



Start Birding

Birdwatching classes and individual tuition

Field guides and general bird books

Introduction

Due to the rise in popularity of birdwatching as a hobby, there are now lots of bird books to choose from, most of which can be found in your high street bookstore. So, with such a wide range on offer, which field guide do you choose? What makes a good field guide and what should you be looking for to help you identify birds more easily in the field? This handout will demystify field guides and will help you to make the best choice to facilitate your learning.

Elements that make up a good field guide

- Light, compact and informative
- The right birds for your individual circumstances
- Accurate and complex illustrations
- Concise text in plain English
- Distribution maps and population sizes
- Common and Latin names
- Systematic order of birds
- Topography
- Fieldcraft tips and Code of Conduct

Light, compact and informative: As you will be walking around with this guide for many hours to come, size and weight are important factors to consider when choosing your field guide. Also, you may need to consider whether you want it to fit into your favourite coat pocket if you don't want to carry a rucksack. There are many small field guides available, however most are lacking in essential information and do not offer enough illustrations to help you identify birds in the field. Once you have read the rest of the information below you will be able to assess how much information you will need your field guide to contain, then you can choose the most portable for you out of the best available. The last thing you want to do is to buy one, only to leave it at home because you can't carry it. As you build up your library you may want to invest in more books to refer to at home at the end of your birdwatching day. The range of books available will provide hours of pleasure and will extend your knowledge over a variety of related subjects areas.

The right birds for your individual circumstances: the number of birds shown in a field guide can differ immensely from one book to another. As a beginner, you will need to be able to look at illustrations for the birds that regularly occur in Britain. This will include summer and winter visitors as well as birds that regularly visit the UK on passage each year. Some field guides will not only cover birds seen in Britain but will also describe birds seen in parts of Europe, Asia and North Africa (see "**Putting it into context**" below). It is important that novice birdwatchers start with a good quality British field guide to avoid confusion when trying to identify birds that look very similar to European species. The introduction at the front of the book should give you some idea as to the aims of writing the field guide and the intended audience.

Accurate and complex illustrations: You will notice that some field guides show photographs of birds while others show an artist's illustrations. As a beginner, you can be forgiven for being drawn to a book with nice photographs because, after all, looking at birds is why you've taken up

the hobby in the first place. However, photographs are not that useful in a field guide. While it is easy enough now, with digital technology, to get a good photographic likeness of a bird, such field guides will usually only show one view of a bird and won't reveal the characteristics that are unique to that species. It is difficult to demonstrate subtle details of plumage using photographs of the size that would enable a field guide to be portable. Illustrations are always preferable. There are many brilliantly talented bird artists whose work is showcased in field guides. Eventually you will recognise some of their names. A good field guide will include illustrations that show the characteristics of each bird and emphasise the significant identifying markings you need to look for in the field. Illustrations should show birds in flight and in different plumages (winter, breeding and immature) and will compare similar species. To get a feel for which artists have captured the "essence" of a bird, look at birds that you know well in a few different field guides. Look at their stances and postures and ask yourself whether you feel they are a true likeness. Look at the attached notes – are they teaching you anything new?

Concise text in plain English: As well as emphasising useful field notes with each illustration, a good field guide will include text that gives you a brief description of the bird, habitat, breeding, song and call description, food and some behavioural tips (called "Jizz"). This will help you identify the bird. The guide will also contain the bird's size range and wingspan. It is worth noting that size is very difficult to assess in the field so use size in relation to other species rather than learning specific sizes for each bird. Size can be very misleading in different light and when birds fluff up their plumage in the cold. Choose guides that have the text on the same or facing page to aid speedy identification. You'll find this especially useful when your hands are too cold to turn the pages in winter or when you are wearing gloves! Some guides will contain symbols and abbreviations. Make sure that you read the preliminary notes in the field guide to see whether you can easily understand these. It is also useful if there is a glossary of terms used in the guide.

Distribution maps and population sizes: A good field guide will show a distribution map for each bird which will be colour coded. You will need to look in the introductory chapters to learn the colour code for your book. The distribution maps will show whether a species is resident; whether it is a winter or summer visitor; or the likelihood that it will turn up during migration. Again, for quick reference, it is useful to have distribution maps on the same page as the bird. Distribution maps are intrinsically linked with population numbers. Distribution and population data provides essential information when increasing your knowledge about birds and their movements. There are some things that you need to be aware of when interpreting the maps in your field guide. One is that colour coding can make a bird appear more common when a large expanse of colour is shown on a small map. It signifies that the species has been recorded in many 10km squares during survey work and not necessarily that it is present in large numbers. Also, be aware that the information provided is only correct at the time of going to print. Some birds are increasing their range while others are declining drastically due to conservation issues, both here and overseas.

Common and Latin names: It is advisable to choose a book that gives Latin names as well as common (vernacular) names, especially now that international communication is so easy. Common names can differ by region and country but the Latin name will generally remain the same. The Latin (or Latinised Greek) name is unique to each particular species and is the same in any language. Therefore, if you are birdwatching abroad or you are trying to communicate to a fellow birder in another country, you will both be able to look at the same bird in your field guides. The Latin name comes in 2 parts - the generic name (always with a capital letter) and the specific name. These should always be italicised i.e. a wigeon is *Anas penelope*. This system, called binomial nomenclature and applied to all animals and plants, was created by a Swedish naturalist, Carl von Linné (1707-1778) generally known as Linnaeus. Sometimes there can be three names - this is because the species is split into two or more races or sub-species. Have a look in your field guide for some of these. Binomial nomenclature indicates the relationships between species. The order of birds shown in most good field guides will reflect this relationship and the evolution of birds. If a Latin name changes then it is because research has proved that this relationship is

different than first thought, normally made possible by advances in technology. Changes to vernacular names can also occur. The reason for this is usually to minimise confusion in the English speaking birdwatching community where birds in two countries have the same common name.

