

Field Guides

By Linda Hendricks Spence

Before I discuss online field guides, bird apps, and field guide books, I will tell you what I prefer – field guides that are books. Keep in mind, this is a personal preference and I think it is partly a generational thing. I lived part of my life before cell phones and the internet. I was raised on books. I love books. I do use online field guides from time to time and I do use a bird app when I need it, but when I am birding or working on my notes, I most often use my field guides that are books. But this is for you to decide – what are you most comfortable using? And a question to consider: If you choose to rely on apps or online field guides, when you are out in nature, how connected to the rest of the world do you want to be? With books, you are connected to just the books. If you have your cell phone or tablet with you, then you are firmly connected to the rest of the world who can interrupt you at any time. And of course a third option is to use books, online field guides, and apps interchangeably. Experiment a bit, then do what is right for you.

Field Guides – Books:

Do you already have a field guide? If the answer is ‘yes’, would you like another one? If you have you been looking for a field guide, are you having trouble deciding which one would be best among the dozens and dozens that are available? There are so many to choose from – how to decide?

The good news is you do not have to make one choice, you can have several field guides – all are a bit different from each other. I just took a look at my book case and I have sixteen. Some cover large areas - like all of the United States; some cover a whole continent – like Europe; and some are very restrictive – I have one that discusses the birds in Washington, DC. Like good friends, books, and plants, I can never have enough field guides!

My advice is that before you buy a field guide, consider what you want from it. All of them list and describe each species of bird found in the area specified in the title and the species will be listed in the family order set out by the American Ornithological Society (see Chapter 7 for more information on this organization). Almost all field guides include range maps. Where field guides differ is in the other information offered and if the guide uses photographs or artists’ illustrations.

Let’s begin by discussing the choice of photographs or illustrations. There are advantages and disadvantages to both. In my experience:

Photographs:

Pros:

- There is an “alive” quality to a photograph that an illustration will never achieve. Photographs also show birds as they really are – not an idealized representation.
- Birds are most often photographed in their habitat.

Cons:

- Sometimes sharpness and clarity can be a problem. Photos that were sharp and clear can end up with a lesser quality during the printing process.
- Color can inadvertently be changed during the printing process.
- Key identifying marks can be in shadow.

Illustrations:

Pros:

- Sharp and clear.
- Colors are more easily controlled.
- There are no shadows and key marks can be highlighted.

Cons:

- No matter how accurate or beautiful, it is always a representation. And each illustration is a representation of the 'idealized' bird.
- Almost all illustrations are just of the birds – no habitat is included.

Preference for photographs or illustrations is a personal choice. Both will aid you in identifying whatever bird you are observing. When I began birding, I had two field guides. One used photographs and the other used illustrations. I found the photographs did not show enough detail and sometimes were a bit confusing. Some were dull and bland. I especially had trouble with photographs of some hawks, all female ducks and the entire Sparrow Family. There were shadowed areas in the photographs and sometimes right where I wanted to see a physical trait. However, that was back in the 1980's and both the technologies of photography and printing have greatly changed. For the first years of my birding hobby, I relied solely on my field guide that contained illustrations. This guide also used an arrow system in which arrows pointed to the best identifying characteristics. And for my beginning years, I used that field guide exclusively; I gave away my field guide containing photographs.

But times have changed, field guides have changed, and so have I. While initially I relied solely on color illustrations, eventually I found them somewhat sterile and lifeless. And I found that no bird in the wild is ever as perfectly presented as its illustration in my field guide. Observing the physical features of birds is dependent on so many things: line of sight, light, distance from you, position of the bird, and molting – just to name a few. I bought another field guide with photographs and as the years went by, I found myself looking more and more at photographs to verify my identification.

