



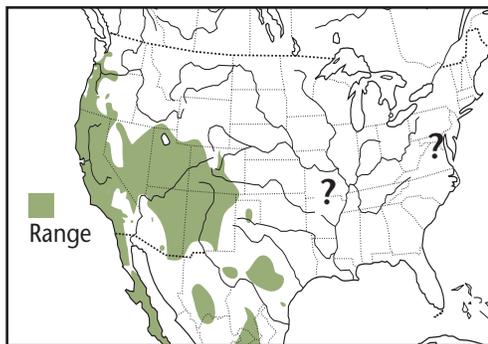
Learning to identify birds takes practice, but by paying attention to certain clues, you'll be a bird sleuth in no time!

Bird Groups

A good way to start identifying birds is to learn to recognize the key characteristics of general groups of birds such as woodpeckers, hawks, owls, wrens, or ducks. Members of these groups share certain similarities and are classified in the same **taxonomic group**, such as order or family (see "Bird Taxonomy"). Most field guides are arranged so that birds in the same family are placed together, so being able to identify which group a bird belongs to will help you narrow down the species to choose from.

Consider Location and Season

One trick for making bird identification easier is to rule out birds you're not likely to see in your area. This approach can reduce the number of species you have to consider, from the 900 birds found in North America to the much smaller number of birds found near you.



Range Map, Western Scrub-Jay

The best way to figure out whether a bird is found in your area is to look at its **range map**.

For example, if you look at the range map for Western Scrub-Jay, you will see that the bird is found in the western United States, but that you are unlikely to see it in Missouri or New Jersey.

Some birds may live in a place only during certain times of the year, so notice the breeding (summer) and nonbreeding (winter) ranges for each bird too.

Bird ID Clues

When looking or listening for birds, six basic clues will help you solve the bird identification puzzle. Notice the bird's

1. shape or silhouette
2. size
3. field marks
4. sound
5. habitat
6. behavior



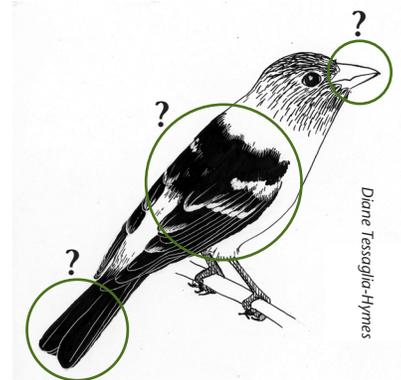
Pileated Woodpecker



Clues to Bird ID

These six clues may seem like a lot of information to gather, but you'll often need only one or two of them to identify a particular bird. Sometimes, the key to identifying a new bird species is simply to know which clue to look for first! Here are some tips to get you started:

1. **Shape or Silhouette:** With practice you will be able to recognize many birds simply by their **silhouette**, or shape and posture. In addition, look at each part of the bird. Is the bill short or long, thick or thin, curved or straight? What shape is the tail? For instance, is it forked? Are the wings pointed or broad, long or short?
2. **Size:** Ask yourself "How big is the bird?" Use the following guidelines to place your mystery bird into a general size class:
 - If it's about the size of a House Sparrow, it's around 5–6 inches.
 - If it's about the size of an American Robin, it's around 10 inches.
 - If it's about the size of an American Crow, it's around 17–21 inches.



Noticing the size and shape of a mystery bird's beak, wings, and tail might help you identify it!

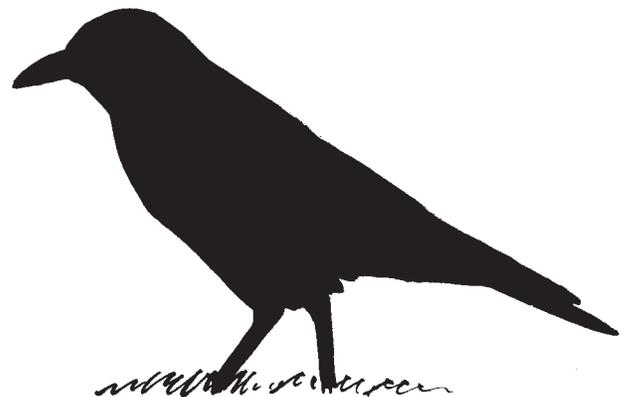
Now, by using descriptions such as "larger than a crow" or "smaller than a sparrow," you have a quick way of describing a bird's approximate size. Compare this size to sizes listed in your field guide, but be cautious—size comparisons can be tricky, especially when you see birds from a distance.