Systematic order of birds: You may wonder why, in a good field guide, the birds are in a particular order and not listed alphabetically or based on size, colour or habitat. This is the systematic order, the taxonomic classification of birds according to their evolutionary relationship. The system used until recently in Europe is the Voous system devised by Dutch Ornithologist K.H Voous (see below). You will see it, not only in a good field guide, but also in bird lists, bird reports and scientific journals. Some good field guides may divert slightly from this only to show similar species to make comparisons easier when space is restricted. Others will purposefully change the recognised order for reasons which ought to be explained in the introductory chapters. Revisions to the systematic order of birds, and to the Voous system, have recently been made due to technological advances in biology. This now means that new field guides will show swans, geese and ducks; and grouse pheasants and partridges at the top of the order.

Birds of Britain and North-west Europe in Systematic Order: usually colour coded in your book

- Divers and Grebes
- Kingfishers
- Petrels and Shearwaters
- Bee-eaters and Rollers
- Storm Petrels
- Hoopoe and Parrots
- Gannets
- Woodpeckers and Wrynecks
- Cormorants
- Larks
- Herons, Bitterns and Egrets
- Swallows and Martins
- Spoonbills and Storks
- Pipits and Wagtails
- Flamingos and Cranes
- Waxwings
- **Swans, Geese, Ducks**
- Dippers
- Raptors
- Accentors
- **Grouse, Pheasants and Partridges**
- Wrens
- Rails and Crakes
- Chats and Thrushes
- Bustards and Stone Curlews
- Warblers
- Oystercatchers and Pratincoles
- Flycatchers
- Stilts and Avocets
- Babblers
- Plovers
- Long-tailed Tits and Tits
- Sandpipers, Snipes, Godwits, Curlews and Phalaropes
- Nuthatches and Creepers
- Skuas, Gulls and Terns
- Penduline Tits
- Auks
- Orioles
- Pigeons and Doves
- Shrikes
- Sandgrouse
- Starlings
- Cuckoos
- Crows and Jays
- Owls
- Sparrows
- Swifts
- Finches
- Nightjars
- Buntings

Topography: If you are going to accurately identify birds and be able to report your sightings to bird recorders, you will need to learn some topography. A good field guide will contain a section on topography which is the graphic representation of the details found on a bird. Turn to the front of the field guide and you should see diagrams of the parts of a bird's body and the names of specific groups of feathers, markings etc. We will learn about this in detail in another session.

Fieldcraft tips and Code of Conduct: As you will learn on this course, there is much more to identifying birds than just matching a species to an image in your book. Improving your fieldcraft technique will enable you to locate more birds and study them without causing any disturbance to them or to other wildlife. Fieldcraft techniques will be covered in detail during your birdwatching classes. Make yourself aware of the Birdwatcher's Code of Conduct which will provide a guiding behavioural framework for you to follow and encourage.

Should I take a field guide with me?

Don't be ashamed to consult your field guide while you are out birdwatching. It is an essential companion and you will learn a lot if you have chosen well. Many birdwatchers will go out without a field guide and some will take one with them but won't take it out of their bag - there is no shame in using one and, initially, you will be lost without it. If there are other birders around then by all means ask for help from someone with more experience and be happy to accept help if it is freely given. Be prepared to challenge someone's identification if you have a different opinion. If you have learned how to use your field guide effectively, you will be able to ask informed questions about markings, jizz and bird migration. Equally, don't worry about making mistakes. We all do it on a regular basis.

Tried and tested field guides and other useful birding books

Now that you know what to look for in a good field guide, are there any out there that are recommended? How many birds do they describe? What makes them stand out from the rest? Here is a little more information to help you make your choice. Below is a list of field guides to compare, showing how many species they describe. You may have already found the perfect book for you. I have found some of these very useful over the years.

Putting it into context

550 species of birds can be seen in the British Isles with 366 of these being very rare or scarce migrants, often seen on remote headlands or offshore islands. 50 of these are generally confined to special habitats. In conclusion, this means that, of the 120 million individual birds seen in the UK, $\frac{3}{4}$ of these will belong to only 30 species.

Reliable field guides for developing birders (Highlighted in green = good for beginners; the other references are good books to go for as you develop further)

- Peter Holden and Tim Cleaves (2002) ***RSPB Handbook of British Birds***, Helm (describing 280 species)
- Chris Kightley, Steve Madge, Dave Nurney (1998), ***The Pocket Guide to the Birds of Britain and North-West Europe***, Pica Press (describing 385 species)
- Peter Hayman and Rob Hume (2002), ***The New Birdwatcher's Pocket Guide***, Mitchell Beazley (describing 430 species)

- Killian Mullarney, Lars Svensson, Dan Zetterstrom, Peter J. Grant (1999) ***Collins Bird Guide***, HarperCollins (describing 722 species)
- A few heavy tomes will describe birds seen in the Western Palaearctic. The Handbook of the Birds of Europe, the Middle East, and North Africa: The Birds of the Western Palaearctic, often referred to by the initials BWP, is a nine-volume ornithological handbook published from 1977 to 1996. A two-volume Concise Edition was produced in 1998. Both Oxford University Press (describing around 900 species).

Other useful bird books

- Dominic Couzens (2003) ***Identifying Birds by Behaviour***, Collins
- Dominic Couzens; David Nurney (2013) ***Birds ID Insights***, New Holland Publishers