

Common Songbirds and Raptors in Your Yard, Neighborhood, and Favorite Park

What is this about? What kind of information is included?

The easiest place to start birding, to become a good birder, and to understand birds is by watching birds in your yard, neighborhood, and favorite park. If you are already a good birder, then these are good places to watch behavior and interaction. And even if you are not interested in birding as a hobby, wouldn't it be nice to know what birds are coming to your feeders? What birds are in your bushes? Singing from the trees? Regardless of where you are in the continental United States (the lower 48 states), this book includes most of the 'Common'* birds you might see and several 'Uncommon'* ones.

At the beginning of the discussion for each bird, I list their physical characteristics such as eye-stripes, spotted breasts, and wing-bars. These are in boxes with photos of the bird. Look at these photos, but also consult your own field guide's photos because no one photo or drawing of a bird will show every physical trait. Below these boxes, will be boxes talking about behavior at feeders or when foraging, followed by boxes discussing songs and call notes. (If you do not have a field guide, there are good ones online – try allaboutbirds.org from the Laboratory of Ornithology, Cornell University.)

I struggle with birdsongs and call notes. There are people who can ID every bird they hear by its call note - that will never be me. I now know a few call notes of which I am certain – Northern Cardinal and Gray Catbird are two of which I am fairly sure. But, with much time and observation, I am now able to ID a good number of birds by song alone and have confidence in these IDs. However, I still struggle with certain families like the Finch Family. They all sound pretty much alike to me. I now know when I hear a finch, but as to which one? I need to see the bird.

Not all the birds in this book come to feeders. And even if they do, they will often be at other places in your yard, neighborhood, or favorite park. Learning to recognize songs is important in identifying birds as some birds will be at treetops of big leafy trees – impossible to see the actual bird. Some birds will be on the ground and down in tall grass or plants. You can hear them, but never see them. Song is important – and fascinating. I discuss song – and call notes - under each bird and tell you what is often written in field guides and also what I hear when that bird sings or calls. I tell you from where the bird sings – for example, is it out in the open or more hidden? And when does it sing? I will tell you if it is all day long, which season, and often the probable reasons for its singing.

After discussing these traits for each bird in boxes, I have paragraphs discussing the bird - including its behaviors. I have written this in a conversational style because nothing I write is set in stone. This is not an academic or scholarly work, but is based on my years of experience as a birder. I do disagree with experts from time to time and when I do, I will tell you, and explain why. My primary goal is to encourage you to get out and experience birds. To observe all this for yourself. To form your own opinions. So much about birds is still not known – particularly when it comes to behavior. What they do and especially why. How they communicate.

*'Common' and 'Uncommon' are terms used in field guides and also on bird lists that are often available at wildlife refuges and national parks and on their websites. A bird that is 'Common' is one you will see in the area practically every day and often several times a day. A bird that is 'Uncommon' is one that you might see every week, every few weeks or so, and then not for periods at a time.

Take a look at the following photos – these birds are discussed in this PDF and are good examples of common birds which can be hard to identify. Can you identify them? The answers are at the end.



These are just a few of the birds that look similar to each other. Birders encounter this all the time. With each bird I discuss, if there are birds that look similar, I put them all in an easy-to-read chart with their photos and traits so you can compare them side by side. Whether this is your first day of birding or you have been watching birds for years, I will help you be a better observer and interpreter of the world of birds which is unfolding right in front of you – and of which you are a part.

The main point is that I believe we human beings share many behaviors with birds and I will point this out over and over. This is especially true with courtship. When you watch Mourning Doves or Brown-headed Cowbirds court at feeders, you might think you are in a bar on a Friday night during Happy Hour. Some of their behaviors eerily mirror our own. I want all of us to realize and understand how connected we truly are. We human beings – because of the sheer number of us, the fact we live everywhere on this planet, we are so large, and we consume so much and generate so much garbage – influence every square inch of this planet and every living creature who lives here with us. So we must understand how everything fits together. This PDF will help you understand this and I hope give you things to think about – to consider. And also give you help with identifying a bird you see and hear in that big shrub!

First row – left to right: Female Rose-breasted Grosbeak, Female House Finch, Pine Siskin, Female Purple Finch, Female Red-winged Blackbird.

Second row – left to right: Song Sparrow, House Wren, Female House Sparrow, American Tree Sparrow.

Photographers: Virginia Kickle, John Niehay, Jim Oettel, and Avery Cleon Spence.

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