

## Appearance



The hardest thing to observe about most birds is their actual appearance, in particular their color pattern. The bird is either too small or too far away, so all you get is a silhouette. Even if it's up close, many birds move around too much to get a clear look or the light is simply wrong.

Cheer up, you don't need to see or remember everything about how a bird looks. Instead, look for what are called "field marks". These are characteristic telltales, frequently easy to see if you know to look for them, that can quickly distinguish between otherwise similar birds.

Different groups of birds tends to have different types of field marks. For example, when looking at sparrows always look for the pattern on the head. Is it striped or uniform? On Downy and Hairy woodpeckers, look for the size of the bill in relation to the head. On most small songbirds, look for bars on the wings when the birds are perched. On most birds, look for the color of the legs and bill.

The exact shape of a feature is generally much less important than where it occurs on the bird. For example, it usually doesn't so much matter exactly WHERE that white patch on the rump is or how it is SHAPED, just that there is a white patch on the RUMP.

This is where the pictures and descriptions in a bird guide come in handy, because bird guides always draw attention to the field marks you can use to tell bird species apart.