

Why is a bluebird blue?

Birds are among the most colorful creatures on earth.

Illustrations by Julie Martinez. Text by Gustave Axelson.

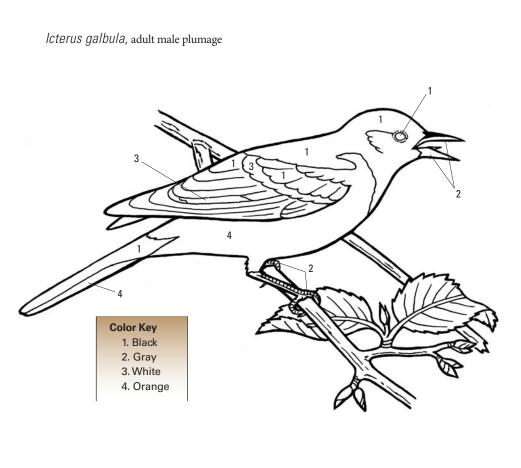
ou might have some very good reasons for the way you dress. If you're going outside to play, you might wear old, scruffy blue jeans. But if you're going out for a fancy dinner, you might dress up. You might choose the brightest and cleanest clothes in your closet, so that when people see you at the restaurant, they might say something like "You look good!"

Birds have a good reason to dress up and look good—male birds want to attract females to mate. For a male bird, dressing up means growing a brightly colored set of feathers, or *plumage*.

Ornithologists, or scientists who study birds, are trying to find out more about why some birds have bright colors. For example, to find out why bluebirds are so blue, a scientist at Appalachian State University in North Carolina closely watched bluebirds at more than 200 bluebird houses. She discovered that the bluer a male bluebird is, the more success it has attracting a mate, finding a place to nest, and producing a family of healthy young bluebirds.

As you flip through the following pages, you'll see coloring activities for six colorful bird species. As you color, ask yourself, "Why am I using this crayon for this bird?" You'll find some cool color facts that might help answer your questions.

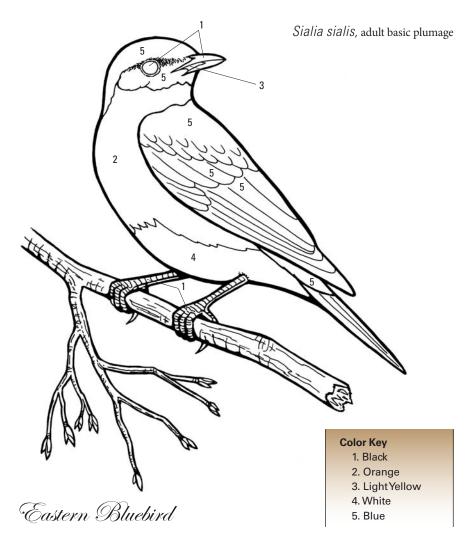




Baltimore Oriole

Cool Color Facts

- This American songbird was named for its plumage, not where it lived. An 18th-century naturalist thought the bird's black and orange feathers looked like the family coat of arms of Lord Baltimore, who owned the colony of Maryland before it became a state. Hence the naturalist chose the name *Baltimore oriole*.
- The brighter a male Baltimore oriole, the more threatening it looks to other male orioles. Scientists have done experiments placing stuffed Baltimore oriole look-alikes in the territory of nesting male orioles. The males attacked the brightly colored fake orioles more often than they attacked dull-colored fake orioles, which resembled immature males or females.



Cool Color Facts

- © Bluebirds aren't really blue. They are gray. A bluebird's feathers *refract*, or bend, light, so they look blue to us. When light enters a bluebird's feather, it bounces off tiny air pockets and cells in such a way that only the blue wavelengths return to our eyes.
- © Because a bluebird's color depends on bouncing light, it can look different from a distance. From far away, a bluebird might look more like a plain grayish-brownish bird. But as you get closer, you'll see that it looks brilliant blue.

