



EPISODE 16

Common Bird ID Struggles and How to Solve Them

SEE THE SHOW NOTES AT:

www.birdingtools.com/16-bird-id-struggles

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 new, free audio mini-series course detailing the basics of getting started with birding. Over five days with audio straight to your inbox, you'll learn how to select and use a pair of binoculars, get acquainted with the setup of your bird field guide, download your local area's bird checklist, learn the five keys to bird identification, and get insights on how to connect with the birding community. No matter if you're just starting out or you want to freshen up on any of these topics, this series is for you. To get this free audio course, just visit the podcast show notes at birdingtools.com or visit the birdingtools.com homepage.

This week on the Birding Tools podcast I am taking on some of the biggest struggles birders have with identifying birds, which I've taken from my own

experiences and from insights other birders have shared with me. If you're looking to enhance your bird ID skills, this episode is for you.

When we talk about the most common bird identification struggles, I think it's important to first mention what the keys to bird identification are because these are what we're going to turn to when we want to get answers about how to solve or work through some of the ID struggles we might be having.

So let's recap the keys to bird ID: they are size and shape, so the overall size of the bird and the size and shape of the individual parts of the bird, the colors and patterns on the bird, behaviors the bird exhibits, such as posture, foraging and flight behaviors, habitats and distribution, so local habitat and regional or global distribution and how birds are found in those locations seasonally, and sound, or the songs, calls and other aural noises they make are.

So, those are five keys to bird ID, and remember these aren't novel things I'm listing out here. Anytime you look in your bird field guide or bird phone identification app, these are the features that will pop up when you're looking at and working on a bird's identification.

I also have a free downloadable guide to learning more about these five keys to bird ID, which I'll be linking in the podcast show notes at birdingtools.com.

There are five struggles I'm diving into today, and these are more general identification issues. You might have really specific challenges you're having with bird ID, like trying to differentiate between a Downy and Hairy Woodpecker since they're pretty similar looking birds and their call notes are pretty similar, or being confused with birds that are all red, so in Eastern North America you may confuse the male Northern Cardinal with the male Summer Tanager because they're both overall red. Of course, there are individual features about each of these birds that helps to tell them apart, but at first glance, these can be easily confused with each other based on their colors alone.

So, these are really specific things to work through, and nearly every birder is working through some kind of struggle identifying between individual species, I

know I am. I mean, I just moved back to the U.S. a handful of months ago, and I've had to re-learn the difference in identifying between a House Finch and a Purple Finch because they are quite similar-looking and both hang out around my feeder. They're in the same family of birds, but cluing in on their different sounds and the colors and patterns has helped me a lot with this.

But these struggles I'll be talking about today are different things that you may have struggled with in the past, are currently working through, or maybe you haven't yet had to deal with it, in which case I hope the information I give in this episode will help you work through it once you get to that point in your birding journey.

So, first, one of the most common issues birders mentioned having a really hard time with while working on identifying a bird in the field is when a bird is backlit. You'll get a backlit bird when the bird is between you and a light source, whether that's the sun or just a really bright sky, or the conditions outside facilitate this setting, where the sky is overcast but still kind of bright since the sun is filtering through those overcast clouds. Instead of seeing the individual colors and patterns on the bird, you're likely to see just the silhouette of that bird. In fact, even if you can see some patterns on a backlit bird, the colors can sometimes also look distorted and we may not be able to differentiate colors altogether. If we take birds with blue feathers for example, all birds with blue feathers have structural coloration, which means they are only produced when light enters the feather and refracts through the feather to appear blue to us. When a bird is backlit, you're not going to see those colors as vividly if at all.

There isn't a whole lot you can do to prevent these kinds of conditions because it's all about time of day and brightness. Now, if you can, try to see if you can get to the other side of the bird so you're between it and the light source and instead the light is shining on the bird, but of course you'll need to do this without scaring the bird off, not trampling on habitat you shouldn't be trampling on, and assuming you can access the other side or see the bird on the other side. A lot of times, this silhouette issue comes into play for birds in

flight, where they're flying by at a quick speed and you don't have time to move to a different location to get a better angle on the bird.

