

GUIDE TO SPECIES GROUPS

Because BFL covers numerous species from several taxonomic groups, it's important to know a little bit about the identification, ecology, and behavior of each group before going into the field. Learning a little about each species group will allow you to quickly and accurately interpret your observations. The purpose of the Species Guidelines section is to cue you in on important behaviors or observations that relate specifically to responses you might see while conducting the survey protocol.

There is a detailed description of each species in the References: Species Accounts section. Please refer to this section for complete information on distributions, vocalizations, behaviors, and ecology for each species. For example, when reading the taxonomic summaries below, if you are unsure about the sound or context of a hawk begging call, you could refer to the Sharp-shinned Hawk species account for a thorough description. In the summaries below, we often discuss sexual dimorphism. This term refers to differences that occur between the sexes of a given species. For example, when we say that warblers exhibit sexual color dimorphism it simply means that there is some difference in plumage color between males and females that allow us to distinguish the sexes.

Hawks

All hawk vocalizations are defined as calls, not songs, which are sometimes heard overhead, above the forest canopy. Begging calls from fledglings are often also obvious. We are interested in forest hawks which include the Broad-winged Hawk, Red-shouldered Hawk, and accipiters.

Hawks exhibit sexual size dimorphism, with the female larger than the male, but do not exhibit color dimorphism. In some species, both sexes can occur in light or dark forms, so we recommend studying a field guide to distinguish between the two, as well as to learn the distinc-

tive body shapes of different groups and species specific behaviors.

Hawks are often seen soaring or in flapping flight, so learning flight profiles is very important. The shape of the bird and the way it flies are generally the best clues to its identification. The Broad-winged and Red-shouldered hawks are *buteos*, which tend to soar with open, flat wings, while *accipiters* fly with more rapid wingbeats.

Hawks will often approach quietly to assess what's going on, so stay alert if they respond to your playback. Alternatively, they may leave an area in response to mobbing calls because they believe potential prey have been alerted to their presence. Also, keep an eye out for their stick nests high in the canopy. Some squirrel species also build similar sized nests; however, their nests are mostly constructed of leaves. Note that fledglings remain with adults for an extended period (weeks) after leaving the nest, so look for family groups in late spring to mid-summer.

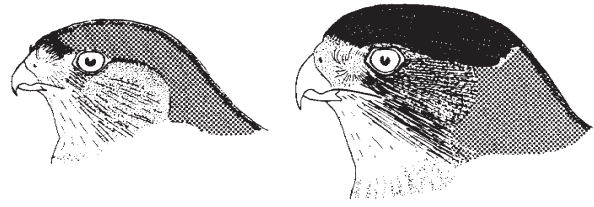
A comparison of Sharp-shinned and Cooper's Hawks

Sharp-shinned and Cooper's hawks are two of the most difficult raptors to tell apart in the field. They have similar plumages; one of the most noticeable differences between them is their size.

When the birds are flying, veteran hawk watchers look for the long rounded tail of the Cooper's Hawk and the shorter, squared-off tail of the sharp-shin. Another excellent field mark is neck length. In flight, the Sharp-shinned Hawk's head does not extend past the leading edge of the wing, giving this hawk a "short-necked" appearance. The Cooper's Hawk's head, on the other hand, extends past the leading edge of the wing, giving this hawk a comparatively "long-necked" appearance. A perched accipiter, however, is a real identification challenge—even when it is as close as your bird feeder.

A perched bird's size can be surprisingly

difficult to judge, and to make matters worse, both species exhibit reverse sexual dimorphism—that is, the females are considerably larger than the males. A male sharp-shin may be as small as a jay, and a female Cooper’s may be larger than a crow, but



a female sharp-shin and a male Cooper’s may appear to be the same size.

A perched Sharp-shinned or Cooper’s hawk can be identified by a combination of subtle field marks. The information in the table below comes from two field guides that are excellent for raptor identification: *A Field Guide to Advanced Birding*, by Kenn Kaufman, and *A Field Guide to Hawks*, by William S. Clark, illustrated by

Brian K. Wheeler.

Although none of the field marks listed here will cinch an identification by itself, you can use a combination of characters to increase your confidence in identifying perched raptors.

