



## EPISODE 10

# Bird Identification Field Guide Apps

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**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:** First, I wanted to let you know that I have a free guide to learning all about bird identification. After going through this workbook, you'll know about the five keys to bird identification: size and shape, color and pattern, behavior, habitat and distribution, and sound. When you understand the main components of identifying a bird, you'll begin to feel more confident with your birding and identification skills. This process will not just help you with identifying birds by sight and sound easier, but it will also help deepen your connection with nature. To get this free guide, just visit the podcast show notes at [birdingtools.com](http://birdingtools.com).

A lot of people are switching over to birding phone apps (or applications) only, instead of bringing a physical guide book with them for a multitude of reasons, but there's still a lot of utility and usefulness in having a physical guide book with you. .

I'm also going to preface this discussion by starting out that I love my physical guide book – my Sibley for North America more specifically – so I bring it out nearly every time I go out birding. Yes, it's something else to carry but I just prefer referencing the guide than flipping through pages on my phone, as well as for other reasons I'll get into more here. The idea is that by presenting information about these apps, you'll have the information you need to test and try things out so that you can make an informed decision about what works best for you. Remember, that's what birding is about – finding the tools and processes that make you feel most fulfilled in your birding experience.

So, why would you want an app over a physical guide book?

1. People don't want their guide to get dirty or messed up. Guides aren't cheap and you sort of cherish them and don't want to take them out. Of course, I love a well-worn book. To me, they're meant to be used and loved, so this doesn't bother me. I'll also say that I've used my field guides in a number of elements and circumstances outside and they're still completely usable.
2. Apps, like the Merlin Bird ID app, make identification a snap by clicking through different identifying factors of a bird you're seeing and the output being a list of the possible birds based on the information you provided. That's pretty nifty from an identification standpoint. Apps also often show the photos of similar-looking bird species that you could confuse with the one you've looked up. So, for example, if you look up that you think you're seeing a northern Cardinal, a Summer or Scarlet Tanager will also pop up to show you the difference in what these birds comparatively look like.
3. Physical field guides can be heavy. There's no doubt that a book of nearly a thousand bird species for North America becomes pretty hefty. If you're into identifying waterfowl or raptors, the Crossly ID guide is the most comprehensive of its kind, but it's massive in size, and unfortunately, unless you're hanging out at a watch point or blind, you aren't likely to carry that around with you as much. This is also why I love the Sibley Guide of Western or Eastern North America, because the guide is A LOT more manageable to handle without sacrificing quality or details.

4. Apps are quick – a couple clicks on your phone and voila – you’ve got birds at your fingertips.

5. Apps have bird songs, and I’ll say this is my personal favorite reason for having a bird app on my phone. Just as I talked about last week on the podcast, learning bird songs is difficult and takes a lot of time and practice. Having a way to listen to the sounds a bird you’re seeing, or think you’re seeing, is really helpful.

Ok, so here’s why having a bird app isn’t necessarily the best thing over having a physical ID guide.

1. Unless you also plan to bring out a solar or portable battery charger, using your phone constantly and being on the app can drain your battery. Remember that whenever you’re out birding, it’s not a bad idea to have a phone or way to communicate with people just in case something goes wrong while you’re out there, and if you’re like me, you want your phone to be charged up so you can use your google maps to navigate you back home after your birding excursion.

2. Apps can take up a lot of space. Depending on the app, there will be certain packages that allow you to download only portions of parts of the country or continent because of space requirements, but make sure you account for this based on what else you already have on your phone and the specs of your phone to what it can process and handle.

3. While incredible apps like Merlin Bird ID are free, and some others allow limited capability on a free function, a lot of the really good and comprehensive ID guides are not free.

4. You have to actually be on your phone. Don’t get me wrong, I love my phone, and I love technology. It’s how I get to talk to you over this podcast today. But, especially this year, so much of our time and work is spent on the computer or phone, and I love to be able to disconnect from my phone every

once in a while and just pick up a book. There's something more rejuvenating to me about it, likely because I can't get distracted by other notifications or emails or whatnot coming in and just focus on birds for a bit.

5. A number of birders have mentioned that certain parts of the world don't yet have a comprehensive app system set up for the birds found there, and that getting a physical guide book is the way to go there. Merlin's packages are slowly spreading to other countries in the world, which is really incredible, but until they've done that, in some cases we'll have to stick with physical guides. The same rules apply to any other guide book that you get for when you travel – study how it's laid out, terms used, colors referenced on the range map and anything you'd similarly look for in your own field guide.