It's also I think important to note that it doesn't matter how good of glass you have with your scope or binoculars, if you're looking into the sun or another light source, that bird is going to be backlit no matter how much light is allowed to come into whatever birding tool you're using.

For this scenario, where we really can't rely on being able to use colors and patterns as a way to make an ID or at least narrow down to the family or species we're looking at, we're going to rely heavily on the other four keys to bird ID, such as size and shape and habitat and distribution.

For size and shape, every family group has an overall size and shape of the individual species within that family. For example, if you were looking at a silhouette of a woodpecker – and I like to use this as an example for a silhouette because it's a really obvious one – you've got a bird clinging to the side of a tree with their zygodactyl feet, or where two toes face forward and two face backward, a long, sharp pointed bill for drilling or drumming, and tail feathers with a point on the end to aid in their stabilization while drumming on the side of a tree. For the behavior key to ID, if you saw something backlit but it was clinging to the side of a tree or making a see-saw motion while working its way up a tree, you can narrow down the options pretty well. There are a couple of other species in other family groups that exhibit this behavior, like tree creepers and nuthatches, but again it's a pretty unique behavioral trait for birds. You can also look at where the bird is located, so what kind of habitat it is in and evaluate the species you might be seeing in that habitat. If the bird is making sounds, and this is an advanced way of being able to ID birds so it's fine if you don't want to consider sounds just yet, but you can pull up the bird app on your phone, like the Merlin Bird ID app, and listen to the sounds of the birds you might think you're seeing to compare with the sounds the bird is actually making in the field.

So these are a couple of components you can look at to get an ID even if you can't actually see the color and pattern details on the bird.

If a bird is flying by really quickly, and you're not able to get a good look at the bird, sometimes you just aren't able to get a good ID and that's OK too, sometimes that happens. But there are some workarounds that you can use to utilize the other keys to ID to help with determining which bird you're seeing.

The next struggle that birders mention having trouble with in regards to identifying birds is actually second-guessing themselves on which bird they think they're seeing. This really seems to hang people up because there's a self confidence thing that comes into play here in the process of IDing birds, and I think it's OK to second-guess yourself sometimes, and just stay humble, especially, if you're still new to learning birds, but don't do it so much that you're worried about claiming a bird's correct ID. And I do think this just comes with practice in feeling confident in what you're looking at. If you're running through the five keys to bird ID and you're coming up with a particular species it is pretty likely it's that bird. Are you looking at its size and shape, colors and patterns, distribution, and behaviors? Are you listening to its calls or songs and are able to compare sounds with what you're seeing? Then it's probably the bird you think it is. And for the sounds portion, once you get to that in your birding journey, if you're hearing a bird's song, it's a pretty good bet that you're IDing that bird correctly. Of course we've got mimickers and sometimes birds just make weird noises, but overall I think this is true. Remember, these are just guidelines, not hard and fast rules.

You're using your deduction skills based on what you know about bird identification and applying them to the bird you think you're saying. It's always beneficial to say what could I be confusing this bird with and evaluate what it is that's making you second guess yourself.

A lot of times people second guess themselves because well bird ID is hard, for one, but also the distribution factor and potentially rare birds. If you're seeing a bird that isn't supposed to be where you are you may be thinking to yourself gosh it can't be that bird because they aren't supposed to be here. But I've also talked about this once or twice now on the podcast, I finally was able to drive an hour north of me and see the Vermillion Flycatcher that is overwintering up

here in Northern California, way out of this species' normal range. Apparently this individual has been overwintering in this area for five or six years now, and it just hangs out with the other phoebes and other flycatchers, but if I look at a range map they really aren't supposed to be in this area. Of course, there is no denying what the beautiful bird was, not only because eBird reports told me others had also seen it, but because the males of this species are pretty unmistakable. It also does its sallying behavior like other flycatchers, which is where they perch on a branch or object, fly out to catch a bug midair then go back to land on that same spot before. If I was just going based off of distribution I would be thinking OK it can't be that bird, but go based off of the other key ID factors.

