

BIRD WATCHING Basics

The Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission

AN INTRODUCTION FOR BEGINNING BIRDERS

Written by Jim Cox

2010 revisions by Mark and Selena Kiser

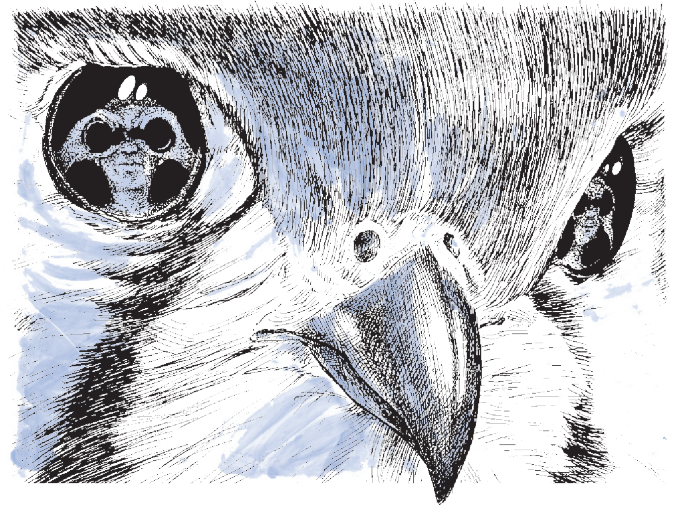
Design by Marrell Cooper

Illustrated by Clark Frazier

No one knows the sights and sounds of nature quite like a bird watcher. By taking a half-second look at a small darting assemblage of brown, yellow and white feathers and adding a call note that sounds something like “chip,” a “birder” can tell you, not only was that one of 42 different types of warblers in Florida, but it specifically was a Yellow-rumped Warbler.

You too can learn to do this, but it takes practice. To distinguish among the 900+ species of birds found in the U.S., birders must quickly process a great deal of information on color patterns, call notes and even the shapes of bills. They have to know what to key in on when they see a strange bird, noting its overall shape, how it moves through a bush or tree, and the shape of its wings. Such sensory work-outs help to develop great visual and hearing acuity among birders. In fact, birders are generally much more observant than the average person.

To the beginning birder, however, trying to identify even common species can be extremely frustrating, and many people give up before they ever actually begin. A small gray bird flashes up to the top of a bush. Quick, grab your binoculars! Start flipping through your field guide. Take another look at the bird. Flip back a page or two... suddenly the bird is gone, but there is a different one lower in the bush. All that page riffling and binocular lifting begins anew. This pamphlet is intended to help you get beyond this frustrating early stage. It's a crash course in the basics of bird watching, often called “birding” nowadays by experienced watchers. Study this pamphlet



Who's watching whom? An American Kestrel spots a birder.

carefully and you'll be well on your way to greater enjoyment of the world around you since birding focuses on some of the most spectacular creatures on earth. Birds are highly visual creatures - just like people - and some species don breathtaking combinations of yellows, blues, reds, blacks and greens to make themselves more obvious. They also come in a wide variety of shapes and forms, which adds considerably to the pleasures of bird watching.

Birding will also make you more familiar with the natural beauty of Florida and perhaps will lead you to appreciate how quickly that beauty is being lost. Florida has the fifth greatest number of different bird species of any state in the nation, but the continued existence of many of these species is threatened by the estimated 5,000 new residents that move to Florida each week. Many birds simply do not tolerate the urban landscapes created by these new human residents. Thirty-four species and subspecies are officially listed as being in trouble in Florida, and four species have become extinct - never to be seen again. Birding also coaxes you into new country and enables you to take in all the fresh air and impressive scenery that you can hold. Most important, though, is the fact that birding is simply too much fun to be missed.

The type of information presented here is second nature to an experienced birder, but it can take many months of hard toil for the beginning bird watcher to grasp these concepts and techniques. Even with the information spelled out here, you still have to supply a good bit of patience and sweat to become one of the truly tuned-in nature watchers. We have tried to strip away some of the mystique of birding and expose the bare essentials, but practice and patience are just as important to birding as they are to sports, music and other recreational activities. You can't expect to record 150 different species on your first outing (though this will be possible later on) or to identify all those confusing birds. You'll have to work at it.

Enough said. Let's get to work.