6. I find physical field guides a lot easier to reference in the field when comparing different birds. In apps, it's not easy to slide or search for a good comparison of all the birds in a particular family, for example, all on one page. Or see a good side-by-side along with a range map and description. Often, in apps, you need to swipe between different pages to get a good view of all these different details for even one bird, much less multiple birds.

My recommendation is to have both at your disposal. Have a guide that you love to reference and know how to use to your best advantage (and you can listen to episode number 3 about how your field guide is organized and tips for using your field guide) as well as an app that works well for you and gives you the features you desire.

I also want to point out that people use these two tools for different reasons. There are more experienced birders that know four letter banding codes for birds, for example (which is a shortened and standardized code used for birds in the banding and survey world to make it easier to record the bird's information, which I can get into in more detail another time). If you already KNOW the birds you're seeing and have a general idea of what it could be, you could easily look up the banding code or the word "Warbler" in your app to see which warbler species pop up. But that's assuming when you look at a bird you already know it's a warbler! Not everyone can do that. The Merlin Bird ID App

(which, I know I reference it a lot, but just get used to it because it really is a fantastic app, especially for beginner birders), is perfect for those who are just starting out because it's so intuitive in going through four of the five keys to bird identification to give you list of possibilities. But as far as learning how to identify birds, there is a lot of value in being able to use a physical ID guide to compare and contrast the birds you're seeing.

Now that we've looked at the pros and cons of having a bird ID app, let's get into some of the top apps out there and everything you need to know about them to make an informed decision about which might work the best for you. I'm going to be linking to information about each in the episode's show notes at [birdingtools.com](http://birdingtools.com) so if you'd like to go on and compare, feel free. I'll also be focusing on apps that incorporate North America but some I'm mentioning do cover other parts of the world and are really fantastic.

And before I start, I'd like to mention that I'm NOT including eBird on this list because it's not used for identifying birds, rather it's used to list birds and look up other lists. eBird's website also specifically recommends using the Merlin Bird ID App for determining the ID of a bird...

And with that, of course, I'll start with the Merlin Bird ID App since I've mentioned it a few times already.

This app was created by the Cornell Lab of Ornithology as an easy and streamlined way to walk through bird identification by asking about key factors in identifying birds.

The incredible thing is that it's free, and there aren't a million ads bogging down the app for it to be free, either. Other than the space it takes up on your phone, and the data that's required to use it out in the field, you're not paying for the app itself.

You'll need about 500 Megabytes of free space on your phone, and I'll say that it's the app that takes up the most storage on my phone, but by deleting unwanted photos or videos and backing those up to the cloud or elsewhere to create space will be well worth it.



Incredibly, the app currently has content for over 7,500 species around the world, which is  $\frac{3}{4}$  of the World's bird species. At the time of this recording, they are still adding to their lists in west, central, and east Africa as well as southeast Asia and Antarctica, but most of the rest of the world looks fairly complete. The Merlin App will recommend a specific pack for you to download and use based on your current location, which is really nifty.

Let me chat about the myriad features and functions for a minute.

First, you can look up all the birds in your bird pack by name, which is handy if you already have an idea of the bird you want to look up or look at.

Next, Merlin provides what I think is one of the best functions in a bird app for those birding somewhere new or getting to know birds better. It walks you through, step-by-step, specific components critical to determining a bird's identification to give you a list of possible birds based on the criteria you entered. At the beginning of the episode I mentioned the guide I have to learning the five keys to bird ID, and these, other than sound, are what you walk through in this app to make an ID. If that doesn't tell you how important these keys to bird ID are then I'm not sure what will! So, first you're asked for your location, which is important for the fact that geography and distribution is a critical part in determining which birds may be where. Then, you're asked for the date you saw the bird, another important factor since not all birds are residents and may not be found in the location you put in at the time of year you're noting. You'll then enter the bird's overall size, from sparrow-sized or smaller to goose-sized or larger. Take an average guess here, as the app is pretty forgiving and will still give you some birds that are various sizes, just in case. You'll then be asked to list 1-3 main colors the bird had on its body. The more detail you're able to give, if applicable, the better, as this will narrow down the search even more. Look at the primary body colors and any colors that distinctly stand out on the head, wings, or tail. You'll then note where you saw the bird, flying in the air, swimming, eating a feeder, in trees, and more. This is the habitat component of bird ID, because you won't see an American Robin swimming or wading, but you'll certainly see it foraging on the ground. A list of

possible birds will then come up, where you can listen to its sound and find out more information. If you click “yes, this is my bird” your sightings will be saved in the app.

Finally, you can integrate your Merlin sightings into the eBird app directly, however, at the moment, you can only integrate the sightings you make through the step-by-step ID function, not the look up function I mentioned before.