You may be seeing a rarity, and you could be the first one, but check eBird or rare bird alerts to verify whether other birders are also seeing reports of that bird, too.

I think the trouble is you can convince yourself you're seeing something you might not be seeing, which you want to avoid, but you can do that by using these definitive factors in bird ID. Overall, be confident in the knowledge that you can utilize these keys to bird ID to your best advantage to determine a bird's ID or at least narrow down the possible birds you could be seeing, and take notes on it, to then reference in your guide later or with a friend or mentor who might be able to help guide you.

These ID struggles are also muddled a bit by juvenile, wintering, and molting plumages, which is the next most common bird ID issue that birders have mentioned having a hard time with.

Juveniles and wintering plumage often end up being really different from what we often see or think of for a certain species adult coloration or patterns, so it can be a challenge to learn those. This isn't much different from the same things we discussed for the backlighting issue, where we can't necessarily rely on color and pattern to give us an ID if that's what's hanging us up. You can still look at size and shape, behavior, habitat and distribution, and sounds, and there might even be some colors that carry over into these various plumages

compared to the adults or year-round characteristics, like leg color and bill color.

You can still also look at the patterns of the colors even if they are different washes of more neutral colors.

The next bird identification struggle that is really common among birders is achieving a species level ID once you've narrowed down to a certain family or subset of birds. One of the first bird families that comes to mind for this is flycatchers, since they're pretty hard to ID even when you have optimal conditions for looking at them, and often you're just hoping for them to make a noise for you to give itself away.

If you've narrowed the bird down to a particular family but don't know which species it is within that family, which is awesome by the way. From here, you can look at the size and shape of individual parts of the different species within a family. If we take woodpeckers as an example again, we can look at the overall size of the bird we are seeing to determine if it's a small woodpecker or a larger woodpecker, so could it be a Downy Woodpecker or the largest in North America, the Pileated Woodpecker? You can also eliminate birds or narrow them down based on bill length, too. If you're looking through your field guide and looking at the different woodpeckers in your area, you can see there are specific characteristics that set them apart from each other. Then you'll move on again to color and pattern, and this one is a big one for woodpeckers because they're pretty distinctive from each other in their patterning, except of course for Downy and Hairy that I mentioned earlier, but you can see which color hues they have, if they have barring or streaking on their back, and where the colors are distributed on their body. Distribution also is handy here, because some woodpeckers might not even be found where you're located – for example, I don't have Red-headed and Red-bellied Woodpeckers where I am, so I know I can eliminate those as potential woodpecker species that I might be seeing. These are all really helpful in achieving a species level ID. Sometimes it takes a bird making a sound for you to really know which species it is.

So this allows us to transition nicely to the last struggle that birders have with bird ID, which is birding solely by ear. As I've mentioned a few times now, this really is a challenging way to ID birds and it takes a little longer to learn, especially if you aren't necessarily musically inclined – I'm not musically inclined at all so it took me a while to learn birds by ear the first time!

This is difficult if you aren't practicing your bird sounds, just as you'd practice a language.

I mentioned this earlier, but identifying birds by ear is definitely an advanced way to ID birds because you're not using those visual factors to aid in ID and some birds really do sound kind of similar to each other in various ways. If you're looking to learn more about bird sounds, I talk about bird sounds and mnemonics with tips for birding by ear in episode 9 of the Birding Tools podcast. In it, I go into some mnemonics or memorization techniques to help you learn birds by ear, like recognizing birds that say their own name, like the Common Cuckoo, or birds that sing in phrases we can remember, like the Eastern Towhee's "drink your tea" song. These are some of the techniques you can use to learn birds in your area, and start small because if you try to learn many at once, you'll get overwhelmed.

I recommend having a list of the common birds in your region and working through the sounds of those most common birds then move on to family groups to practice with, or multiple adjacent family groups. So for example, you can look at the different kinds of sparrows in your area and listen to the different sounds they make to compare their noises with each other, especially since their tones will be similar.