Woodpeckers

Woodpecker vocalizations include calls but not songs. For woodpeckers, drumming serves as the primary mate-attraction and territory-defense sound. Drumming is as distinct as a song, and can often be used to identify a bird to the species level. Woodpeckers make irregular hammering sounds as they excavate insects from trees, and sapsuckers produce ir-

Illustration by Kenn Kaufman, reprinted with permission from Kaufman 1990

TABLE 5. A COMPARISON OF SHARP-SHINNED AND COOPER’S HAWKS

	<i>SHARP-SHINNED HAWK</i>	<i>COOPER’S HAWKS</i>
BIRDS OF ALL AGES		
Size	10 inches to 14 inches (25 cm to 36 cm) (the size of a jay or dove)	14 inches to 20 inches (36 cm to 51 cm) (the size of a crow or grouse)
Tail	Tail has a narrow white tip	Tail has a wide white tip
Legs	Very thin; bird looks long-legged	Legs are thicker, look shorter
Eye	Seen from the side, eye seems to be placed in the middle of the head	Eye appears to be placed forward on head, close to bill
ADULTS (birds with gray backs, reddish underparts, red eyes)		
Top of head	Crown and nape are uniformly gray	Crown of head is blackish, contrasts with paler face and nape
IMMATURES (birds with brown backs, streaked underparts, yellow eyes)		
Under parts	Heavily streaked, especially on lower breast and belly; streaks reddish in color	Streaks are finer and mostly on upper breast, belly mostly white
Eye-stripe	Usually has pale eye-stripe	Lacks eye-stripe
Side of head and nape	Lacks reddish color	Often with reddish cast

Adapted from an article by Kenneth V. Rosenberg, *Birdscope*, Summer 1995. Reprinted with permission.



regular drumming patterns as they cut sap wells in trees. Note that it is possible and important to distinguish drumming from feeding or nest excavation.

Woodpeckers exhibit some sexual color dimorphism. Most males have some red on the head. Please check a field guide for examples.

All woodpeckers nest in cavities, and many are very vocal and active in the immediate vicinity of their nest hole.

Woodpeckers have a distinct flight pattern: a quick flutter of wings followed by a short tuck with no flapping that gives their flight an undulating, wavy pattern.

Thrushes

Thrush vocalizations include songs, performed mainly by the male, and distinctive call notes. Thrushes are often heard calling or singing more frequently than they are seen. Thrushes also give a “whisper song,” or a softer, quieter version of their primary song. This may serve as an attempt to disguise their location, making it seem as though they are farther away than their true location.

The spotted thrushes are best identified by face and breast pattern and overall color, including the flanks.

The only thrush that exhibits sexual color dimorphism is the Varied Thrush.

See Table 6 for a thrush identification guide to help you in the field.

Warblers

Some warbler species remain high in the canopy or are frequently hidden in the understory, so learning the songs and calls of these species is often the best way to identify them. Songs are high pitched notes and trills, performed mainly by male, sometimes from a conspicuous perch. Females are typically inconspicuous, and are more difficult to see during nesting as they don't sing. Call notes and alarm chips are given by both males and females.

Warblers usually exhibit sexual color dimor-

phism, with the female's plumage generally being a duller version of the male's.

Although warblers can range from understory to canopy, the area where a warbler is seen feeding is often a good key to its identity. Check the References: Species Accounts section for species specific behaviors.

Nuthatches

Distinctive nuthatch behavior includes creeping along tree trunks like woodpeckers. In contrast, however, they often move from the top of the tree to the bottom, head down, frequently craning their neck backwards for a better view of their surroundings.

Nuthatches use their strong, sharp bill to probe into furrows of tree bark. They also feed on insects at the tips of tree branches and on seeds of pine cones.

Nuthatches are secondary cavity nesters and often use abandoned woodpecker holes as a nest site. Little sexual color dimorphism makes it difficult to determine sex by plumage.

Flycatchers

Flycatcher's short, simple songs are perhaps the most reliable method of identifying the similar looking species in this group. They exhibit little sexual color dimorphism, and because catching insects is a solitary pursuit, flycatchers are frequently seen alone. Individuals typically sit erect on an exposed perch, flicking their wings and tails, while waiting for a passing insect. After darting out to catch their prey, they return to their perch to try again. Other birds, including warblers, also flycatch, but are rarely as patient and persistent as flycatchers.

Look for wood-pewees high in the forest canopy. Olive-sided Flycatchers are frequently seen flycatching from a dead snag in a forest clearing or bog. The Empidonax flycatchers (including the Willow and Acadian flycatchers) are best identified by voice because their plumage and other characteristics are so similar.

