

By BLANE KLEMEK

Illustrations by RON FINGER

# Let's Go Birding!



**IDENTIFY THIS BIRD!**

Hey! Five of these blanks appear in this story. Try to fill them in with the name of the bird in the drawing. Look closely at the bird, then use a field guide (bird book) to find a match. Correct answers appear on page 46.

**B**irds are beautiful. They capture our imagination as we watch them fly. We are thrilled when we see them visiting our bird feeders. And it is a joy to hear their songs and calls. When we watch birds, we are participating in an activity called *birding*.

Birding is a lot like being a detective. Birders (people who go birding) search for birds, sneak up on them, spy on them through their binoculars, and identify them. Birders even keep lists of the birds they see. Lucky we are that birds are all around us. Minnesota has 428 species to see and enjoy. Let's go birding!

# Identifying Birds: See the Details

**W**hat kind of bird is that? That's the favorite question of every birder. It is one of the many questions a bird book, called a field guide, will help you answer. Here are some features to look for and questions to ask when trying to identify a bird.

**Shape.** What shape is the bird? Are its legs long or short? Is its beak short and blunt, long and slender, hooked or curved? Is its tail long or short? When it flies, do its wings look long or short, narrow or broad?



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**Color and Pattern.** What color are its feathers? What patterns do the colors make? Feather colors and patterns are often the most noticeable features for recognizing birds. You can recognize a mallard drake (male), for example, by its green-looking head and white neckband. The male common yellowthroat has a yellow breast and a black band, like a mask, across its eyes.



IDENTIFY THIS BIRD!

**Size.** One good way to gauge the size of an unidentified bird is to compare it to the size of a common bird you know. Is the bird bigger or smaller than a robin? Bigger or smaller than a crow?

**Field marks.** Does the bird have unusual markings? Pay close attention to field marks such as head color, wing bars (linelike markings on wings), shape or color of beak, leg color, and other markings that are noted in your field guide.

Small details can help you distinguish one species from a similar one. For example, downy woodpeckers and hairy woodpeckers look almost identical. How do you tell them apart? The guide tells you the hairy woodpecker is larger and its bill is about as long as its head is. The downy's bill is only about half as long as its head is.

**Behavior.** Take note of the bird's posture, behavior (what it's doing), sounds (songs and calls), and even the way it walks, swims, or flies.

**Habitat and Range.** Before you identify the bird you're watching, check the range map in the field guide. Are you in the right place at the right time to see this species? Read the habitat description. Is the habitat (such as a grassy field) right?



## Study Bird Behavior

Seeing and identifying birds is only a part of birding. Watching what they do and learning how and why they do it is fun too. For example, you may see how a blue jay cracks acorns. The jay positions an acorn between its feet, strikes at the hard shell with its beak, then tugs out the soft insides and eats them.