What I love about learning birds by ear is that you don't necessarily have to get your binoculars on the bird to know that you have a positive ID, unless of course you're working on life listing and you need to visually see the bird.

So these five bird identification struggles seem to be some of the most common general issues that birders have mentioned.

Just remember that bird ID can be challenging, and there are a lot of bird species out there you could be confusing with each other. Just these last couple of weeks I've been monitoring for Great-tailed Grackles, and they were foraging with Brewer's Blackbirds, Brown-headed Cowbirds, Red-winged Blackbirds, and American Crows, so all these black-colored birds are hanging around together making kind of similar noises and that creates an interesting opportunity to learn a variety of black-colored birds by sight and sound easier. I can look at the individual components on each bird to help me differentiate them, like their size differences, or the brown head of the cowbird, or the white eyes of the Great-tailed Grackles and the Brewer's Blackbirds. Now that I've been listening to them all the last couple of weeks straight I can really easily ID them and tell them apart, even their call notes, but this is really hard if you're just learning to ID birds on a species level, and there are all these birds that look or sound similar to each other.

Bird ID can be hard and that's OK, and that's sort of the fun part of the bird learning journey is working through the different techniques you can implement to keep learning new birds and progressing in your skills. And it's OK if you're not yet at this point in your birding journey or if you're just wanting to go out and enjoy birds for their intrinsic value.

For those who are working on bird ID, though, be gracious with yourself in the process. I mean birds sometimes make funny sounds, their plumages change throughout the year, they decide to travel to a place they were never found before - this makes bird ID challenging.

These keys to bird ID aren't hard and fast rules necessarily, but a good portion of the time, they're going to lead you in the right direction if you're looking to ID birds as part of your bird learning journey.

Before I go, just know whatever you end up deciding to do in learning birds, just be kind to yourself in the process, work through the different keys to bird ID, work with your birding community or friends to work through a bird's ID.

And, let's work on normalizing asking questions about bird identification, too, because I do see some birding forums where new birders might not know what a certain species' ID is and more seasoned birders get frustrated by that. Of course no one is required to help out new birders but if you're a seasoned birder, please don't discourage new birders from being curious and working on their birding skills! We have to get things wrong sometimes to learn and eventually get them right. If the next time you see someone asking for a bird's ID, be kind to them, work through it with them, maybe help walk them through the process of identifying a bird.

If you're a new birder, that community really comes into play to establish that and be able to ask ID questions, talk through it together with them. I certainly have those people in my life to send them pictures and say hey can we talk through this ID together? I've sent a bunch of bird photos over to Chris at Rogue Birders to help me with bird ID and he hasn't steered me wrong yet!

I'm of course always happy for you join me in my Birding Tools community, you can always message me or email me at birdingtools.com and I'd love to chat with you. I think that is important for you continuing with your birding journey and continuing to ID different birds.

I'm even still on this journey since there are plenty of North American species, and others around the world that I haven't yet checked off my life list. No matter that I know certain birds really well by sight and sound, there's always more to learn when it comes to birds.

To recap, we talked about using the five keys to bird identification to help us work through and answer five bird identification struggles that birders have had issues with. Those are:

- Determining the ID of a backlit bird
- Second-guessing yourself in your bird identification
- Identifying birds in juvenile or winter plumage
- Getting a species-level ID once you know the family of the bird
- Knowing the ID of a bird by sound alone

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Hopefully these points have helped you in your current journey or will help you in the future when you work more on your bird identification.

So there you have it!

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. You can follow Birding Tools on Instagram and Facebook with the handle @BirdingTools, and in case you didn't already know, I send out weekly emails detailing the content discussed on the podcast along with some helpful, actionable tips and information. To get on my email list simply visit the website or email me at hello@birdingtools.com.

Next week, I'm sharing my tips for finding birds in the field, by sight and sound, and by paying more attention to the natural world around you.

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See you next time.