

MiBC Getting Started in Birding

(some tips taken and paraphrased from Sibley's Guide to Birds p.10)

1. Be Patient

Expect this endeavor to be a gradual pursuit of knowledge. Delight in small discoveries! You will be rewarded. Use a broad paintbrush at first – you'll get a finer touch as time goes on.

2. Look at the Bird

Don't flip for your bird book or pad & pencil right away. Most times you'll have only a moment to observe. Start with the bill and facial markings. What it's doing and how it flies away. THEN try to find it in your book. It can help to first identify the Family and then the species if enough details were noted – or over time as you become more familiar with the Family you will start to discern differences between species.

eg. Mergansers: first off get so you can peg them as Mergansers; fine tune your identification to Hooded, Common or Redbreasted later.

eg. Stellar's Jay: its vocal nature and body structure place it in the Family Corvidae or Crow family. Once you have located the family in your guidebook, it's easier to track down the species.

3. Take in Details

As observing the bill and facial markings becomes automatic, look further to include wing colouration or markings. Continue to add details from field marks listed in MIBC Guidelines. The more field marks noted, the better chance you have to identify correctly.

4. Recognize Patterns

Variation in bird behaviour, appearance, occurrence etc. fit into predictable patterns. Cobble these patterns together as you come to know them, and your framework of knowledge begins.

5. Recognize Shape and Silhouettes

The more you look at birds, the more you will notice their shapes. This helps especially for distinguishing similarly marked birds like Robins and Varied Thrushes or Buffleheads and Hooded Mergansers.

Depending on light conditions, often all you will see is a bird's silhouette. You will find some guide books feature silhouettes for this reason.

6. Note Habits

Habits provide good supporting clues. Birds are forever in search of food, so most actions and habitat choices relate to food.

eg. Fox Sparrows characteristically scratch the ground for food with a two-foot hopping motion.

7. Beware of size

Judging size from a distance can be difficult. Often it helps to compare its size to that of a well known bird.

eg. a Robin or an eEgle.

8. Meet other birders

One of the best ways to learn about local birds is to talk with local birders. And to participate in local bird counts, where you'll learn firsthand from others. And listen up for events you can attend or tune into to hear bird experts speak on their area of knowledge.

Have a look at MIBC Guidelines for a more detailed list of ways to identify birds.