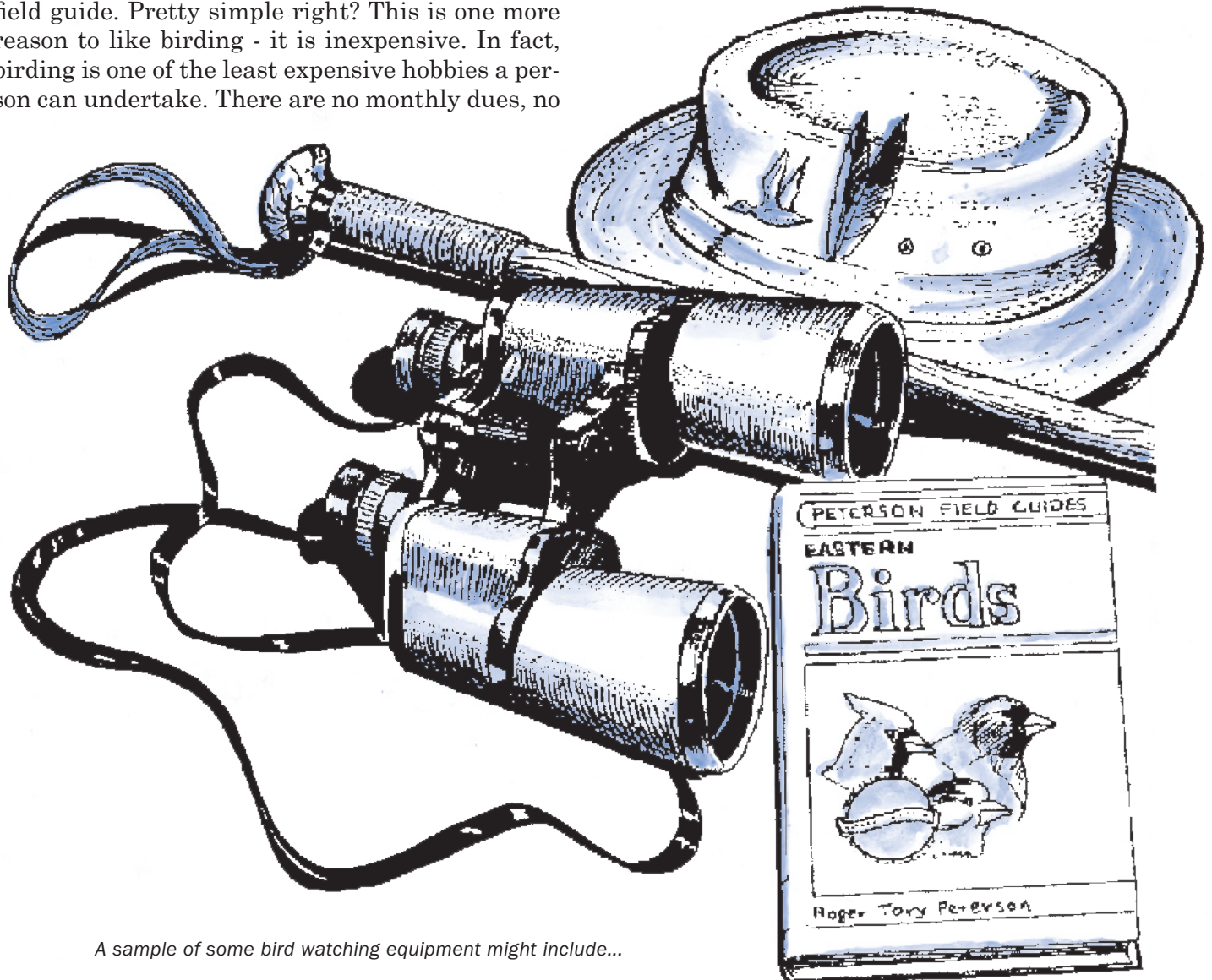
Part One: The Equipment

Let's start with the easiest part of birding, which is deciding what equipment you need. There are only two absolute essentials: binoculars and a field guide. Pretty simple right? This is one more reason to like birding - it is inexpensive. In fact, birding is one of the least expensive hobbies a person can undertake. There are no monthly dues, no

rackets to string, no nets to tie up, no golf clubs to buy, no green fees to pay or balls to lose. Binoculars of adequate quality can be purchased for around 100 dollars, a good field guide is around 20 dollars, and with these supplies you are well on your way.

Binoculars

Binoculars are a birder's eyes on the world, and they can greatly affect the quality of a bird outing. Good binoculars make for good birding, while bad binoculars can lead to missed birds and severe headaches induced by blurred images, double vision and eye strain. Binoculars come in many different shapes and forms and carry such descriptions as "roof prism," "close focus," "armor coated," etc. At the outset, you don't need to spend too much time deciphering this arcane lexicon. If you really get hooked on birding, you can learn more about binoculars later and trade in for a bet-



A sample of some bird watching equipment might include...



Backyard birds are accessible and worth watching!

ter pair. There are a few simple rules to consider and questions to ask when purchasing your first binoculars.

