8 KEEPING FIELD NOTES

One of the most valuable habits you can develop is to write up your day's field notes, no matter where you are or how short your day in the field was. These notes will prove invaluable not only for future reference but also because in writing them you gradually accumulate a comprehensive overview of your birdwatching over long periods of time. Most experienced birdwatchers carry a notebook to record unusual or confusing observations for later study. Jot down on a simple pocket notebook or steno pad any features of a bird you may need help to identify later. If you are a careful observer, the many details you accumulate over a day's birding (plumage notes, behavior notes, habitat descriptions, etc.) will be much too numerous to commit to memory alone. With descriptive field notes before you, a careful identification should be possible long after your mystery bird has flown off and you have gone home to consult your library. A solid knowledge of avian topography (surface anatomy) is a must for recording field observations accurately. For example, you must understand which feather groups are visible in a bird's folded wing in order to describe accurately the wing coloration in a field report. Here are the most important features to record in a field description:

Shape and Color — Subtle nuances of shape are often important in the field identification of birds. Poor lighting conditions may make it difficult or impossible to see color patterns or surface detail on distant birds. The overall body shape or the shape of the wings, head, and tail may be your only solid clues to the species. Draw a simple sketch of the bird. Field sketches do not require great artistry, and in most cases some features of the bird will stand out that you can describe in even the crudest sketch. Annotate your drawing with specific notes on the color, pattern, and plumage details you saw. Don't forget to record the color of the fleshy parts of the bird's body: iris color, the color of bare skin near the eyes, bill color, and leg coloration. Try recording the characteristics of several common birds, and notice how much more detail you observe and remember when you make a careful written record of what you see in the field.

Size — Most people find it difficult to estimate the size of distant birds. Try to compare the bird to the size of plants or other nearby objects or relate it to a species you are very familiar with. For example, is the bird smaller than a Blue Jay or larger than a House Sparrow? In judging the size of distant flying birds with which there are no other species to compare, note the speed of the wingbeats and how much gusting winds affect the bird. Larger birds beat their wings more slowly and are less affected by the wind. These can be useful clues when, for example, you are trying to tell a Cooper's Hawk (*Accipiter cooperii*) from the very similar but smaller Sharp-shinned Hawk (*A. striatus*), or to separate a small Merlin (*Falco columbarius*) from the larger Peregrine Falcon (*F. peregrinus*) or Prairie Falcon (*F. mexicanus*).

Family — Did it look like a sparrow, a warbler, or a thrush?

Bill shape and color — This is often a key point in identifying songbirds.

Tail — Note the color patterns and overall shape of the tail. How long is the tail compared with the wingtips when the bird stands with folded wings? Is the end of the tail notched, straight, or rounded?

Wings — Note any markings (wingbars), the length of wings in relation to the tip of the tail, and any special features or patterns.