

Identifying birds



A kingfisher

1. The great bird detective game

1.1. Introduction

You are going to look at many different ways to gather clues to help you identify birds and solve some bird mysteries.

You will need to be a good detective, use your eyes and ears, ask questions, take notes, find clues and solve mysteries.

1.2. Your patch

A good detective must get to know his or her patch. Who's about and what's going on.

You will need to get to know the birds on your patch. Which birds appear to be always around, which ones are just visiting, passing through or plain lost.

You will soon learn to identify many different birds. You may already be able to identify the local robin without having to look it up in a book or ask somebody to help you.

But could you definitely tell the difference between a crow, rook, jackdaw and a raven? Not so easy maybe.

1.3. Starting your training

Before you can start to solve the big mysteries you need to receive some basic detective training and clear up some of the simpler cases.

1.4. Make a list of some local birds you could recognise

Make a quick list of some of the local birds you think you would recognise on your patch.

Your teacher might show you some pictures of some other birds to add to your list. In fact your teacher may give you a “Wanted” poster for you to carry around in case you spot the bird.

Birds you already know

1.5. Using a field guide

There will always be a bird book, called a field guide, with mug shots to help witnesses identify different birds.

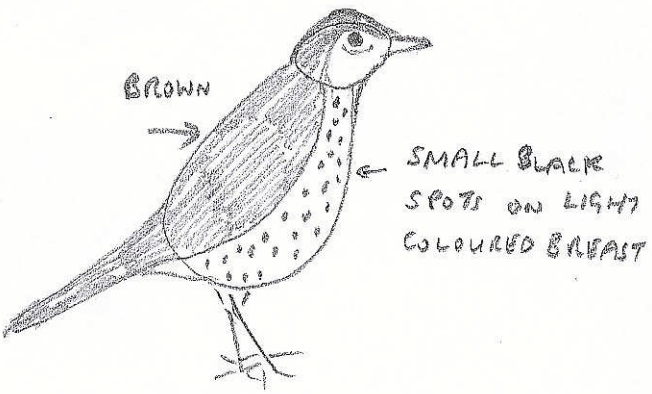
When you start to look at birds in the field, remember that books are only a guide and that light can play tricks on your eyes and make a bird look very different.

1.6. Using your list to size birds

You will use your list for future reference. For example you may see a bird you don't recognise. But you might be able to say it definitely wasn't as big as a swan or a crow. You may think it was about robin size. It doesn't matter if you are wrong, it would be your first clue. You might be able to eliminate larger birds from your enquiries.

1.7. Recording what you see

You will need to gather evidence for your records. To help make sure that you remember to capture as much information as possible, here is a form for you to fill in. Take a quick look at this completed form. There is a blank form at the end of this document.

Bird identity report			
Your name	Andrew		
Date	17 May 2005	Time	3 p.m.
Place	Dorchester on Thames – my back garden		
Weather	Bright sunny day, little wind, few clouds in the sky, hot		
What was the bird doing	It had a snail in its beak and it was banging the snail on the pavement slabs. It then ate the fleshy part of the snail and flew away.		
What was your first impression	I heard a tapping sound which helped me locate the bird. As it had a spotted breast I thought it was some sort of thrush.		
Size and general shape	Blackbird size and shape		
Colours and noticeable marks	White breast with brown spots		
Beak shape	Blackbird-like		
Legs and feet			
Tail			
Wing shape			
Song	No sounds heard other than tapping		
Anything else	Bird was by itself		
Shorthand sketch			
Conclusion	Song thrush		

Here are some notes to give you ideas on how to fill the form in and why you might collect the information.