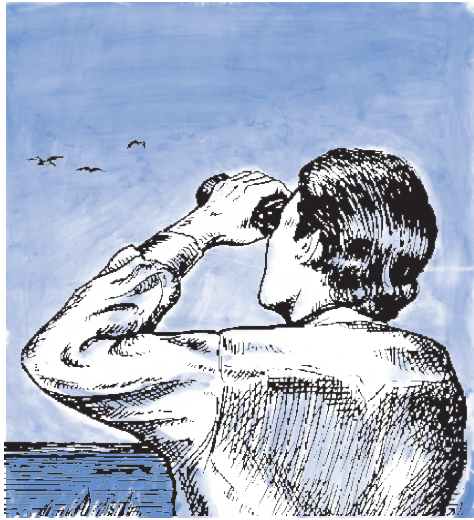
1. **Make sure the power (or magnification) is at least 7-power.** The power is the first number given in the numerical notation that describes binoculars. For example, a “7 X 35” pair of “glasses” will make objects appear as if they are seven times as close as they actually are. Seven-power binoculars are about the minimum needed to see birds well. Binoculars 10-power or stronger can be difficult for some birders to hold steady.
2. **Make sure that the second number (“40” for an “8 X 40” pair of glasses) is four to five times as large as the power (e.g., “8 X 40,” “10 X 42,” etc.).** This second number describes the diameter, in millimeters, of the large lens that faces the object of interest - the “objective” lens. The larger this lens is, the greater the amount of light the binoculars gather and thus the easier it will be to see characteristics in dim light or on a dull-colored bird. Larger lenses are heavier, however.
3. **Are the binoculars too heavy for you to carry and use for at least two hours straight?** Don’t end up with a hunchback because your binoculars act like a yoke.
4. **Can you flex the barrels of the binoculars fairly easily?** To test to see if they are too flexible, spread the barrels out as far as possible and then hold onto only one of the barrels. Does the free barrel slip or fall from the spread position? It shouldn’t.

5. **When held a foot away, do the large objective lenses reflect a bluish/greenish or purplish tinge?** If they do, the lenses are color-coated (a good thing). This coating reduces internal glare in the binoculars and increases the amount of light that actually reaches your eyes. Check the lenses to make sure the coatings are free of any blotches or scrapes.
6. **Can you bring the barrels of the binoculars close enough together so that the image you see merges into a single, clear image within a single, perfect circle?** If the image isn’t singular or clear, the binoculars may be out of alignment or the eyepieces may not come close enough together to accommodate your eyes. These two problems may lead to eye strain and severe headaches. Make sure any pair of optics you buy “fits” your face.
7. **Do you wear eyeglasses or sunglasses?** If you do, your binoculars should have rubber eye cups that twist up and down or fold back. This allows you to put your eyeglasses up closer to the eyepieces of your binoculars and gives you a much larger field of view.
8. **Do the binoculars produce a clear image of an object only 15 feet away?** Some binoculars do not focus on objects this close, so you may miss the sparrow or warbler that skulks in a nearby bush.
9. **Look at a sign with large lettering. Do the letters close to the edge of the field of view appear as precise and well-formed as the letters in the center of the field of view?** Image distortion towards the edge of binoculars is common in bad binoculars - like looking through a fish-eye lens. Look for a pair that has minimal distortion.
10. **When you focus on a license plate or small sign two blocks away, are the letters and numbers clear?** They should be.

Practicing with your new binoculars

Before using your binoculars, it is important to adjust them so they compensate for the differing strengths of your two eyes. Take a lens cap and cover up the right objective lens with it. Then look through the left lens and focus on an object 30 feet away using the main focusing knob located between the two barrels of your binoculars.

Once you have focused on the object, move the lens cap from the right lens to the left lens. Look through the right lens at the same object (but don’t touch the main focusing knob!). If the image you see is not as clear as it looked through the left lens, adjust it using the focusing ring (diopter)



located on the right eyepiece or on the center column of your binoculars. Take note of where you have set the focus on the right eyepiece or center column. Now your binoculars are adjusted to your eyes and are ready for action.

Next, spend some time developing the hand-eye coordination you'll need to spot birds quickly. Most birding is definitely not like watching football. With birding there's much more action - everything is happening at 1/100 the scale and moves 100 times as quickly over an unlimited expanse of space. It takes time for beginning birders to get the knack of spotting birds with their binoculars. The secret is to learn to spot a bird with the naked eye and then lift the binoculars up to your eyes without ever taking your eyes off the bird.

I usually recommend that the fledgling birder find a comfortable spot at a local park and spend time just practicing spotting objects with their binoculars. Initially, set the focus lever on the binoculars so that an object approximately 30 feet away is in clear view. This is a good average distance from which you can learn to focus the binoculars in and out. Next, begin to look for birds with your naked eyes and then find them with your binoculars. Simply follow the bird around for a while, lowering and lifting your binoculars every so often. Don't worry about identifying birds yet. Just watch what they are doing. Soon, you'll be able to spot and focus like a pro.

Field Guides

There has been a veritable explosion in the number of field guides published about birds over the last few years. Until the late 1960s, the guide most widely used was Roger Tory Peterson's original *The Birds of Eastern North America*, the first

field guide of its kind produced. This book literally made birding a popular activity by making accurate identifications of birds possible. Today, however, there are specific field guides available for certain regions of the country (most states now have their own field guide) as well as for specific groups of birds, such as hawks, gulls, shorebirds, ducks and others. These specialized books may eventually make their way into the library of a birding enthusiast. Still, beginners need only consider the comprehensive guides when choosing their first field guide.