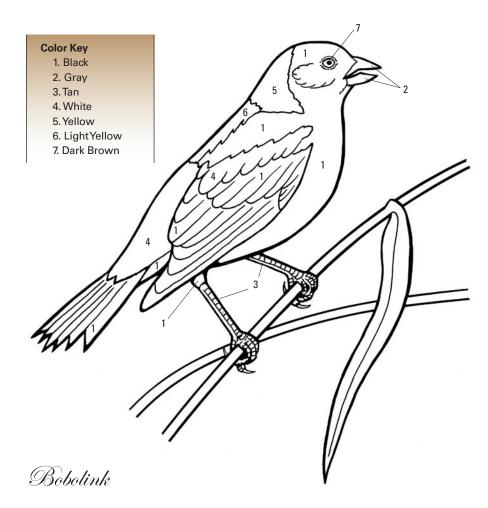
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Belted Kingfisher

Cool Color Facts

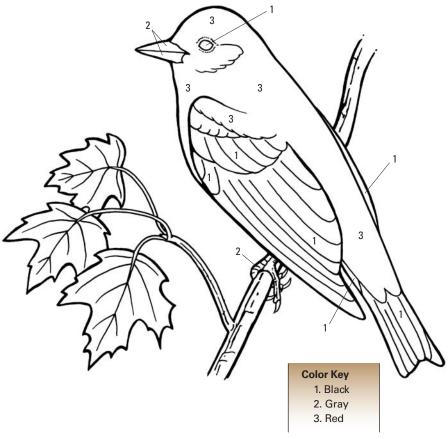
- Female kingfishers look similar to males, but they have an orange band on their breast, making them one of the few female birds that look more colorful than males of their species.
- © Baseball players and kingfishers both have spots near their eyes, for opposite reasons. Ball players smear black on their cheeks to stop the sun from reflecting into their eyes and blinding them from a fly ball. Bird researcher Lawrence Kilham theorized that the white spot between a kingfisher's eye and bill reflects sun *into* its eyes, providing more light to help the kingfisher be more accurate in dive-bombing for fish and frogs in streams.



Cool Color Facts

- With its black-and-white plumage, the bobolink is sometimes called the "skunk black-bird." Its common name—bobolink—is onomatopoetic and sounds like its bubbly song.
- Adult male bobolinks grow two complete sets of feathers every year. During the breeding season, the male bobolink is black and white with a yellow *nape*, the back of its neck and head. During the rest of the year, its plumage is black and brown.

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Scarlet Tanager

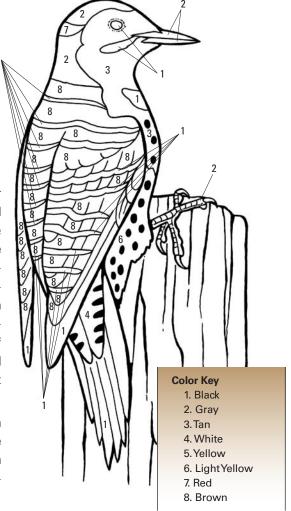
Cool Color Facts

- The scarlet tanager's Latin name doesn't match its common name. *Olivacea* means "the olive-sided one." The first scientifically described and named scarlet tanager was an immature bird with olive-colored feathers (not a male in red breeding plumage).
- Scarlet tanagers aren't very good singers. Some people say they sound like a robin with a sore throat. But male tanagers attract mates in thick, green, leafy forests with bright red breeding plumage that stands out like the flashing lights of a police car.

Northern Flicker
(Yellow-Shafted)

Cool Color Facts

- Two varieties of northern flicker live in the United States. Red-shafted flickers live in the western part of the country, but in Minnesota we have the yellow-shafted flicker. Our northern flickers have yellow feathers under their wings and tails, which flash yellow when they fly. Our male northern flickers also have a red patch of color at the back of the head, called a *nuchal patch*. Western flickers don't have a nuchal patch.



A Note to Teachers

Find links to teachers guides for this and other stories online a www.mndnr.gov/young_naturalists.

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