Flycatchers can be separated from warblers

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TABLE 6. IDENTIFICATION GUIDE TO NORTH AMERICAN FOREST THRUSHES

SPECIES	UPPERPARTS	THROAT/BREAST	FLANKS	EYE-RING	VOCALIZATION	NEST
VEERY	uniform reddish-brown (East); reddish-olive (West)	orange hue, light spotting throat, upper breast (East); heavier spotting, slightly less orange on breast (West)	gray	indistinct, grayish	song: spirals down calls: vee-ur, veee-oo, njernt	ground, sometimes tree, <4 ft (<1.2m) (to 25 ft or 7.5m)
GRAY-CHEEKED THRUSH	uniform gray-olive; brownish (Newfoundland)	white; bold dark spots throat, upper breast	brownish-gray	indistinct	song: jumbled series, low trill at end calls: whee-ah, quee-a	tree, 2–12 ft (0.5–2m) (to 20 ft or 6m), sometimes on ground
BICKNELL'S THRUSH	olive-brown back, slightly reddish tail and primaries	yellow tinge, bold dark spots throat, upper breast	brownish-gray	indistinct	song: like Gray-cheeked, higher trill at end calls: whee-ah, quee-a	tree, 2–6 ft (0.5–4m) (to 25 ft or 7.5m)
SWAINSON'S THRUSH	uniform olive (East); uniform reddish-brown (Pacific)	buffy, dark spots throat, upper breast	brownish-gray	bold, buffy	song: spirals up calls: feee-ee, spring peeper, whit	tree, 4–7 ft (1.2–2m) (0.5–60 ft or 0.2–18m)
HERMIT THRUSH	reddish-tail, brownish-gray back (paler-West)	white, dark spots throat, upper breast (West); buffy, dark spots throat, upper breast (Pacific/East)	buff-brown (East); grayish (West/Pacific)	white, conspicuous	song: long introductory note calls: chup, wee-er	mostly on ground (East); tree (West), 2–8 ft (0.5–2.4m) (1.5–30 ft or 0.5–9m)
WOOD THRUSH	reddish-head, olive-brown back	white, large black spots on breast and belly	white, large black spots	white, bold	song: flute-like, ee-oh-lay calls: wik,wik,wik,wik,wik	tree, 10–13 ft (3–4m) (2–70 ft or 0.5–21m)
VARIED THRUSH	slate-grayish (male); brownish-gray (female); orange wing bars (both sexes)	orange, black breast band	orange	none	song: single notes, long pauses in-between calls: chook, ringing whistles	tree, 6–20 ft (2–6m)

and vireos by their sit-and-wait foraging behavior, their distinctive vertical profile when perched, and physically by their large triangular heads.

Vireos

Different species of vireo are often confused with each other and can easily be confused with warblers. A vireo's bill is more "swollen" than a warbler's and has a slightly hooked tip that is difficult to see at a distance. Songs, mostly sung by the male, are useful in identifying to species level. Adults show little sexual color dimorphism.

Chickadees

The only chickadee studied by BFL is the Chestnut-backed Chickadee. This species is similar in behavior to other species of chickadees, but with a slightly different song and call. It is also easily distinguished by its chestnut back and flanks.

Cuckoos

The only cuckoo studied by BFL is the Yellow-billed Cuckoo. The bill color, tail pattern, and eye ring are the best ways to separate the Yellow-billed from the Black-billed cuckoo where the two species overlap. Cuckoos are sometimes difficult to see as they stealthily pluck caterpillars in dense, leafy trees. They are never seen in flocks and are very secretive, seldom straying far from cover and thus best identified by voice. They are often seen darting between patches of cover, so pay attention to shape and plumage to distinguish cuckoos from thrashers and other similar species.

Titmice

Titmice are similar in behavior to chickadees, but slightly larger. The facial pattern of the Bridled Titmouse is striking and distinctive.

The Oak Titmouse was formerly considered a sub-species of the Plain Titmouse, and as the name suggests, this species exhibits no distinctive markings except its crest.

Orioles

The only oriole studied by BFL is the Scott's Oriole. The male's black breast and back are distinctive. The adult female is more easily confused with other female orioles, particularly female Hooded and Orchard orioles where their ranges overlap. Scott's Orioles are often located by following their call note, a sharp chuck.