

BIRD-WATCHING WITHOUT BELLS AND WHISTLES

By Julie Cramer-Le

For non-birders, and those just getting interested in birds, the idea of spending a lot of money on a pair of nice binoculars and a fancy Peterson's Guide and learning how to tell eight different kinds of sparrows apart can seem intimidating.

Here are some simple ways to identify common birds without binoculars.

SHAPES: Many common and backyard birds have a distinct shape. One of my favorites is the **mourning dove**, which, when perched on a wire or a branch, looks a lot like an ice cream cone. Mourning doves have a tail that tapers into a point, like a sugar cone, and a soft rounded head and body like the scoop of ice cream. Even in flight, mourning doves are distinct for their pointy tails.

Starlings are a common bird that you'll often see in big groups. When starlings are in their breeding plumage, hoping to impress a mate, they are iridescent and covered with gorgeous white speckles. In the winter, they're often more a dull grey or black. In flight, starlings look like a plus sign -- they have short tails and relatively short wings.

Vultures look like a V-shape in the air. Lots of bigger birds soar by catching air currents rather than flapping their wings, but of the common birds, only vultures make that V. Turkey vultures also stand out by the way they wobble in the sky as they constantly adjust for the wind. Turkey vultures often fly lower than other vultures to sniff out the road-kill!

There are many kinds of **gulls**, commonly called seagulls (though they don't necessarily stick to the sea). If you see one perched on a lamppost or in a parking lot, they're pretty easy to identify as a gull because of the color -- most gulls are some combination of grey and white. In flight, they look like a stereotypical M, the way kids draw birds.

COLORS: This time of year, if you have a bird feeder, you might see **dark-eyed juncos**. These birds are dark and small, but when they fly you'll get the impression of white, because they have white feathers on the underside of their tails that flash when they fly. If you don't even see the bird until it's in the air, when you get that flash of white, you know it's a junco.

Mockingbirds also flash white when they fly, but the white patches are on their wings. They're much bigger than juncos, and they enjoy hanging around in most kinds of habitats, so you might see them at your school or workplace. Mockingbirds tend to move their tails a lot, sometimes holding them at a jaunty angle to their bodies.

Your bird feeder probably also gets **blue jays!** These big blue birds love to squabble-- they make a lot of noise, throw things, and fuss at each other. You can also recognize them by their wedge-shaped crest, although when they're relaxed it may lie flat on their head.

BEHAVIOR/HABITAT: House sparrows are everywhere! Along with starlings, these are the birds you've most likely seen in grocery store parking lots, hanging around outdoor restaurants, and eating dropped food. Sometimes they're so brave they'll get right up close to you. The females are a drab brown color and the males have a black throat. These birds are used to living on our trash and in the safe nooks and crannies our buildings create, so their ideal habitat is one close to us.

Mallards are the most common kind of duck you might see anywhere there's water. Sometimes they even hang out in fountains. Male mallards have the classic green head and gray body, while females, and males who aren't trying to impress a girlfriend, are a mottled brown. You can often tell a mallard from other kinds of ducks because they have a little curl in their tail!

Woodpeckers. If you have a feeder, woodpeckers will often come to it! There are two kinds that are very common at feeders, the red-bellied (big) and the downy (small). The important thing for you to know is that woodpeckers grab the rim of your feeder and hang on with their feet -- or, if you have a suet block, hang onto the cage it's placed on. That's because they're used to creeping up and down trees with their feet.

Being able to identify birds when you're just going about your life is a real pleasure -- it's fun to see the shape of a bird flying over your car and think, Hey, that's a vulture! You don't need to buy binoculars, take trips to Costa Rica, or sit out all day in a rainy swamp to begin identifying your local birds.

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