Heading	Notes
Your name	Always write your name on the form in case you are called as a witness.
Date and time	Enter the date and time you saw your bird. For example, you are unlikely to see a swallow on Christmas Day.
Place	Where exactly did you see the bird? You are unlikely to see a woodpecker in a river unless it has had an accident.
Weather	Describe the weather conditions as best you can. You might use words such as sunny, very windy, hot, cold, and wet. Wind conditions can be important in case a bird has been blown off course.
What was the bird doing	The bird's behaviour might be a vital clue as to its identity. It might be – sitting in a tree, or swimming in the river, or eating at the bird table. All vital clues.
What was your first impression	It doesn't matter if you are wrong but write down your first thoughts about the bird. For example – "I heard tapping and thought it might be a woodpecker." "I saw some red and thought it might be a robin."
Size and general shape	How big was it compared to a bird you know? For example – blackbird-size.
Colours and noticeable markings	Any colours or markings that you noticed and where. For example – "It had a red breast." "It had a yellow belly with a big black stripe from top to bottom."
Beak shape	Describe the beak if you can. Was it short, long, curved?

Heading	Notes
Legs and feet	Anything you noticed about the legs or feet, for example, "It had webbed feet."
Tail	Anything about the tail shape, colour, movement, for example, wagged tail up and down.
Wing shape, how it flies	This might be useful if you observe the bird in flight, e.g. soaring high in the sky
Song	This is hard to do but can you describe any noises it made?
Anything else	Was it with any other birds? If feeding, what was it eating?
Shorthand sketch	Later on you will learn how to draw a simple sketch of the bird. Remember birds don't usually stay still for long, so you will have to sketch quickly.
Conclusion	If you can, state the name of the bird

1.8. When it starts to get tough

Some birds are reluctant to show themselves and will only sing or call from dense foliage.

You may catch sight of others flying high in the sky or away from you or just get a glance as they quickly fly by.

The sun may be in your eyes or the light may be bad hindering you from noticing features.

Just when you are ready to fill in your identity form the bird flies away. You can only fill in what you manage to see. Don't be surprised if you have gaps. You may see the bird again later on.

Finally male birds can look different to females. Juveniles can look different and you may need to hang around until their parents turn up before you can identify the species. Some birds have different breeding and non-breeding plumages and therefore look different at different times of the year. Then there is moulting, the changing of feathers, disease, injuries and the really unusual such as albinos.

1.9. Flying clues

If the bird is in flight you will need to note down information about how it flies, how high up it is, if it was alone or in a flock.

Consider some of these descriptions:

- Strong and direct
- Little bursts
- Undulating
- Soars, hovers, glides

1.10. Ground movement clues

- Walks, runs, hops
- Swims, dives, wades
- Just stands there

1.11. Body movements

- Wags tail
- Bobs head
- Scratches head
- Cleans feathers

2. Would you expect to see this bird here

Its time to solve a few problems.

2.1. Habitat

Habitat is the area where a bird lives. It includes all the living things in the area surrounding its territory.

Different species of birds prefer different habitats. For example swans prefer water, woodpeckers woodland.

Consider the following habitats and birds. Indicate which birds you would expect to find there:

Robin, blackbird, mallard, skylark, great spotted woodpecker, treecreeper, red kite, puffin, penguin, grey heron, kingfisher, vulture

Habitat	Birds
Garden	
Farmland	
Woodland	
Coastal areas, sea	
Freshwater lakes, rivers and gravel pits	
Zoo	

You are walking in a wood with no rivers or lakes nearby. Would you expect to see the following and if so why?

Bird	Expect to see and why
Treecreeper	
Kingfisher	
Parrot	
Great tit	
Mallard	

2.2. Time of year

There are many different species of birds that just visit the UK at certain times of the year. There are some that get diverted here by accident, perhaps an error in navigation or strong winds blow them off course.

Which of the birds listed below might you see on Christmas Day and which on a warm summer day in the South of England?

Bird	Christmas or summer
Swift	
Swallow	
Fieldfare	
Redwing	
Turkey	

2.3. Weather

A spell of windy weather can blow birds off course and result in rarities and surprises turning up in your area.

Which of the following might be a surprise in your area?