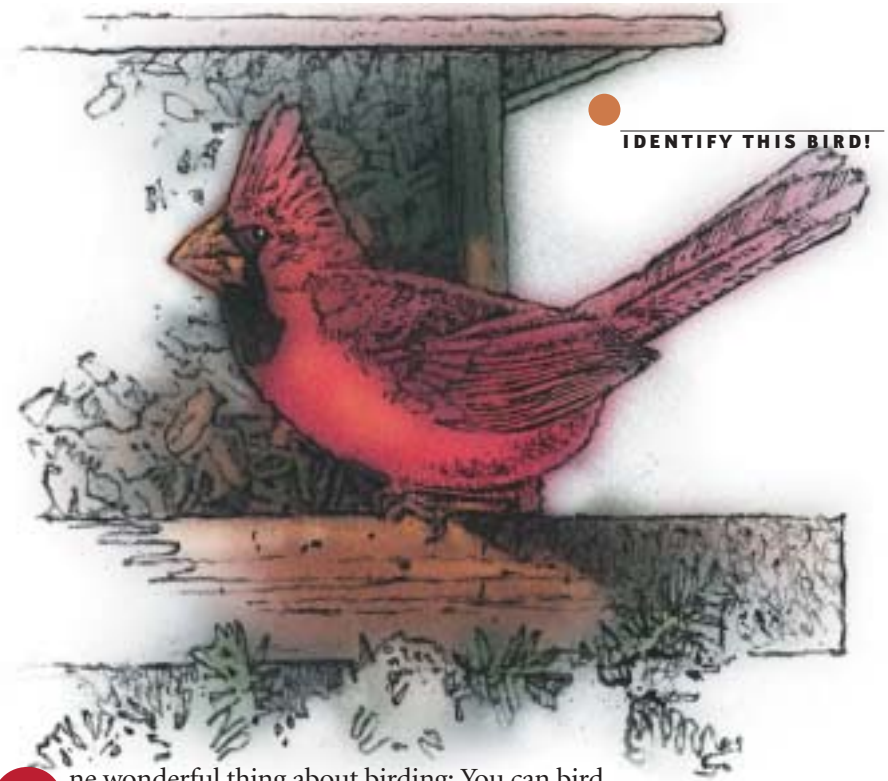
One of the best ways to observe birds is to set up bird feeders, birdhouses, and birdbaths in your yard. You can discover what foods they like the best. You might see birds feeding one another or grooming themselves. You might spot black-capped chickadees hiding sunflower seeds underneath tree bark to feed on later. Or you might watch white-breasted nuthatches eating upside down from a suet feeder.

Hang a hummingbird feeder for the summer and you can enjoy watching ruby-throated hummingbirds flying about and drinking nectar.

Watching a birdbath, you can see how birds drink and bathe. Birdhouses attract house wrens, tree swallows, and eastern bluebirds. It's fun to see birds raise their young.

Watch for American robins hopping across your lawn searching for worms, a downy woodpecker pecking on a tree, a chipping sparrow singing its song, or a mourning dove building its nest of sticks in a tree or bush. If a hawk should happen to fly overhead, you might see blackbirds, crows, or eastern kingbirds chase it away.

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IDENTIFY THIS BIRD!

One wonderful thing about birding: You can bird almost anywhere you go and at any time of the day, even at night!

Look high and low. Some birds hang out in trees. Others spend most of their time on the ground hunting for seeds, nuts, and worms.

Explore new places because you'll find different bird species live in different habitats, such as forests, lakes, or grassy fields. Fabulous birding adventures await you in any of Minnesota's 66 state parks and six recreation areas. Ask the park staff where to go birding.

More than 1,300 wildlife management areas around the state make great places to bird. Other public lands include state and national forests and wildlife refuges.

Zoos offer the chance to see native birds and exotic species. County and city parks, hiking trails, rivers, and lakes are all places where you will find birds.

## Where to Look

# Get a Field Guide

If you bird in Minnesota, choose a field guide to birds of Minnesota or the eastern United States, such as the ones shown here.

Pictures in field guides show important features of each species to help you identify birds you see. Guides usually show each species doing what you are most likely to see it doing, such as flying, swimming, wading, or perching.

The male and female of some species look different. When they do, a field guide usually shows the male (marked by the symbol ♂) because its coloring is more distinctive. In many cases it also shows the female (marked by the symbol ♀).

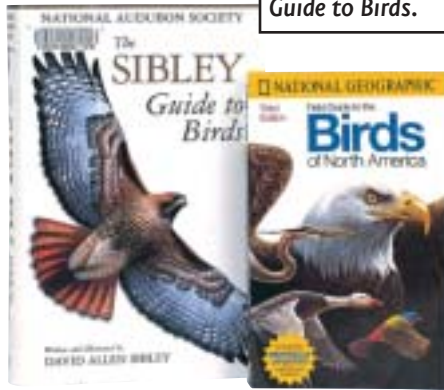
Field guides sometimes show birds in their fall plumage if different from their spring plumage. They may include juvenile (young) birds if they look different from adults. For example, a bald eagle doesn't get its white head and white tail feathers until about age 4.

Field guides often give the measurements of the average body length (L) and wingspan (W) next to a bird's picture.

To help you identify a bird by its body shape, some guides have silhouettes of birds. You will often catch only glimpses of birds, so learning their basic shapes will help you identify them.

