



EPISODE 3

Anatomy of a Bird Field Guide

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www.birdingtools.com/3-anatomy-of-a-field-guide

INTRO: Hey there, I'm Christa, your host for the Birding Tools podcast.

Each week, I'll delve into the wonderful world of birds for birding beginners and those wanting to get the low-down on what goes into birdwatching and identifying birds.

Let's get started.

CHRISTA ROLLS: This week on the Birding Tools Podcast I'll be getting into the anatomy of your bird field guide, including what makes a great field guide and how it's organized.

As I mentioned in episode 1, getting a bird field guide is one of the most important pieces of equipment you need to get started with birdwatching. Field guides tell you all kinds of information, including what birds might be found in your particular area and what to look for when you're trying to identify a bird.

Before we get started, I wanted to let you know that I've actually created a field guide map on our website with guide recommendations for countries and regions around the world. We're continuously adding to it, but if you're trying to figure out the best guide for you based on your region or even somewhere you're planning on traveling to, this map will be really useful for you. If there's a guide you use that has been especially helpful and you don't see it on our list,

feel free to reach out to me and I'll see about adding it on there. You can find the map on our website at birdingtools.com/guide-map.

So first, what IS a field guide? This little book is jam-packed with tons of useful information about birds. It describes and shows pictures or drawings of the birds, and it explains the five keys to bird identification for each bird listed in the book. And I'll get into that more in a bit.

Until the 1960s, the most popular bird field guide in North America was Roger Tory Peterson's *The Birds of Eastern North America*. Peterson paved the way for bird guides, and now, there are a ton of different guides on the market, not only for North America, but even specific localities or ones that are state- and province-specific. There are also specific guides available for certain groups of birds, such as hawks, gulls, shorebirds, and others. At some point, you might even have many different kinds of guides! But for you new birders out there, don't fret – you only need one comprehensive guide when you're first starting out and choosing your first field guide.

For those listening who already have a field guide, let me know which guide you have and why you're happy with it. Personally, I have the Sibley guide to *Birds of Western North America* and I really love it for a multitude of reasons I'll be getting into more here.

So, when you're selecting your first field guide, keep these two things in mind:

First, make sure the field guide is comprehensive for your area. Guides are often country or region specific, so select a guide that covers that larger area. This will be incredibly useful if you ever plan to travel to another state or province, which may have different birds than are found in your immediate locale. As I mentioned, I have the Sibley guide to *Birds of Western North America*. Now, I'm in California, but I wouldn't seek out just a guide for birds in California as my first guide. Instead, I want something that will show me birds found in neighboring states or that might not always be found here but could potentially make their way over.

Next, consider starting with a guide that has paintings or drawings of birds rather than photos. Drawings allow the artist to include all the distinguishing features of a bird, otherwise called field marks, that help to ID a bird in each illustration. Many times, photos don't show every one of these markings because of lighting, or the angle at which the bird is standing, or because of simple variations in plumage from bird to bird.

Once you decide to get a family-specific guide, such as one just for hawks or just for waterfowl, photographic guides can be really useful to study a bird's overall shape and behavior, such as flight or perching patterns. By the way, the Crossley Guides are incredibly useful photographic guides for this reason and I really recommend them once you start to hone in on your bird identification further.

Now, once you've received your first field guide in the mail, do not, I REPEAT DO NOT, immediately run off to look for birds. As exciting as it will be to have your new guide, trying to use your guide before you even know how it's organized will lead you down a path of serious frustration, and we don't want to do something that will put a damper on your birding experience.

Instead, grab a good cup of tea or coffee or kombucha, whatever your fancy, and sit down with your field guide to get comfortable with its setup.

Read through the guide's introduction first. There's a ton of useful information in there about how the book is organized, how to identify birds, and what the terminology and colors mean on the range maps for each bird, for example. Importantly, the introduction should also have a section on the anatomy of a bird.

The bird's anatomy will be the names for the parts of a bird, including the technical name for different feathers. This will be important to look over, as the description of each bird in your guide will use these different terms to describe the bird's features.

I like to use the American Robin as an example, since it's one of the most common birds found throughout North America. When you see the description

of a robin, your guide will say they have “rufous underwing coverts.” What the heck does that mean?? Well, the introduction of your guide will tell you about color terminology and what an underwing covert is.

Honestly, I didn’t take my own advice when I got my first field guide. I was so excited that I thought, yes! Now I can go out and watch birds! I saw a bird, flipped to the middle of the guide, shuffled the pages right a bit and didn’t see anything similar. I shuffled the pages LEFT a bit and still didn’t see anything similar. Then, I looked in the index in the back of the book but realized I had no idea what the official common name of the bird was. And well, I’m a patient person, so I didn’t throw my guide across the room in frustration. But I’ve seen it happen!

This ISN’T meant to be a frustrating process. Birding is just like learning any new skill. My husband knows how to juggle and he literally tossed me three things to try and juggle with and I failed miserably. There’s technique, there’s practice, and birding is no different.

Field guides, just like dictionaries, are ordered according to a very precise system. If you were looking up the word apple in the dictionary, knowing that dictionaries are ordered alphabetically, you’d start with the first part of the book, wouldn’t you.