My First Field Guide

I began birding at the J.N. "Ding" Darling National Wildlife Refuge on Sanibel Island off the coast of Florida in 1979. I had a pad of paper, a pen, binoculars, and my first field guide: A Field Guide to Eastern Birds by Roger Tory Peterson. I loved his system of arrows that he used to point out the physical characteristics I should look for on each bird – as a beginner, I found that so helpful. What I found awkward was the range maps were all together at the back of the book and I found as time went on, I liked the range map to be right at the bird's entry.

I now have a shelf full of field guides for birds – different authors and all with their own approaches. When I go birding now, I generally take three with me and one of them is usually this first field guide by Roger Tory Peterson. And I find when I am stumped in IDing a bird, it is my 'safety net' – the one I rely on.

So, if you like your first field guide, don't ever discard it or give it away – keep it. It will teach you so much and you will become so comfortable using it. Write in its margins. Make all sorts of notes about what you are seeing. Regardless of how you move on, or what field guides eventually become your favorites, you might be just like me and always go back to that first guide when you just cannot make an ID. The AOS changes the order of birds every so often and new field guides will reflect that. All the birds that should be in the book will be there just in a different order. I do like my newer guides, but I have to sometimes still use the index to find a bird – not in my Roger Tory Peterson guide – I know exactly where every bird is. I love that!

I now have three favorite field guides. Two use color illustrations, but the illustrations differ – different artists have different styles and interpretations. The third uses photographs and the photographs are great. So many of the problems I had encountered with my first field guide were solved. And now, each species of bird was photographed several times: male, female, juvenile, breeding plumage, winter plumage - even the location of the photo was listed. The photographs also included the surrounding habitat. Now, all three guides are with me when I am birding – two are in the bag I carry with me as I walk and one remains in the car – and the two I take in my bag vary.

It is not uncommon for me to bird in the morning and then stop at a restaurant for lunch and have all three books open on my table. Plus my own notebook. There is hardly any place for my lunch – or Cleon! I use all three field guides all the time and interchangeably.

So my advice would be to have a field guide with color illustrations and a field guide with photographs. Use them both and see what you think.

Other information: Almost all field guides have more information in them besides the birds and their photos/illustrations and characteristics of the birds found in the specified area of the title, and listed species by species in family order. If you already own a field guide, take a good look at the beginning and ending pages. You may be amazed at what is there: diagrams with labels, descriptions, helpful hints, explanations. Birding can be as simple or as big an educational opportunity as you want to make it. Some field guides contain as much information as you would get in an entire beginning course in ornithology – and the authors are to be commended for this. It allows the user of the guide to decide how much to learn. It is always your choice as to what to read and what to skip.

What area should my field guide cover?: If you are not a traveler and you are just starting to identify birds, consider getting a field guide that deals with birds just in your area – your state or your region of states. This eliminates a lot of choices. Sparrows are a good example for limiting the area your field guide covers. There are about twenty species of sparrows living here in Illinois and they can all look alike – especially to a beginning birder. But even experienced birders can be frustrated by all these ‘little brown birds’. A field guide of birds in North America will contain at least forty-five species of sparrows. To consider forty-five little brown birds for the unknown little brown bird in front of you can be overwhelming.

Using a field guide of only the area in which you are birding helps not only beginners but also good birders who are in a new and unfamiliar area. Wait to purchase/use a field guide that includes all of the United States and Canada. A guide this inclusive would be a wonderful reference guide, but too many birds will be included when you are trying to ID one bird. Many western birds, like the Western Tanager, rarely or never come east of the Rockies and many eastern birds, like the Scarlet Tanager, are rarely or never found west of the Rockies. For example, if I am birding in New England, I do not need a guide that includes birds only found in states like Nevada and Oregon. Including those birds would increase the number of birds to consider when I see a bird I do not recognize. Keeping your field guide to the region in which you live or are traveling will eliminate birds to consider.

To conclude - my suggestions to consider when choosing a field guide:

Photos or illustrations? I recommend two field guides – one with illustrations and one with photographs. They will complement each other.

