

All field guides are made up of a series of **species accounts**, one for each bird species. Each account generally includes a picture of the bird along with the following information:

A field guide usually includes

- Picture**
 - size
 - appearance
 - field marks
- Range Map**

American Crow
Corvus brachyrhynchos

This cunning, inquisitive, vocal opportunist is one of the most widespread of North American birds. Everybody knows crows. You may have seen one pilfering the dog's food, tearing holes in your garbage bag, or emptying a temporarily neglected lunch bag. It is a mistake to underestimate a crow's ability. Most people have opinions about crows that run the gamut from outright hatred to bemused admiration.

Very similar in appearance to the North-western Crow (*Corvus caurinus*), this species is larger, has a higher-pitched voice, and is less social during the breeding season. The American Crow is also similar in appearance to the Fish Crow (*Corvus ossifragus*), which is smaller and has a distinct nasal voice. Where American Crow overlaps Northwestern Crow (e.g., Puget Sound, Washington) and Fish Crow (Atlantic seaboard and southeastern U.S.), identification is difficult, with voice the most reliable character.

American Crows are found in a wide variety of habitats, particularly in open landscapes, with scattered trees and small woodlots. Clearing of hardwood and coniferous forests, planting of trees around prairie homesteads and urban centers, and tilling of agricultural land has created additional habitat for the species, which is now more abundant than it was when the first European settlers arrived. Large-scale persecution during the nineteenth century and first half of the twentieth made crows shy of people. They learned quickly, however, that there is safety from guns in villages and cities and that food is abundant there.

Crows roost communally; often the same sites are used year after year. Outside of the breeding season, such roosts may contain thousands of local individuals, their numbers often augmented by migrants from northern regions. When these roosts are located in cities, they may become a nuisance requiring management.

■ Breeding
■ Breeding and winter
■ Winter

Common Name

Scientific Name

Species Information

- habitat
- calls/songs
- field marks
- behaviors

Text courtesy CIO All About Birds

How Field Guides Are Organized

In most field guides, species are arranged according to an established **taxonomic order**—that is, species that are closely related are found together. For example, all species in the hawk family (Accipitridae) are found in one section of the guide, all species of the woodpecker family (Picidae) are in another, and so on (see the “Classifying Birds” article for more information).

Experienced birders can quickly find a species in a field guide by knowing which **taxonomic group** it belongs to and where that group is found in the field guide. As a beginner, you will probably want to use the index in the back of the guide.

How to Use a Field Guide

Most field guides include both common and scientific names in the index. Some list the common names by their “first” names, some by their “last” names, and some by both! For example, the American Robin might be under “A” for American or “R” for robin, or both. Scientific names are listed in the index by genus first, then species.

| | |
|----------------------------------|------------|
| <i>Roadrunner, Greater</i> | 230 |
| Robin, American | 380 |
| <i>Rosy-finch, Black</i> | 495 |

| | |
|------------------------------------|------------|
| <i>American Redstart</i> | 414 |
| American Robin | 380 |
| <i>American Tree Sparrow</i> | 448 |

Dimorphism

Some kinds of birds have different **plumages** (feather colors and patterns) depending on their age, their gender, the time of year, or even the geographic location. Most field guides include multiple pictures for these species.

For example, Northern Cardinals are **sexually dimorphic** (males look different from females), so field guides always have two images to show the plumage of both male and female. As another example, male and female European Starlings look the same, but have a spotted plumage in the winter months and are mostly black during the breeding season. In this case, field guides have two images to show breeding and nonbreeding plumage.

Find the American Goldfinch in your field guide. You’ll see several different pictures, because this species shows several types of plumage variation:

1. Sexual dimorphism (difference between males and females)
2. Seasonal variation (non-breeding vs. breeding—also called “winter” and “summer”)
3. Age variation (juvenile vs. adult)



Harold B. Key

We can tell that this American Goldfinch is an adult male in the breeding season.

How to Use a Field Guide

Not all bird species have different plumages. For example, look up the American Crow, a species that shows no variation in plumage at all. This makes it easier to learn what a crow looks like, but it also means that, when you spot a crow, you have little way of knowing whether it is a juvenile or an adult, or whether it is male or female.

Now that you know what's in a field guide, try looking up some birds that interest you to learn more about them!



Joy and Kevin McCowan

We can't tell if this American Crow is a male or female, young or old, or if it is in the breeding season, since crows always look so similar to each other.

Suggested Field Guides

Try finding used field guides online or in bookstores. New guides can be purchased at bookstores, online, or at bird-feed supply stores.

Birds of North America. Kaufman Focus Guides. Houghton Mifflin Company.

Birds of North America. Golden Field Guides from St. Martin's Press.

National Geographic Field Guide to the Birds of North America. National Geographic. National Geographic Society.

Peterson Field Guides of (Western Birds or Birds of Eastern and Central North America). Houghton Mifflin Company.

Stokes Field Guide to Birds (Western Region or Eastern Region). Little, Brown and Company.