When purchasing your first guide, it is best to start with one that displays paintings of birds rather than photographs. Paintings allow artists to include all distinguishing features (called "field marks") that help to identify a bird in each illustration. Often, photographs do not show all these marks due to lighting or positioning of the bird. Photographic guides can be a valuable companion reference, however, especially when studying the details of a bird's shape. Of the many comprehensive guides available, here are four of the most popular.

Peterson Field Guide to Birds of Eastern and Central North America. Sixth Edition, 2010. Roger Tory Peterson

The fully updated "Peterson guide" offers a clarity and consistency hard to find elsewhere. This is because nearly all the paintings in the guide were drawn by Roger Tory Peterson rather than multiple artists as in other guides. In addition, the guide is limited to birds found in the eastern and central United States, which means Floridians do not have to sort through birds that do not occur here very often. Peterson also uses a



With its bright red plumage, the Northern Cardinal is easy to see under any conditions.

simple, effective method of highlighting the field marks of different birds by using arrows to point to them. These simple, visual indications of key features help save valuable identification time in the field. A drawback in previous editions was that range maps describing where each species of bird occurs were grouped at the back, rather than placing each map beside the bird's picture and description. In this edition, however, small "thumbnail" range maps are included on the same page with each species' description (fear not, larger range maps are still found in the back.) A "combined" eastern and western edition (2008) is also available.

Kaufman Field Guide to Birds of North America. 2005. Kenn Kaufman

The Kaufman guide is among the most popular of the photographic guides today. Digitally enhanced images (with distracting backgrounds removed) show identification characteristics that are sometimes not apparent in other field guides using photographs. The guide is organized by bird family groupings instead of by strict taxonomic classification ("phylogenetic" order - discussed later in this booklet). This feature will appeal to beginners but may confuse those used to traditional field guide organization. The text contains clear descriptions on how to identify each bird plus interesting life history information.

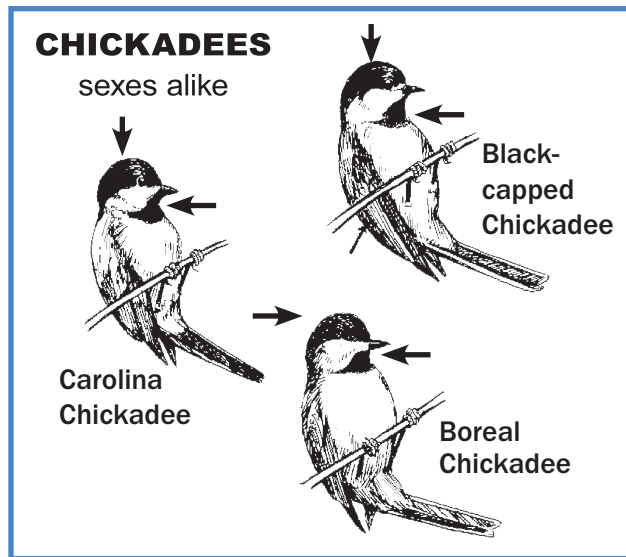
National Geographic Field Guide to the Birds of North America. Fifth Edition, 2006. Jon L. Dunn and Jonathan Alderfer

This popular field guide is among the most recently revised guides and includes the current common names of all North American bird species. The National Geographic guide also contains more illustrations and gives better descriptions of the variation that certain birds exhibit in their color patterning. For example, Red-shouldered Hawks in Florida generally are a lighter color than Red-shouldered Hawks in other parts of the country. Most field guides mention this, but drawings in the National Geographic guide actually show this type of variation. For some species, there may be as many as 15 illustrations showing the color-

ation differences of juvenile birds, subadult birds, males versus females, as well as differences that occur across broad geographic regions. This additional information can help to settle some tricky identification problems, but may also overwhelm beginning birders with more information than is needed to identify the common birds around their neighborhood. Separate eastern and western editions (both published in 2008) are now available.

The Sibley Guide to Birds. First Edition, 2000. David Allen Sibley

This landmark guide is a relative newcomer compared to other illustrated guides discussed here. However, Sibley's exceptional, high-quality paintings cover virtually all birds found in the U.S. and Canada. If you travel out west this can be a benefit - you won't have to purchase another field guide. Like the National Geographic guide, it features multiple illustrations which cover the variations in plumage across a species' range and between sexes and age classes. The large size of this book makes it cumbersome to carry in the field. However, smaller and separate eastern and western versions of the guide (both updated in 2003) are available and are much more portable.



Some field guides have arrows to point out slight differences in similar species. Only the Carolina Chickadee occurs in Florida.

A few other guides you may find helpful are:

- All the Birds of North America. Second Edition, 2002. Jack L. Griggs
- National Geographic Field Guide to the Birds of Eastern North America. First Edition, 2008. Jon L. Dunn and Jonathan Alderfer
- Peterson Field Guide to the Birds of North America. First Edition, 2008. Roger Tory Peterson
- The Sibley Field Guide to Birds of Eastern North America. First Edition, 2003. David Allen Sibley
- Smithsonian Field Guide to the Birds of North America. First Edition, 2008. Ted Floyd
- Stokes Field Guide to Birds: Eastern Region. First Edition, 1996. Donald & Lillian Stokes

Once you have selected your field guide, do not - repeat, do not - immediately run off looking for birds, because what you'll actually find instead



Don't let the variety of birds overwhelm you. Birds are more easily identified than you might imagine...

of birds is trouble and frustration. Many a field guide has spent more time collecting dust than helping to identify birds because the owner didn't learn how to use the guide. Sit down with your field guide when you first get it and read through the complete introduction. Next, look at some of the pictures and figure out where some of the common birds you recognize are located in the field guide (i.e., front, back or middle).