Consider the size of the field guide. Big ones can be heavy. But small ones may only contain the most common birds. Take a good look at the birds included before you buy. And is this a guide you want with you as you bird because if it is, its size should be smaller and lighter. Or is this a guide you will use later for research and study so size and weight will not matter? The guides I use when birding fit into the large pockets of my jacket – which I bought because of the size of the pockets.

Area you want the field guide to cover. Do you need a specific smaller area like only birds in your state, or birds in Chicago, New Orleans, or Central Park in New York City? Or do you need a much larger geographical range like birds east of the Mississippi, birds west of the Rockies, or birds in North America? The title should state the area or region.

Older versus newer field guides. Latin names for birds and the order of families listed in field guides will change (because of decisions made by AOS). The book you begin with is often the one you stick with because you get so familiar with it.

Range maps. Do you want a range map with each bird or all range maps placed together which generally is in the rear of the book? Guides differ as to the placement. I have both and prefer maps to be right with the bird. But, this is a personal choice.

Additional information. Field guides differ as to how much extra information is included. Do you just want to identify birds or do you want to know more about them? Just remember, the more information a field guide contains, the bigger and heavier it is.

Order of birds. Almost all field guides are set up using the order of birds determined by the AOS*. However, every so often the AOS changes the order. So where you have always found falcons in older guides like Peterson's (my favorite is copyright 1980) which is in the midst of all the other raptors like hawks, vultures, and owls, that is not where falcons are now. In my newer field guides copyright from about 2016 on, the woodpeckers are now right before the falcons and the parrots follow right after. Hawks, vultures and owls are located away from the falcons. This can be confusing. In field guides published around the same time, the order of birds will be the same in each book. However, if you use field guides published 10 years or more apart, the order of birds may be different. And this matters.

When you are looking at a bird you do not know, you do not want to spend a lot of time searching your field guide for specific birds or a family of birds. You want to go straight to the page. Looking up 'woodpeckers' in the index takes time. I know it may only be seconds but as beginning birders will learn the first day of birding, birds disappear in a nanosecond. You see a bird sitting on a branch, you blink your eyes, and it can be gone without a trace. So you want to be able to locate families of birds like woodpeckers, or specific birds like the Northern Flicker - which might be what you are seeing - as quickly as possible. To do that, you must know where birds are in your field guide without looking them up in the index. This takes practice – and you will use your field guide most when you are starting out. I am surprised my original field guide still has its pages intact. I flipped through it, flipped through it, and then flipped through some more – time after time - until I started to remember where the families were in the book.

**More on the AOS in Articles. Go to the homepage of this website and click on Articles in the menu which is on the left side of the page. Click on [Organizations That Not Only Help Birds, But Will Help You Understand Birds](#). Scroll down to American Ornithologists Organization.*

One thing you might want to consider is to use tabs in your field guide – regardless if you are taking it into the field or using it at your desk or restaurant table. I have seen some people with tabs marking the beginning page of each family of birds. I tend to use big paperclips to mark where families of birds are that I could see during a birding walk. Whatever works for you. Just remember, you do not want to spend time leafing through an index to find the page number for a bird that may not even be the right bird. And then by the time you do find the bird you were seeking in the guide, the actual bird is long gone. Finding birds in a field guide needs to be a quick process.

What do you want from your field guide? This is the question you must ask yourself. My answer is that I want different things at different times so I have sixteen field guides. Three which I regularly use in the field and one I regularly use as a reference when working on my field notes or just want to know more. I use the other twelve periodically – they all have a purpose. Each author or group of authors has something different to offer. None sit on the shelf gathering dust.

When I am out birding, I want a field guide that does not weigh much and that will fit into the pocket of the coat I most often wear or into the small bag I carry when not wearing the coat. I want good drawings or photos of each bird with a list of their physical characteristics and their habitat. And I want a range map right with the bird. And a notation as to how common it is where I am birding. Everything else is optional.