Oh, and I don’t want to forget the photo identification feature! Upload a reasonably clear photo of a bird into the Merlin app and watch as Merlin makes recommendations for possible birds it could be!

So, it’s no wonder this is one of the most popular bird apps to have on your phone – if you don’t have it yet, what are you waiting for??

One of the next popular bird apps is the Sibley app. This doesn’t exactly surprise me since the physical guide is also my favorite.

Of course, the app is backed and created by David Sibley himself, so his incredible illustrations are included for nearly all the bird species in North America. What I love about having an illustrative guide in general (also for a physical guide book) is that it gives you a sense of the overall field markings found on the bird, which isn’t always represented in a photo. Plus, he includes illustrations of birds perching and in flight, which is critical for identification purposes, as you’re going to spot birds in all different positions and kinds of light.

While the app isn’t free, there is the option to test it out with a small subset of species just to see how you like it. At the time of this recording, the app is \$19.99, which is a great price considering everything that’s included. One of the most helpful feature is the smart search, allowing users to search by refined location and month, as well as habitat, size and shape, and color and distribution. See how those keys to bird ID keep popping up everywhere for figuring out which bird you’re looking at or hearing? Plus, you can keep a personal list of the birds you’ve seen and back them up onto your Google Drive

account, which is really useful, so, as you're identifying birds and searching for them, you can add them to your list as you go really easily. Of course, since it's an app, you're going to get features that you wouldn't in his amazing printed guide, particularly the sounds the various birds make. And finally, something that not all bird apps allow for, you can compare two birds side-by-side

The Sibley App takes up about 650 Megabytes of space, which is hefty, but don't forget that there are a ton of features, songs, images, and other helpful content included for all of North America.

If you're a fan of Sibley's printed field guide to the birds of North America, which I know I've mentioned tons of times before, but it's my most favorite field guide, then you're really going to like this digital version if you're looking to switch over to a phone app guide.

The next app I'll cover is the Audubon bird guide app.

Of course, as the name implies, this birding app is created by Audubon, and since Audubon is a North American organization, that's where the birds are focused.

Incredibly, the Audubon app is free to use, other than giving over your email address when you first login to the app. Of course, you can always opt out of the emails they'll send you later if you find they aren't pertinent to you, but I do enjoy their updates on bird news and information.

The base of the app itself is approximately 100 Megabytes to download, so it's not super extensive, however, the field guide portion of the app needs to be downloaded if you want to look up birds when you don't have internet connection of any kinds, which takes around 350 Megabytes. You don't have to download the package directly onto your phone, but Audubon recommends this if you're planning to go birding offline. This is pretty useful because you aren't always going to be able to look up those birds if you don't have internet connection!



The Audubon app has a pretty slick setup, as the first screen you see has your sightings and total birds seen as a tally, as well as any alerts you've set up to be notified if a particular bird is nearby, so you can add your sightings as you go. The field guide also allows you to search by individual, family group, or alphabetical order, and I must say, the listing is quite extensive as far as information goes about the birds, including, their descriptive information, where they're found at least one image and song. But two other things I think are super useful in the field guide are the corresponding sightings tab for individual birds to see if that same bird has been sighted nearby pulled from the eBird hotspots listing, as well as a listing of the similar birds you could potentially confuse with the bird in question.

Now, here's the cool thing. They've also added an "Identify a Bird" button on the front page of the app, where you can enter your state in the U.S. or province in Canada, the month, and a variety of features that you can click through to aid in bird identification. It provides a lot more detail than Merlin's similar feature, but it adds a few more components, including voice, wing shape, and tail shape. For more advanced birders, this is super useful, but for beginner birders, I think the more streamlined and less complicated version in Merlin makes it easier to use.

So, the Audubon app is a great contender for primo bird guide apps in the United States and Canada, and since it's free, it's definitely worth checking out to see how you like the functionality and features they offer compared to the other apps on this list.

BirdsEye is the next bird guide app that birders highly recommend checking out, and it's created by BirdsEye Nature Apps. I'll get into the functionality in a minute, but one of the things I love about this app is the worldwide context it provides. Photos and descriptions are provided for birds in every continent other than Antarctica, and songs for North American birds are pulled from the Macaulay Library Database, which is the Cornell Lab of Ornithology's animal sound database.

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What makes Birdseye unique from other birding apps is that it is free to download the app itself, then bird ID packages are available for regions around the world for a monthly or annual membership cost. With the free version of the app, you are still able to get access to 100 of the most common birds in your area, which is perfect for beginners, and you'll get information about birds reported near you as well as birding hotspots to determine where birds are located, including those not found on your life list.

