

## The Bird Identification Process

When people tell me about an unidentified bird they have just seen, the description sometimes goes like this. "I was walking the dog the other day when this bird landed on a fence. It was yellowish-brown in colour, and had some red on the head. It showed white in the wing when it flew away. I looked all through my field guide but nothing matched. Any idea what it was?" After a few lame guesses, I mutter something about how hard it can be to make an identification from another person's description of a bird's field marks. The discussion ends there with both of us somewhat frustrated.

As counter-intuitive as it may sound, field marks - the patterns and colours of a bird's plumage - are not the place to begin when identifying birds. In many cases, they don't really distinguish a given bird from other similar species unless you see all of the field marks and see them well. There are simply too many species that share similar colours and markings. For example, at least seven types of sparrows seen in the Kawarthas have streaks on the breast and stripes on the crown.

Seeing markings and colours properly usually requires having the proper light, being relatively close, and having the bird cooperate long enough for you get a good look. Birds are often partially concealed by vegetation, and rapid movement can make it difficult to keep your binoculars on them. Many field marks change with the age of the bird and the time of year, too. I'm not saying that field marks aren't important. They just shouldn't be the first things you take note of.

So, let's imagine that you are looking at a bird somewhere in the Kawarthas that you can't identify. Instead of immediately going to the field guide, take as much time as possible to really pay attention to the bird itself. Take note first of all of its general shape, including the shape of the bill. Then, turn your attention to its size, what it's doing, and whether it is alone or with others of the same species. Once you've established this basic information, you can move on to some of the field marks. First of all, try to see if it has any special markings, especially around the head area. Next, look at the bird's chest, sides, wings, tail, and back. The key here is to observe as many different field marks as possible. Keep on watching until the bird flies away, or until you are confident that you have seen it well.

A great way to really see and remember a bird is to get into the habit of making a quick sketch or jotting down some notes. This will force you to look more closely and is wonderful for the memory. Finally, be sure to take a mental note of the general habitat type in which you have seen the bird, keeping in mind if it's the breeding season, migration time or winter. Having done all of this, you can then go to the field guide.

The bird's size and shape should direct you to the most likely general category of birds such as hawks, waterfowl, wading birds, sparrows, etc. As you are looking at the various species that seem most reasonable, it is important to reduce the number of possibilities to a manageable size by eliminating those birds that you wouldn't expect to find in this area. To do this, you need to consider a bird's range (does it even show up in this area?) and seasonal presence (can you expect to see the bird at this time of year?).

Any good, up-to-date field guide such as those by David Sibley or Roger Tory Peterson will have a small map right beside the species' description which shows where the bird is found. The colours used on the map will indicate if it's a resident species (here all year), a migrant (only seen during migration), or a winter bird (only present during late fall, winter and early spring).

If you see a hummingbird, for example, you can be 95% sure that it's a ruby-throated, because no other hummingbird species is found in the Kawarthas except on very rare occasions. If you saw a strange woodpecker in late fall or winter, you can immediately eliminate the yellow-bellied sapsucker, because they are migratory and only found here in spring in summer.

Chances are, too, that your bird will be a common species as opposed to something rare. So, having an idea of a bird's relative abundance adds more important information. The Sibley guide does a good job of describing how common a given bird is in eastern North America. In most cases, this information applies to the Peterborough area, as well.

A good example of the importance of leaving field marks to the end of the identification process is distinguishing between the house finch and purple finch. The birds can be quite similar, especially as they are depicted in some guide books. However, purple finches are usually quite uncommon in urban or suburban areas, while house finches are almost never seen in rural areas. House finches are present all year long, whereas purple finches often disappear completely in winter or suddenly appear in very large numbers. Their abundance depends on the amount of wild food available. Once you have an idea of which finch is more probable, the head pattern of the female and the presence or absence of streaking on the flanks of the male should determine which species you are looking at.

People who are new to birding tend to underestimate just how important a bird's shape is in identifying it. Most common city birds can be identified by shape alone and often at considerable distances. This group would include the mourning dove, rock pigeon, chickadee, grackle, starling, blue jay, robin, barn swallow, tree swallow, kingbird, crow, and chimney swift. When you combine their shape with how they fly and what they are doing when you see them, the list of easily-identifiable city or suburban birds quickly expands to include house sparrow, flicker, pileated woodpecker, goldfinch, turkey vulture, merlin, red-tailed hawk and sharp-shinned hawk.

An excellent way to learn the shapes of the common birds is to get a copy of a Peterson bird guide, turn to the silhouettes at the front and back, and then commit them to memory. I remember having memorized these as a child and having my mother quiz me on them. Don't worry about those species that are seldom seen in this area like the mockingbird, pheasant, purple martin, and bobwhite.

Like shape, having a good idea of a bird's size is also essential. The method that works best is to compare any unidentified bird you see to a well-known benchmark species. When looking at an unidentified bird, ask yourself if it is smaller, larger or about the same as a hummingbird, house sparrow, robin, crow, or Canada goose. At this time of year, size is sometimes the only way of differentiating red-winged blackbirds and common grackles in a mixed flock passing overhead. Red-wings are smaller than a robin, while grackles are larger.

In addition to the birds shown in silhouette in the Peterson guide, you should also learn the basic shape of the bald eagle, red-tailed hawk, barred owl, mallard, common loon, great blue heron, spotted sandpiper, ring-billed gull, ruby-throated hummingbird, white-breasted nuthatch, house wren, red-eyed vireo, and yellow warbler. For more help with bird shapes and silhouettes, go to <http://www.all-birds.com/bird-shape-ID.htm>

As already mentioned, it's important to pay attention to what any unidentified bird you are looking at is actually doing. Most species, or at least most genera, have a manner peculiar to themselves. Some sparrows travel in flocks while others are almost always alone; some warblers feed on or near the ground while others are usually high in trees; some hawks soar in circles on

motionless wings while others have a “flap, flap and glide” style of flying; and some ducks feed by dabbling and upending themselves on the water’s surface while others dive deep below the water.

The specific habitat in which you see the bird can also provide important information as to its identity. Some species are almost never seen outside of their preferred habitat - except maybe during migration - while others are generalists and can turn up in many different habitats. Likewise, some species are commonly seen in urban or semi-urban settings while others almost never venture into the city. Some useful habitat categories here in the Kawarthas include urban (downtown Peterborough), suburban (rest of the city), wetland (Lakefield marsh), lake (Stoney Lake), river (Otonabee), cultivated field (much of County Road 2 near Keene), grassy field (County Road 24 of Smith-Ennismore Township), brushy field (parts of Lily Lake Road west), mixed woods (Petroglyphs Provincial Park), and deciduous woods (Mark S. Burnham Provincial Park).

Next week, I will deal specifically with field marks.