When I am working on my notes or the list of birds from an outing, I want more information such as where the bird nests, how many times a year, and how many eggs; what the bird eats; migration?; and behavior such as shy and reclusive, aggressive, often motionless.

Online Field Guides:

My two favorites are allaboutbirds.org from The Cornell Laboratory of Ornithology (part of Cornell University) and audubon.org/bird-guide from the National Audubon Society. You will need internet to access either of these – or any online field guide - on your phone or tablet. Normally in a neighborhood or a city park that will not be a problem. If you are in a rural neighborhood or out in the country, the chances of it being a problem are greater.

For me, a big downside of my cell phone when I am birding is that I just do not want to be connected to the rest of the world. You do not need internet access for some birding apps and you do have the option of turning your ringer for texts and phone calls off, but will you actually do that? And this is true even if I am just in my own yard. I want to immerse myself – most especially my mind and spiritual side – in being outside in the natural world. I do not want to hear or feel my phone ringing or buzzing with a call or text. I do not want to spend time looking something up on the internet. I want to breathe in the fresh air, look at the canopy of trees and sky, see the flowers, watch the clouds. I want to disconnect from technology – and from the rest of the world. I want a break from some of the other parts of my life. As much as I love my family and friends, I do not want to be at the beck and call of my cell phone. However, I do make an occasional exception – Merlin (see the following section on bird apps).

The plus side of an online field guide is you only have your small, lightweight cell phone or a bit larger tablet to carry with you – and many cell phones fit right into your pocket. Field guide books have

size and weight, and unless you have quite a large jacket pocket, you will need a day pack or some sort of bag in which to carry them.

I take notes and make a list when I bird and for me that is with pen and paper – I either use my birding notebook or write in the margins of my field guide. I know I can take notes on my cell phone or tablet but I have never gotten comfortable with that – and to be honest it is more than that – I just don't like it at all. My opinion is that once again, this is in part generational – I am an older birder. I was not raised with cell phones and tablets. My 'tablet' was always lined paper and that is what I am comfortable using. But keep in mind, there is no right or wrong way to do this – do whatever is most comfortable for you. I love my field guide books and birding notebook with pen. Some of my birding friends are just as attached to their cell phones. We are all correct. The point is to get out, enjoy yourself, look at some birds, and do a bit of learning!

For me, where online bird guides really shine is when I am working at home at my desk. I will pull one up on my PC and look at my notes in my birding notebook. These online bird guides often have much information on each species – especially allaboutbirds.org. For after-birding, and trying to make sense of and learn about what I have seen and heard, allaboutbirds.org is my go-to online field guide.

Bird apps:

I have tried several with varying success. My favorite is Merlin and like allaboutbirds.org, this is also from The Cornell Lab. Since this was created for cell phones, its format works with cell phone limitations quite well. There is an adequate, abbreviated online field guide with excellent photos of each bird. There is a section where you can describe your unknown bird and based on your location, the app will suggest some species. I think this is an interesting idea but I have never had much luck with it. The suggested birds are often not what I am seeing. You can also send a photo of your unknown bird but I have had mixed success with this, also. Anyone who has tried to take a clear photo of an unknown bird that shows some of its physical characteristic immediately realizes how difficult this can be.

I think the best part of this app – and I am astonished at how good this is! – is the Sound ID. By tapping the mic icon, the app will record all the bird songs and calls it hears and then list the birds making them. It is not 100% correct but, in my estimation, it is almost always correct. And it has the ability to filter out background noise like traffic, children, lawnmowers, wind chimes, and barking dogs. And it hears things I do not, so is quite sensitive. If I am unsure, I do verify what the app suggests and I have found that most times, the app is right. Bird songs and calls are not easy for me and this app has been a great help in teaching me to recognize more and more birds by their songs and calls. It would be my recommendation not to use this part of the app as a crutch, but as a learning tool. You do not want the app to do all the work for you, but to teach you.

More information on this free app and how to download it at merlin.allaboutbirds.org