Incredibly, the app integrates with eBird, where you can download your life list to track the birds you're seeing AND (I especially love this), you can connect to Xeno-Canto, which is a comprehensive sound file website where contributors send in audio files of birds around the world. If you've listened to my previous episode about bird Mnemonics, those clips came from Xeno-Canto and I highly recommend checking out their site.

Now the paid memberships vary in price based on location, so the World membership, where you'd get access to photos and descriptions of birds all over the world, is \$4 per month, or if you're just doing North America, for example, it would be \$2.50 per month to also include bird sounds from the Macaulay Library along with the other features. Specifically for the North America guide, the descriptions are written by Kenn Kaufman, who is a known name in the birding world, especially for writing his own field guide for birds as well as writing *Kingbird Highway*, his memoir, but also contributing to *Birds and Blooms* and *Bird Water's Digest*. So, you're getting the best of the best descriptions of where and how to find these different birds with the North American membership package.

I'll also note that the majority of apps are going to cost some kind of money when you have added features and functionality because maintaining apps and doing updates all costs a lot of money and it's not realistic to assume that you can get all of these things for free forever. While Merlin is somewhat of an exception, they have also been able to create the app from a massive National science foundation Grant they were awarded as well as the huge backing that

the Cornell Lab of Ornithology has with other sponsors and all of the contributors and volunteers that have helped them out.

As far as how much space it's going to take up on your phone, the app itself with the basic functionality is only four megabytes so it's really small and will easily fit on your phone, however the additional packages that you add in there will certainly add to that, so account for again, around 500 MB depending on the region that you're looking at.

The final app on the list is called iBird Pro for Birds of North America, and it has the world Pro in it for a reason. While apps like Sibley and Audubon for North America cover around 800 species, iBird Pro covers 940 species, as it also includes birds found in Hawaii.

While you are paying \$14.99 for the app, that's a steal for what you end up getting in the app itself. Not only are you getting 6 both drawings and images for birds, you're able to zoom in on those images, get a suite of different sounds for each bird, and, the part that I think is really cool, it has a field marks layer to turn on and off the important ID characteristics on the bird to better help you hone in on those features and correctly ID the bird. There's some passive learning going on when using an app, but this feature steps that up a notch by helping you figure out not only the important parts to hone in on but also how to use them as you're identifying a bird on the spot.

iBird Pro also has an awesome search function to allow you to sort birds by prominent colors, habitats, shapes, sizes, and more, so if you want to search by prominent features on a bird's head, like a crest, you can search for crested birds. You might not know this about me but I love crested birds, like Northern Cardinals and Stellar's Jays. But because of these features as well as integrations to back up your field notes and use the app completely offline, it's a really quality app for those birding in North America.

And you'll note I mentioned using the app completely offline, which means ALL those wonderful features have to be downloaded onto your phone... Taking up a whopping 1.85 gigabytes. Now, if you aren't ever planning on using a physical

guide and you have plenty of space on your phone, so you don't take a ton of pictures and videos or you back them up regularly or have a cloud to enhance the storage space on your phone. But if not, this is going to be the biggest limiting factor for this particular app.

So, those are the five birding apps that other birders have recommended to me to use!

It's important to mention that this list is in no way comprehensive of the bird apps that are out in the world today, nor does it mean that those other apps aren't also great, but when I asked a bunch of fellow birders about the apps they use most when out birding – for bird identification specifically – these are the most common ones that popped up.

A couple other apps I want to mention for other parts of world are Ornitho and Sunbird.

Ornitho was created by Dominik Ramik, and it's a fun, free, and useful bird app that covers nearly 4,000 bird species in 120 different countries. This app doesn't give you detailed descriptions of the birds you're seeing, but rather shows you images of the potential bird and compares it to other similar birds for fast bird ID during identification.

Sunbird is the suite of apps I used when I lived in Germany and is great for country specific bird identification guide apps, so if there is a country you're not seeing with a bird app, search for Sunbird, as they continue to grow their list, as well as the available languages you can use within the app. This particular app isn't free, and while the prices for certain countries are really reasonable, some of the continent specific ones are pretty pricey.

So there you have it!

Do you have any bird apps on your phone? I'd love to know which ones you like most and find most helpful when you're in the field – join me on Facebook or Instagram at @BirdingTools and send me a message!



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 content I've mentioned in the show, and the show notes, visit our website at [birdingtools.com](http://birdingtools.com).

Next week I won't be releasing a new episode as I'll be spending time birding and prepping for the next ten episodes of the podcast, but join me again the first week of December for some other great content that I've got planned for you.

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See you next time.