Field Guide Organization

I have watched numerous beginners spot a bird and immediately open their field guide to the middle pages. They then look to the right ten pages, look left ten pages, and don't find the bird. Then they look right 20 pages, look left 20 pages, and still don't find the bird. After looking a few more pages left and right, they heave the guide into the air out of disgust and give up the whole enterprise.

This happens because the person hasn't learned how bird species are arranged in the field guide. It's no wonder they get frustrated. Field guides, just like dictionaries and phone books, are ordered according to a precise system that determines where different birds are located in the book. If you were looking up the word "aardvark" in the dictionary, you wouldn't begin somewhere in the middle, would you? Similarly, if you see a sparrow-like bird sitting on the ground, don't start searching through the middle of a field guide because all the sparrows are located in the last quarter of field guides.

Most guides are roughly organized in "phylogenetic order." Phylogenetic order is the way sci-

entists classify all living things (not just birds) based on their evolutionary history - which creatures, according to likenesses in their present-day appearance, most probably evolved from common ancestors. You can learn more about this ordering system by reading your field guide. The point is that birds having similar physical appearances occur very close together in a field guide. You won't find sparrows on the same page with hawks, or a loon facing a warbler. All sparrows, loons, warblers, hawks, and even gulls and blackbirds are located many pages away from one another.

Classification

There are five essential levels of classification by which all birds are grouped. When we refer to birds of the same "species," for example a group of 15 American Robins, we are using the most specific level of classification. Similar species are grouped into a "genus," then different genera (plural of genus) are grouped into a "family," different families are grouped into an "order" of birds, and finally all orders are grouped into just one "class." This is the class "Aves," which in Latin refers to all birds. As you may guess, species in the same genus are more closely related to one another - and look more alike - than species in different genera. Likewise, families grouped in a single order are more similar to one another than families grouped in different orders.

Most field guides covering North America contain about 800-900 species, grouped into more than 300 genera, grouped into more than 70 different families, grouped into just 20 different orders (guides limited to eastern or western North America have about half as many species).



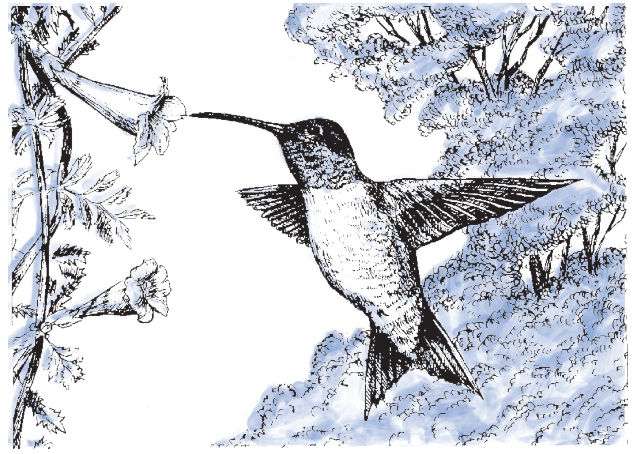
A Burrowing Owl chick.

Bird Families

The most convenient and logical classification level for the beginning birder to focus on is the family. There are simply too many genera and species out there for a novice to grasp easily, and identification to a particular order is too broad to be challenging. More importantly, by learning the general shape, size and appearance of the different families of birds, you will develop the powers of observation that characterize a good birder. In fact, you probably know more about some of the families than you realize. For example, if you can recognize a Laughing Gull, you already know a lot about the general sizes and shapes of all the gulls. Similarly, by knowing what a Northern Cardinal looks like, you know a good bit about buntings, grosbeaks and other members of this family - namely that they have very thick, pointed bills. Florida's state bird, the Northern Mockingbird, is in the family of mimic thrushes. All birds in this family have the same approximate size and shape, including that long tail.

Armed with the ability to recognize the shapes of the major bird families and a good local field guide, you can go anywhere in the world and immediately find yourself head and shoulders above non-birders in terms of identification skills - even though you don't have any familiarity or experience with the local birds.

