

3 FIELD MARKS AND FIELD GUIDES

Many factors influence the identification decisions of an experienced birdwatcher: the time of year, the range of species known to be in the area, and the habitat in which the bird is seen all contribute to the identification of a bird in the field. Most important are the **field marks**—the unique combinations of color, pattern, and shape that mark and separate each species. Field marks are not always visual; behavior plays an important role in most identifications and is often more important than visual details in separating one species from another. For example, on a field trip you might see a tiny bird feeding in the top of a tree. No marks can be seen on the bird's body, but the bird is constantly twitching or flicking its wings. That behavior clinches the identification: the bird is a Ruby-crowned Kinglet (*Regulus calendula*), a tiny bird that favors treetops and the high canopy of woodlands. Ruby-crowned Kinglets are the only North American bird of similar size with that habit of constantly twitching their wings. Or consider the following scenario: You are scanning with your scope and you see a bird sitting upright on a breakwater a mile from shore. Although you can see no features of the bird, you know instantly it is a cormorant, because cormorants are the only coastal birds that habitually sit bolt upright. No body markings were used in these examples; both identifications depended on behavioral cues that set the target bird apart from other similar species.

Jizz

As you gain experience in the field, your identifications of many birds will depend as much on subtle differences in shape and behavior as on any visible color patterns. This is especially true when you are birding along seashores, marshes, or in other situations where birds are far away and plumage details are difficult to see clearly. The British use the term **jizz** to summarize the unique combination of silhouette and behavioral idiosyncrasies that mark each species in the field. The word **jizz** supposedly originated with British aircraft spotters during World War II, many of whom were also experienced birdwatchers. Instead of collecting volumes of detailed descriptions of planes, the aircraft spotters were asked to give a concise "General Impression of Shape and Size" (G.I.S.S., or "jizz") to identify each type of aircraft they saw. In birding, **jizz** describes the birdwatcher's gut reaction to the total visual impression a bird makes on the viewer and is not concerned with minute descriptions of plumage. For example, in North America there are two small falcons of roughly the same size, shape, and overall plumage; the American Kestrel (*Falco sparverius*) and the Merlin (*Falco columbarius*). If you rely solely on a color plate in a field guide, you might think the two birds are hard to separate in the field, yet the **jizz** of each species is so different that the two are not often confused. In flight Kestrels give a light, bouncy, windblown impression, whereas Merlins fly like miniature jet aircraft, cruising stiff-winged in a straight line, seemingly impervious to the wind. The distinctive behavior patterns make plumage details almost irrelevant in distinguishing these two small falcons in the field.

Not that plumage details are unimportant in all birdwatching; in forest or thicket birding, tiny variations of color or pattern may be your only clue to identifying a bird with certainty. This is especially true when birding for small songbirds like sparrows, where several dozen species all have

roughly the same size, shape, and coloration. Experienced birdwatchers will even admit that most of those “little brown jobs” look pretty much alike in the field and that nailing down an identification is often a matter of collecting that lone plumage detail that distinguishes one sparrow species from another. Part of becoming a good birder is training your eyes to pick out small details of color and pattern quickly when sighting a bird in the field, then forming a solid mental “snapshot” of your sighting to compare against field guide references. In his original *Field Guide to the Birds*, Roger Tory Peterson’s great innovation was to group the birds visually, not in taxonomic order. Peterson placed all the birds that look roughly alike together on a page, then pointed out the most important marks (the field marks) that allow you to separate one species from another. Train your eyes to seek out those field marks—the concentration and discipline will make you both a better birdwatcher and a much more observant person in other areas of your life.

Selecting a Field Guide

Most people are visual in their overall approach to buying field guides and simply look for the book with the most pleasing and detailed paintings. But in the bush those intricate field guide plates may actually make it harder to identify birds by presenting you with irrelevant information. Advanced birders may appreciate elaborate paintings, but novice birdwatchers need simple, patternistic diagrams that are carefully organized in logical visual groups. Fortunately, there are enough field guides to North American birds to suit a wide range of abilities and preferences. Here are some factors to consider when shopping for a field guide:

1. Organization. Most novices do better with a field guide that is organized visually rather than taxonomically. Peterson’s Eastern and Western editions of *A Field Guide to the Birds* are organized so that birds that look roughly alike are grouped on pages regardless of whether the species are related. Most other field guides to North American birds are organized by taxonomic order. Many experienced birders prefer the taxonomic field guide arrangement, however, because once you know the taxonomic order of bird families, it is easier to locate particular groups of birds quickly.
2. Geographic area. The guides that cover all the species of North America are valuable to the experienced birdwatcher, but they usually offer too many confusing options to the beginning birder. Beginners rarely pay adequate attention to range maps and lack field experience to help them pinpoint what birds are most likely to occur in the local area. Field guides that concentrate on either the eastern or western United States may be easier and less confusing to use.
3. Location of range maps and descriptive text. Maps illustrating the overall geographic range and the summer and winter range of each species are an essential feature of the better field guides. Ideally, the range map and the text describing each species should be on the same or opposite page as the main illustrations of the bird, so that all of the essential information on a species is presented in a single spread.