Most field guides describe birds' abundance (that is, whether a species is rare, uncommon, common, or abundant). Guides also describe their preferred habitat, such as forests or open fields. Range maps show where a bird lives in summer and in winter.

Some field guides include types of nests, number of eggs, and other interesting facts.



Here (right-hand page) is a sample page from *The Sibley Guide to Birds*.



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## Birding Gear

Most birders use **binoculars**. Binoculars magnify objects so they appear closer to you. Many good models are available, with prices starting at around \$25.

One of the main things to consider when buying binoculars is the magnification (or power). A pair of numbers printed on binoculars such as "7x35" indicates this. The first number means the power of the binoculars. In this case, a bird seen through the binoculars will appear seven times closer to you than it would with just your eyes.

The second number is the diameter in millimeters of the objective lens (the big lens in front). The bigger the number, the more light that will enter your binoculars.

Even though you may think more powerful binoculars would be best for birding, high-magnification binoculars can be heavy and hard to hold steady. For this reason most birders use lighter weight 7- or 8-power binoculars.



Even your **mouth** and the **sounds** you can make are birding gear. Many birds will come closer to you if you make certain noises. Birders often make a *pishing* sound to accomplish this (go, *pssshhh*, *pssshhh*, *pssshhh!*). This noise makes some birds curious enough to search for the source of the sound. Imitating other calls, squeaks, and songs of birds sometimes works too.

Many birders also carry **species checklists** to keep track of the birds they've observed. Checklists are organized lists of bird names that you mark when you observe a bird in the wild. It's like keeping score! You can compare your lists with those of your friends to see who sees the most birds. Some field guides have checklists, and many state parks have checklists available for park visitors. Remember to bring a few pencils. 📌

### BIRDING BY EAR

**T**he best bird detectives depend on their ears as well as their eyes to locate birds. Most often you can hear a bird before you see it. In fact, you might never spot the bird you hear singing from a bush or tree. Libraries and bookstores carry audiotapes and CDs to help you learn to recognize bird songs. Here are two examples: *The Cornell Lab of Ornithology's Guide to Birds of North America*. *Peterson Field Guides: Bird Songs: Eastern/Central*.

### ANSWERS TO "IDENTIFY THIS BIRD!"

Page 38: American crow  
Page 40: Baltimore oriole  
Page 41: downy woodpecker  
Page 42: white-breasted nuthatch  
Page 43: northern cardinal

A **vest** with pockets, a backpack, or a fanny pack is handy to carry items. Pack a water bottle and a lunch when you bird away from home. Depending on the season and the weather, you might need insect repellent and a baseball cap and sunglasses to keep the sun out of your eyes. Use sunscreen.

### BIRDERS LEARN TOGETHER

**B**irders like to share information about birds. After all, the more eyes and ears you have looking and listening, the more birds you're likely to spy. Your discoveries can add to the science and conservation of birds. Here are three groups you might want to join.

Minnesota Ornithologists' Union has a youth mentorship program. MOU members volunteer to visit schools to teach kids about birding. Call 651-484-8832. To learn more or join the club, visit [www.mou.mn.org](http://www.mou.mn.org).

National Audubon Society has chapters (clubs) all over the country. Local Audubon groups usually meet once a month to talk about birds. The members also arrange day trips for novices and experts to go birding together. Visit [www.audubon.org](http://www.audubon.org).

Project FeederWatch invites you to count winter birds in your back yard and report your results to scientists at Cornell Lab of Ornithology. (*Ornithology* is the study of birds.) To learn more, visit [www.birds.cornell.edu/pfw](http://www.birds.cornell.edu/pfw).

### Calling All Teachers

Online teaching materials are available for this *Young Naturalists* article. Visit [www.dnr.state.mn.us/magazine](http://www.dnr.state.mn.us/magazine). Click on *study guide*. To find other articles and study guides, select "Index of past *Young Naturalists* articles." Or contact Meredith McNab: [meredith.mcnab@dnr.state.mn.us](mailto:meredith.mcnab@dnr.state.mn.us) or 651-215-0615.