House Sparrow
(5–6 inches)
small



American Robin
(10 inches)
medium

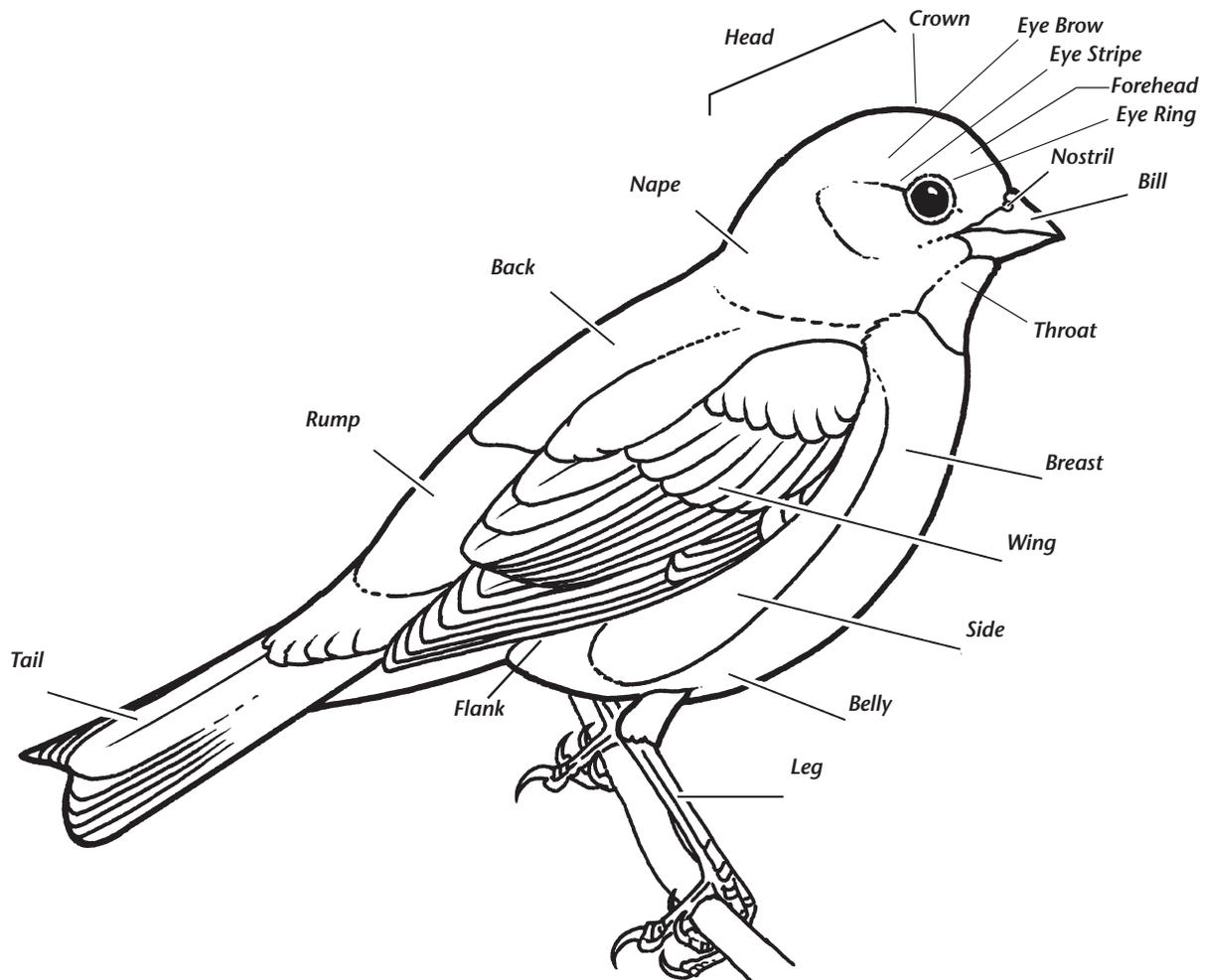


American Crow
(17–21 inches)
large



Clues to Bird ID

3. **Field Marks:** You can use a bird's distinctive colors and patterns to identify it. These **field marks** include features such as breast spots, wingbars (thin lines along the wings), eyerings (circles around the eyes), eye stripes (lines through the eyes), and many others. Check the color of each major body part. Sometimes the color of a bird's eye or legs alone will help distinguish one species from another. But be careful—a bird's colors can be affected by light conditions or the angle at which you see the bird.



Clues to Bird ID

4. **Sound:** Really good birders can find and identify more birds with their ears than with their eyes! Even beginning birders can use sound as a clue. Read the “Listening in on Birds” article if you’d like to learn more about using bird calls and songs as a clue for bird ID.
5. **Habitat:** Look around you. Is the bird deep in a forest, on your lawn, or in the city? Most birds prefer a certain **habitat**—the place where they find the food, water, and cover that they need. Knowing what birds are most likely to be found in a certain habitat will help you identify the birds you see there.
6. **Behavior:** Notice the bird’s behavior. Is it swimming or wading? Does it climb tree trunks? Does it wag its tail frequently? Does it fly in a straight line, or up and down like a roller coaster? What does it eat and how? The more you watch birds, the more you’ll learn about how different kinds of birds behave.

If you can use several of the clues above, you have a very good chance of finding your bird in the field guide. And with practice, you will be able to notice more of these clues quickly, so that identifying new birds will become easier and easier.



Many birders will never see a Chimney Swift up close or at rest. They will only see them flying at a distance over rooftops in the city. So knowing how swifts fly is very important!