Field guides are arranged taxonomically, or in phylogenetic order. This is the way that all living things are classified based on their evolutionary history. So, birds that have similar physical appearances occur very close together in a field guide. Based on this, you’ll always find, for example, ducks in the first quarter of your field guide and sparrows in the last quarter of your field guide. You’ll never find ducks and sparrows on pages next to each other in your field guide (and honestly, if you do, it might not be the right field guide for you).

Now, keep in mind that the individual birds you see in your guide are all different species. These species form groups called genera, which are then formed into a larger group called a family. The different species within one family are all more similar to each other than they are to species in other bird

families. This will be especially important as you learn the overall size and shape of birds to help with identification, as the shape of birds in the duck family are very distinctly duck-like and birds in the sparrow family are shaped very sparrow-like.

Spend some time looking at the overall organization of these families. Now listen up here, if you're multi-tasking then come back to me - the first half of your field guide (approximately) will be non-passerine birds, or birds not considered perching birds. In that first half, the first quarter has families of water birds and the second quarter has families of large land birds.

Woodpeckers are often the delineator between the first two halves of the guide, as they are not passerines, and they lead into the flycatcher section, which are passerines. Use tags or sticky notes to mark these critical locations in your guide, especially this "half-way mark" to tell you that water birds and raptors are to the left of that mark, and finches, sparrows, thrushes and all other perching birds are to the right of that mark.

Next, use those sticky notes to look for and mark common species you already know and see often in your backyard or local park or nature trail. You can then use these birds you feel you can identify fairly well as a guide for learning the characteristics of other species in the same family.

What's in a field guide

Ok, so what is all that information you see listed under each bird species? Well, that is all the identifying information you need to identify a bird. Those different characteristics are called the five keys to bird ID, and include size and shape, color and pattern, behavior (such as flying behavior or perching behavior), habitat (including what kinds of places you're likely to see that bird), and sounds the bird makes.

We have a freebie guide that details these five keys to bird identification that you can download from our website at birdingtools.com and we'll be linking to that guide in the show notes.

Together with this information, you'll see a distribution or range map, of where in your region or country that bird will be found at what time of year. That's where the range key in the front of your field guide will come in handy, so you can recognize when a bird is located somewhere only in the summer, or if it just migrates through, or if it's found there year-round.

There should also be a variety of images associated with that bird, including plumage variation between males and females, what a juvenile bird's plumage will look like, and examples of the bird both perching or standing and in flight. As I mentioned earlier, having a guide that has drawings of birds instead of photos will better be able to capture those field markings that sometimes distinguish between an adult and a juvenile, or molting plumages, or even a subspecies of a particular bird.

Apps versus physical books

So, I think I've pretty well convinced you that having a physical bird field guide in the form of a book is a good idea, but I'm often asked about phone apps as well.

First off, I think having a phone app is a great idea, because I know sometimes I'm out and about and I see a bird but don't necessarily always have my field guide on me (hello random field birds on the way to the grocery store!) – having an app during this time is super useful. My favorite, especially for birding beginners, is the free Merlin Bird ID App by the Cornell Lab of Ornithology. They've bird packs you can download for various parts of the world and they keep adding to it still. It's a super intuitive app and really well done.

However, when I'm actually out birding, I really like my physical field guide. For one, it's really nice to disconnect and get off the phone for a while, especially while birding. And for another, understanding the organization of a field guide better helps you understand about bird taxonomy and families of birds that show similar species. Yes, the app does show, for example, other birds you could confuse a bird with, so if you tell it you think you see a Northern Cardinal,

it will show you other red birds you might be confusing it with (such as a Summer Tanager). But there's so much value packed into a field guide and you can learn so much from it about bird biology and ecology alone that it's well worth bringing it along on your bird trip.

Having a small cross-body satchel can be convenient for pulling out your guide on the drop of a hat. I've also worked with plenty of people who swear by the birding vest, because let's face it, all those pockets are super useful for carrying literally anything you need in the field. But if you aren't a vest person, a satchel is a good alternative. I honestly often just carry my bird book in hand and put it on the ground or between my knees when I'm looking at a bird.

So, bottom line, get a field guide that works well for your region and really take time to get acquainted with how it's organized because it will serve you SO well if you take that time.

I've actually created a field guide map on our website with guide recommendations for countries and regions around the world. We're continuously adding to it, but if you're trying to figure out the best guide for you based on your region or even somewhere you're planning on traveling to, this map will be really useful for you. If there's a guide you use that has been especially helpful and you don't see it on our list, feel free to reach out to me and I'll see about adding it on there. You can find the map at our website birdingtools.com/guide-map.

And there you have it! Everything you need to select the right field guide for you, how your field guide is organized, and the birdy goodness you'll find within.

Thanks so much for tuning in to the Birding Tools Podcast and I hope this material was helpful to you.

To access information about the products and freebie I mentioned in the show, and the show notes, visit our website at birdingtools.com.

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Next week, I'll be delving into the ins and outs of birding ethics, including how to reduce impacts on birds, the habitats on which they depend, and our fellow birders. Whether you've just starting on your birdwatching endeavors or you've been birding for years, this is a really important topic we should all continue striving toward.

If you enjoyed this episode and want to get updates on the latest Birding Tools has to offer, subscribe to the podcast wherever you're listening now.

See you next time.