So when you first get your field guide, spend time looking at its organization and the way it



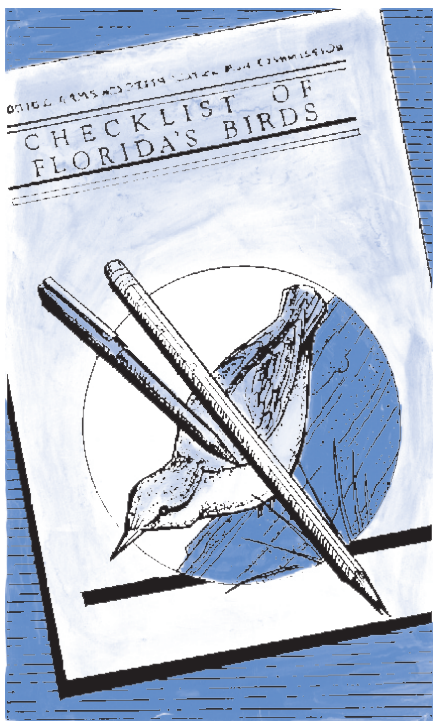
If you see a "hummer" in Florida, chances are it's a Ruby-throated Hummingbird.

groups families of birds. Divide your guide into four sections using tags or sticky notes. The first quarter will contain the families of large water birds, the second quarter the large land birds (ending with the woodpeckers), and the last two quarters will contain the small land birds (all in the order "Passeriformes," commonly called the "passerines" or "perching birds"). Continue to look for common species that you already know and use these as a guide for learning the common characteristics of other species in the family. Remember, you should begin birding using your head, not running around chasing after elusive thrushes and confusing fall warblers. Look casually, not frantically, at birds you don't know. Equipped with your spyglasses and trusty field guide, you can now begin to get acquainted with all those fitting bundles of feathers.

Part Two: Identifying Birds

By now you're familiar with the organization of field guides and with some of the different families of birds. You have binoculars and can spot an object with your naked eye and then look at it through the binoculars without having to search for ten minutes. Most importantly, you've avoided the frustration - so far - of trying to associate a particular name with a particular bird. Now, to accomplish this feat, let's go over some helpful techniques for learning to identify families and species of birds.

The first thing to remember is: *don't make bird identification hard on yourself*. There are two general rules to keep in mind during your first few months of birding: 1) eliminate as many species as possible from consideration before you ever attempt to identify anything, and 2) the bird is most likely a species that commonly occurs in your area, not some strange exotic that blew in from a thousand miles away.



Many birders keep checklists to record the species they see, and to remember when and where they encounter them.



A Barred Owl listens and watches for its prey in the moonlight.

These rules are closely tied to one another, and they focus on making birding easier by reducing the number of choices you have to consider. For example, in Florida there is only one type of hummingbird that occurs regularly, the Ruby-throated Hummingbird (verify this from your field guide, if you like). Small numbers of other hummingbird species make their way to Florida (typically in winter), but why worry about trying to identify these uncommon vagrants until you have more experience with our most common species?

I received a long-distance phone call one day from a woman who thought she had a Spotted Owl in her backyard. She wanted to know why she couldn't find the bird in her field guide of eastern birds. It's no wonder! Spotted Owls occur in several western states but they're as rare as two-pound diamonds east of the Rockies. This woman had recently seen a picture of a Spotted Owl in *Natural History* magazine, so when she saw an owl that looked like the picture she immediately went looking for Spotted Owls in her field guide, passing right by Barred Owls, which look similar and, more importantly, are common throughout the Southeast. It took me approximately ten minutes to convince her that it might be a Barred Owl and that perhaps she should look more closely at this bird. She eventually agreed with me, but this was a perfect case of a beginning bird watcher making things harder than they had to be.

One of the easiest ways to exclude birds is to go through your field guide and put an "X" next to those that do not typically occur in your geographic area. Put these aside for the time being. By doing this, you drastically reduce the number of birds you have to worry about identifying from

the 900 birds in your guide to the 300 or so birds that are regularly seen in Florida! By the way, don't worry about marking up your field guide. A field guide personally adjusted to meet your needs is the best friend you can have when alone in the field. I kept extensive notes in my first field guide. In fact, on one page it was hard to see the drawings amid all my scribbles. Just make sure to use a pencil or permanent ink so that the words won't smear if you leave the book in the rain or drop it in the mud occasionally.

Another way to eliminate choices is to consider the time of year the bird might occur in your area. The range maps included with field guides display this type of information. Some beginners might even find it beneficial to place colored dots next to birds in their field guides. For example, put a red dot next to birds that are year-round residents, put a blue dot next to birds that are only winter visitors, put a green dot next to birds that are summer visitors, and put a black dot next to birds that only pass through Florida during migration.

These procedures will quickly eliminate a lot of confusing birds from consideration. For example, there are approximately 170 native birds that breed in Florida and another 30 or so that hang around in small numbers during the summer. So, if you see some unknown bird in the middle of July, don't consider the 900 species shown in your field guide. Instead, you only have to choose from 200 or so different birds that occur within Florida during the summer. Simple, right?

Identification Clues

The way that some birds skulk about, you'd think that they were afraid of showing off their pretty colors and didn't want anyone to identify them. And this is the case, no doubt, as they must somehow evade predators from both above and below.



A Red-shouldered Hawk surveys life from a tree top.



Sometimes a silhouette is all you need to identify a bird.

Often, their quick movements allow us only a glimpse. Still, you will be able to identify even the most secretive bird using the key clues to identification described here.

