

Behavior



The next thing to notice about a bird is WHAT is it doing? Different types of birds go about their business in very different ways, and most of the time it is a lot easier to see what a bird is doing than what it looks like.

First and foremost, is the bird by itself or is it in a flock? Birds tend to be solitary or social, but not both. Robins tend to be solitary, jays and crows generally come in family groups. Woodpeckers are almost always solitary, except for males courting females or young following their parents around. Finches and some sparrows always come in flocks. Chickadees and nuthatches move around in loose flocks, but not tight knit ones like finches.

Next, how is the bird moving around and exactly where is it going? Is it hopping around on the ground? That would likely make it a sparrow of some kind, if it's small. Is it flying short distances from twig to twig in the bushes or trees? That means it could be a chickadee, or a wood warbler. Is it sitting on a high perching watching things around it? That sounds like a flycatcher or a jay. Is it hard to see because it never leaves cover? That could be a wren.

And let's not forget, what is it eating? Some birds eat almost anything, but most have a strong preference for plant matter (seeds) or insects. If you see a small bird eating seeds on the ground, it is probably a sparrow of some kind. If you see a bird eat from a suet cake, it is likely a chickadee, nuthatch, bushtit, woodpecker, or one of a small handful of wood warblers. If it is walking up or down a tree trunk or large branch it is probably a nuthatch or brown creeper looking for insects.

You can also learn a lot by watching how a bird flies. Woodpeckers have a very distinctive "roller coaster" pattern as they alternate between flapping and gliding. Some birds fly fast and strong, others fly weakly. Some birds have smaller or shorter wings in proportion to their body size so they flap more quickly than other birds the same size (starlings). Some glide a lot. Usually these styles of flight are very easy to recognize at a glance, even from a great distance