Bird	Surprise
Great tit	
Waxwing	
Kestrel	
Vulture	
Red kite	

3. Field craft

You now need to learn how to carry out a patrol and mix with the birds so that you do not scare them away.

3.1. How to move

If you go out on patrol and run around shouting you will scare all the birds away, miss the action and get tired out.

So you need to be smart in the way you approach the patrol of your local patch.

Skill	Practice
Keeping quiet	Perhaps the hardest of the skills to be learnt. Try being quiet for one minute. Try whispering for two minutes.
Let the birds come to you	Find a place to sit down. Whispering is allowed. Count how many birds you see.
You walk and find the birds	Plan a route around your local patch and walk the beat. Remember to stop to listen and observe. How many different birds did you see? Make a list.
Using your ears	Listen for different bird sounds. Locate the direction the sound is coming from and see if you can spot the bird. You may have to wait for the bird to appear, or it may be stubborn and stay hidden.
Using your eyes	Try to get used to detecting movement and then focusing on a spot. Look up to see if there are any flying birds. Try to have the sun behind you. Do

Skill	Practice
	not look into the sun.
Giving directions to a friend	Use the clock system to give directions to a friend, e.g. bullfinch at 2 o'clock in the bushes, and point.

4. Bird shorthand sketches

When you see a new bird you will need to record information as quickly as possible, particularly unusual or noticeable features. Writing long notes can take time and the bird will probably have flown away.

You can develop your own shorthand sketches to jot down information quickly.


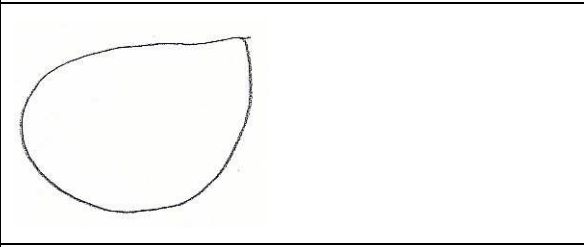


Your hand may not always seem to follow what your eyes can see. Your sketches may not be perfect likenesses. That doesn't matter; the sketches will mean something to you and help you remember. As long as you can record something useful they may help you identify a bird.

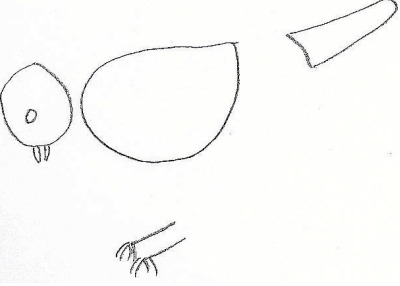
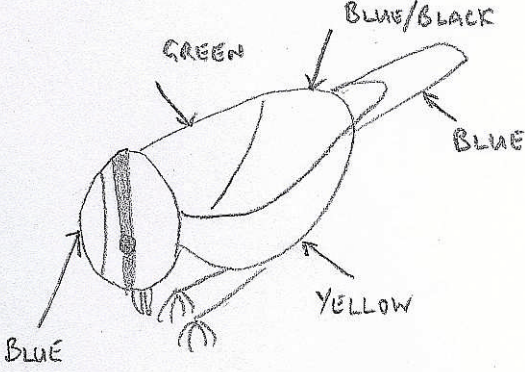
You can probably draw circles and egg shapes and lines and curves. You can probably doodle and shade. You could build a code such as Br = brown, Bk = black, Wh = white.

What you will do is draw a few shapes and put them together to give a feel of how your subject bird looks. You can then use labels with arrows to point at interesting bits. You will build up your own bird picture shorthand to help you record what you see.

Remember you are gathering information not producing accurate drawings. This will come with lots of practice.

Try the following:

Head with eye and beak	
Body	
Tail	
Legs	

<p>Putting it together</p>	
<p>Mark noticeable features</p>	

You may only need to draw part of the bird to highlight unusual features.