There are five basic clues you can look and listen for that will allow you to solve the bird identification puzzle: 1) the bird's silhouette, 2) its plumage and coloration, 3) its behavior, 4) its habitat preferences, and 5) its voice. This may seem like a formidable amount of information to gather, but in truth you often need only one or two of these clues to identify a bird. Sometimes, the key to identification is simply knowing which clue to look for first when you see an unfamiliar bird. As your birding abilities increase, you will be able to pinpoint the important clues with greater ease and certainty.

Silhouette - Shape and Size

As you become familiar with your field guide, you will be able to quickly categorize most birds into families using silhouette alone (remember, each family has a diagnostic shape and size). This will immediately put you at an advantage compared to the average observer because by placing the bird you see into a particular family, you have already narrowed down the possible birds you could be seeing from the 900 in your field guide to only about 15 or so birds - the 15 birds within the family you have identified. As mentioned earlier, you can then further eliminate any species in the family that do not occur in Florida during that season. You can do this even in the worst of lighting conditions when birds are backlit, in low light or

in shadow. It doesn't matter. The overall shape is unchanged. Many birds are even identifiable to species by outline alone.

Of course, it will not be easy to accomplish this feat at first. You must learn to note carefully all the details of a bird's shape. Is the bird large or small, short-legged or long-legged, crested or not crested, plump or slim and sleek, short-tailed or long-tailed?

The shape of a bird's bill is also an extremely helpful clue that is obvious from a silhouette. Cardinals, finches and sparrows have short, conical bills for crushing seeds. Woodpeckers have chisel-shaped bills for working dead wood. Hawks, eagles and falcons, on the other hand, have sharp, hooked bills that make quick work of meat. Shorebirds have slender bills of all lengths for probing at different depths into the sand and mud.

Size is also an important field mark, and field guides do list the size of birds next to pictures. However, if you don't have some type of scale in mind, these numbers are of little use. The "ruler" I use in the field is a mental association of three familiar birds with three general size classes. For example, a Chipping Sparrow is 5-6 inches in size, a Northern Mockingbird is 8-10 inches in size, and an American Crow is 17-21 inches in size. Now, using phrases like "larger than a crow" or "smaller than a sparrow," you have an immediate impression of the approximate size of any bird. You also have an immediate frame of reference for your field guide if you associate each of these three species with 5-, 10- and 20-inch size classes.



A beautiful Wood Duck shows off his own unique plumage.

Plumage

Plumage characteristics are what really draw a lot of people into birding - they like seeing those beautiful colors. The distinguishing plumage clues that identify different species are known as "field marks." These include such things as breast spots, wing bars (thin lines along the wings), eye rings (circles around the eyes), eyebrows (lines over the eyes), eye lines (lines through the eyes) and many others.

Some field marks are best seen when a bird is in flight. A flying Northern Harrier can be identified from nearly a mile away with good binoculars because the bird has a bright white patch on its rump.

Some families of birds can be broken into even smaller groups based on one or two simple field marks. For example, warblers are fairly evenly divided between those that have wing bars and those that do not. So if you see a warbler-like bird, look quickly to see if it has wing bars. Sparrows, on the other hand, can be separated into two smaller groups based on whether or not the breast is streaked. Look for other broad distinctions for other families.



A Pileated Woodpecker searches for insects.

Behavior

A bird's behavior - how it flies, forages or generally comports itself - is one of the best clues to its identity. Hawks have a "serious" demeanor, crows and jays are "gregarious" and cuckoos are... well, not really. Woodpeckers climb up the sides of tree trunks searching for grubs like a lineman scaling a telephone pole. Flycatchers, on the other hand, wouldn't climb a tree trunk if their lives depended on it. They spend most of their time sitting upright on an exposed perch. When they see a bug cruising into range they quickly dart from their perch, snag the meal, then return to the same perch or another one nearby. Finches spend a lot of their time on the ground in search of fallen seeds, as do Northern Mockingbirds, Gray Catbirds and Brown Thrashers. Some wading birds, such as Snowy Egrets and Reddish Egrets, are very active foragers and chase their prey around in shallow waters. Other wading birds, such as Great Blue Herons, are less impetuous and hunt slowly with great patience and stealth.

Even the way a bird props its tail gives some clues as to which species or family it might be. Wrens characteristically hold their tails in a cocked position and often bounce from side to side. Spotted Sandpipers and Louisiana Waterthrushes bounce their tails and rumps rapidly up and down as if doing a stylish dance step. Some thrushes and flycatchers, on the other hand, move their tails frequently but slowly, with a wave-like motion. You can even identify some birds just by the way that they fly. Most finches and woodpeckers move through the air with an undulating flight pattern, flapping their wings for short bursts and then tucking them under for a short rest. One group of raptors, the buteos or soaring hawks, circle the sky suspended on outstretched wings. Most falcons, another group of raptors, fly with strong wing beats and rarely hover. Yet another group, the accipiters or bird hawks, usually fly in a straight line with alternating periods of flapping and floating.

