an example of such a bird.

If the bird is still co-operating and hasn't flown off yet, try to take quick glance at the wings. What you are looking for here is the presence or absence of wing-bars. These are light-coloured horizontal bars across the upper part of the wing. They can be single or double (most common), bold or obscure, or not present at all. This field mark can be very useful when trying to differentiate between birds like the

eastern wood-pewee and the eastern phoebe. The former has two distinct bars on the wing, while the latter lacks wing bars completely. However, it's often hard to tell if you are seeing wing bars or not, so you may have to move on to other field marks.

Another body area that can help clinch an identification is the bird's "rump." This is not what you might think it is, but rather the region immediately above the tail. What you are checking for here is a different colour, usually white. The white rump of several species stands out quite clearly when they fly and can be seen at considerable distances. This is a key field mark for identifying the northern harrier and the flicker. It separates them from all other raptors and woodpeckers. Some of the warblers, too, have a brightly coloured rump area. The aptly named yellow-rumped warbler is obviously one.

Finally, don't forget to take a look at the tail area. Once again, areas of white might be present. Two common patterns are a white tip on the tail (eastern kingbird) and white outer tail feathers (dark-eyed junco). Many of the raptors such as sharp-shinned and Cooper's hawks have dark, horizontal bands across the tail. Others, like the adult red-tailed hawk, show

rufous on the upper side of the tail.

Like the white rump of the harrier and flicker, some field marks can really only be seen when the bird is flying. Another good example is the white stripe on the wings of the lesser and greater scaup. With practice, you can tell the difference between these very similar ducks by the length of this stripe. Likewise, the white wing patch of the immature golden eagle and the black wing patch of the immature rough-legged hawk are only visible when the birds are soaring overhead.

Keep in mind when you are looking at an unknown species that it could be a female. In most species, the male and female are identical or very similar. However, in a few cases, there is a big difference in appearance. This is especially true with many of the ducks. To complicate matters, many of the females look almost identical. Separating female common mergansers from red-breasted mergansers is especially demanding. However, we rarely see the latter species in this area. The male and female of several songbirds is also quite different. These include the red-winged blackbird, scarlet tanager, rose-breasted grosbeak, indigo bunting, American redstart, common yellowthroat, and Baltimore oriole.

So, if the sparrow-like bird you've just seen doesn't match anything in the sparrow section, check to make sure you weren't looking at a female red-winged blackbird!

When identifying eagles, hawks and gulls, you also need to remember that you might be looking at a juvenile or immature bird. Bald eagles, for example, don't acquire the white head and tail until their fourth or fifth year. Immature balds are quite dark and can be sometimes confused with golden eagles. An immature northern goshawk is brown with thin, dark streaks on the breast and belly. Beginning birders might therefore confuse it with a female harrier. Luckily, other characteristics such as style of flight and habitat easily separate these birds.

A final variable to consider is that the bird in your binoculars may not be in its breeding plumage. In a small number of species (fortunately), the plumage can vary considerably between spring and fall. These birds tend to be quite colourful in the breeding season but molt to drabber colours for fall and winter. The bobolink is guilty of this frustrating characteristic. A few of the warblers, too, are notorious for molting into an almost completely different looking bird in the fall. If you have a field guide handy, compare the spring blackpoll warbler with the fall version of the same bird. No wonder some fall warblers cause birders to pull their hair out.

Although birding can be exhilarating, it can also be exasperating. Seeing and interpreting field marks properly is one of the hardest parts. Don't be discouraged if you aren't able to see all five body areas — or see them well — before the bird flies away. Most of the time, birds don't co-operate long enough to allow for really satisfying views. You will just have to right them off as LBJ's — little brown jobs!

Even some birds you see really well can still be hard to identify. Shorebirds and gulls can be especially tough. I remember looking at a very close, co-operative sandpiper once for more than 15 minutes and still not being able to identify it.

The depth and complexity of birding go unappreciated by non-participants. However, so do the payoffs.

When all of the pieces of the puzzle come together — field marks, in combination with shape, size, song, habitat, season and behaviour — there is a huge amount of satisfaction in knowing you have properly identified the bird.

Next week, I'll be discussing field guides and optical equipment.

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