For example the shape of a bird of prey's tail or its wing markings may be the vital clue that gives away its identity.

5. Working with sound

5.1. Identifying territory

To enable a bird to keep other birds of its species away from its territory it will need to let them know who the owner and boss is.

The really experienced detective will be able to recognise a bird from its sound alone, but this takes lots of dedicated practice.

As a “rookie”, (an American word used for inexperienced police men and women) you will find bird sounds challenging. You may learn a few bird songs and calls. You may be able to hear sounds you have never heard before.

Singing is not the only way to make sound; a woodpecker will use its bill to drum against trees.

To get a better understanding of how sounds work you can carry out an exercise to communicate in a similar way to woodpeckers.

Try the following exercises which will require that you pretend you are a male woodpecker.

Purpose	Exercise
You will want to signal to other birds that this is your territory. Males keep away. Females come and visit.	Imagine you are a great spotted woodpecker. Using your fingers to drum on your desk produce a beat that lasts for no more than a few seconds. This will be used to inform other woodpeckers of your territory. Repeat it several times until you can repeat it with ease. This will be your theme tune.
You want other woodpeckers to recognise our call.	Arrange for 4 different woodpeckers to demonstrate their territory call. Then arrange the others so that they cannot see the 4 woodpeckers. Ask each woodpecker to drum their call. See if the others can recognise from the sound which woodpecker is which.
Safety rules.	Due to the risk of head injuries you should not try this exercise by banging your head or nose against some wood or other hard objects.

6. Working with the bird identity reports

You will need to get some practice in filling in the forms and identifying the birds you have seen.

Remember that you may not be able to complete every piece of information as the bird may fly away.

6.1. Complete a report for a bird you know well

To start with, fill in a report for a bird you know well, say a robin or blackbird. Remember to complete a quick shorthand sketch and identify key features.

6.2. Complete a report from a picture

Try completing a report from a picture. Can you identify the bird?



6.3. Complete a report from information supplied by somebody else

An angry Mr John Smith comes into your bird hide demanding to see a detective. He is complaining that some birds have made a mess on his clean washing.

You need to complete a report from the information he supplies. This is what he tells you.

“I was washing up the dishes in the kitchen last Thursday. I had just finished watching the 1 o'clock BBC news. The sun was shining and there was a bit of a breeze, a good day for drying the washing. Two small birds flew over the washing and splat, my sheets were messed up. I had to wash them again.”

"I managed to get a good look at one of the birds. It was about robin-size, but with a yellow breast and a vertical black stripe. It had a white patch on its face with a black cap above the eye and black on the back of its head. I thought it had a grey tail. It had a small beak. It flew into a tree and I could hear a noise that reminded me of a squeaky bicycle pump."

Can you complete the report and identify the bird that splattered?

6.4. Designing a bird

You will need to learn how to go undercover and mix with the birds. You are probably thinking that you are a bit big and that the other birds will get suspicious if you cannot fly and soon work out that you are a phoney.

Nevertheless your boss thinks that you might be able to pass yourself off as a giant grey heron recently flown in from Canada on a strong westerly wind. She thinks you could carry out some surveillance work for half an hour, by standing in the local stream pretending you are asleep or fishing.

Design a costume that you could climb into to pass yourself off as a giant grey heron.

Pay particular attention to the shape of your bill, feet, neck and tuft of hair.

Practice a few heron type movements:

- Stand perfectly still for say a minute
- Comb your hair using your foot – you may need to sit down for this one
- Clean your beak (maybe chin) on your shoulder or desk

When you have completed this, see if you can persuade your boss that it would be easier to build a bird hide or find some other way of camouflaging yourself.

Bird identity report			
Your name			
Date		Time	
Place			
Weather			
What was the bird doing			
What was your first impression			
Size and general shape			
Colours and noticeable marks			
Beak shape			
Legs and feet			
Tail			
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Song			
Anything else			
Shorthand sketch			
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