Habitat

Even if a range map shows that a bird occurs in your neck of the woods, this doesn't mean the bird will be common wherever you go. Birds segregate themselves according to habitat type and are sometimes quite picky in selecting an area as home. Wading birds and ducks, for example, prefer watery habitats rather than dry upland areas. Pine Warblers and Brown-headed Nuthatches associate primarily with pine woods and are less common in areas containing large numbers of

oaks, hickories and other deciduous trees. Some Florida birds, like the Snowy Plover, are restricted primarily to the sandy coast, while others, including the Limpkin, occur mostly along river swamps and freshwater marshes.

Beginning birders must usually spend many hours afield before they are able to associate different species with different habitat types. I suggest you develop a key to habitats you frequent and keep notes of where you see different species. Make the habitat key simple at first, using terms like salt and freshwater marsh, pinelands, deciduous forest, beach, urban area, field and pasture, etc. Then elaborate on this key as you learn to distinguish among different Florida habitat types. You can put abbreviations such as “SM” (for salt marsh), “PW” (for pine woods), and “FP” (for field and pasture) next to the pictures of birds in your field guide after you have some feel for where the birds occur. Most field guides actually provide this information in the written description, but this abbreviated system may help you remember the habitats where each bird occurs.

Voice

I’ve often thought it would be rewarding to teach blind people how to “bird listen.” Birds have unique songs and calls, and voice is often all that’s needed to identify many of the birds you encounter. If each species didn’t have a distinctive call or song, there would be a lot of confusion out there when birds tried to communicate. Just as you can tell that the person on the other end of the phone is Uncle Ted and not Aunt Jill, so too can you learn to distinguish the different voices of birds.

Listening to recordings helps considerably when you are trying to learn bird vocalizations. Many are currently available on CD. Some excellent recordings

include: *Peterson Field Guides Birding by Ear* (2002) and *More Birding by Ear* (2000) by Richard Walton, Robert Lawson and Roger Tory Peterson; *Peterson Field Guides A Field Guide to Bird Songs: Eastern and Central North America* (1990); *Stokes Field Guide to Bird Songs: Eastern Region* (1997) by Donald and Lillian Stokes, and Lang Elliot; and *Bird Songs of Florida* by Geoffrey Keller (1997). However, no matter how many recordings you listen to, there is no substitute for going out into the field. There’s something about the association of voice and bird that helps to fix both in memory. Plus, bird vocalizations are complex and no set of recordings can hope to encompass all the variety and geographic variations that can be experienced firsthand out in nature.

Additional Tips

Going afield with experienced birders can often help to speed you along the bird identification learning curve, and a variety of private and public groups offer bird tours throughout Florida. Your local chapter of the National Audubon Society is perhaps the best starting place to find out more about birding trips in your area. National organizations such as the American Birding Association also offer a multitude of birding information in the form of magazines, newsletters, annual meetings, guided trips, and retailers of birding books, recordings, binoculars and other equipment. In addition, birding festivals occur throughout Florida and offer an opportunity to participate in guided field trips for a minimal fee.

Birding is always more enjoyable when you have information on where to go and what species to look for. The Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC) developed the Great Florida Birding Trail to help you find Florida’s birding hot spots and birds of interest. To download or request free copies of these trail guides, visit www.floridabirdingtrail.com.



The Red-winged Blackbird has its own distinctive song.

To keep track of all the birds you encounter, the FWC has prepared a "Checklist of Florida's Birds." Single copies of this publication are available for free by writing to: "Bird Checklist," Great Florida Birding Trail, Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission, 620 S. Meridian St., Tallahassee, FL 32399-1600. Checklists and other birding information are also available free through the "Wings Over Florida" program which awards certificates at a variety of achievement levels to birders who keep track of their life lists of Florida birds. Write to "Wings Over Florida Application Packet" at the same address.

Birding is not the easiest sport in the world to learn, but it is definitely one of the most rewarding. To offset those first outings when you flipped through your field guide with frustration, there will be many years' worth of pleasant and intriguing field trips. You see, birders experience something new every time they go out. Even if they don't see a new species for the first time, they might see a new behav-

ior, hear a new vocalization, or just explore a new and wild corner of Florida. They might even come across something startling, like a rare European bird that somehow strayed far from home.

The constant variety and challenge of birding are two important attractions, but so too is the camaraderie. About 48 million people in the United States are casual bird watchers, feeding and observing birds around their homes. A smaller number, around 20 million, take trips for the primary purpose of watching birds. Still, that's a lot of people poking their heads into bushes and craning their necks toward the sky!

I've developed a good number of lasting friendships as I've cruised some isolated road and happened across a kindred soul bedecked with binoculars and a field guide. We shoot the breeze for awhile, exchange notes on what we've seen that day, and then walk along together for a short while to find out what new birds are hiding in the bushes ahead. Birding is always filled with a world of new people and new experiences.



Publication provided by:

Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission
620 S. Meridian St., Tallahassee, FL 32399-1600

www.myfwc.com

www.floridabirdingtrail.com



printed on recycled paper

Revised 2010