

◀ You can achieve a reasonable image of an unusual species by holding your smartphone to your binoculars – like this record shot of a White-fronted Goose at BTO's Nunnery Lakes Reserve.

## FIELD CRAFT

# Documenting and identifying unfamiliar birds

**Two of the many great things about watching birds are the never-ending opportunities to learn, and the capacity nature has for serving up surprises. Nick Moran and Paul Stancliffe unpick the process of identifying unfamiliar or unusual species, and why it pays to be prepared for the unexpected...**

Although the ease with which an expert can pick out a Caspian Gull from a motley crew of loafing larids might seem superhuman to most of us, they are following a step-by-step process – even if subconsciously – that can be learned and applied.

Whether faced with something unfamiliar or a species you immediately recognise as unusual, the first step is to remain calm! It might be tempting to gesticulate in excitement (or exasperation, if it has disappeared from view) or call out to someone else. However, the way you react in those first few seconds can be critical to how the bird responds to you, and whether you go on to observe it well enough to clinch the identification. Furthermore, that internal 'pause for breath' also gives a moment for the brain to rectify



▶ Always take a longer, closer look if you can.

## 1 Identify

You discover an unusual or unfamiliar bird. What next? Narrow down its identification using size, shape, plumage, vocalisations, behaviour and habitat.

### RESOURCES

- ▶ The popular Collins Bird Guide is available as an app for iOS and Android devices.
- ▶ The identification of any organism you have photographed can be 'crowd-sourced' via iSpot [www.ispotnature.org](http://www.ispotnature.org).

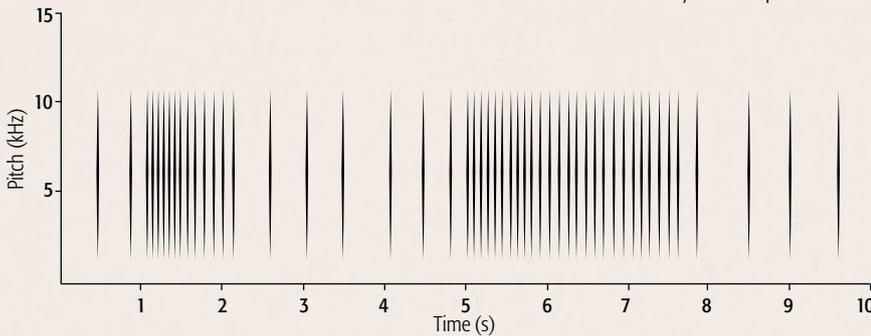
## 2 Document

It is important to document what you see and hear; not only can this help you to make an identification, it could also be useful material for others.

- ▶ Make some notes and sketches of the bird while you are watching it.
- ▶ Hold a smartphone to the eyepiece of a telescope or binoculars to take photographs and video.
- ▶ Record unfamiliar vocalisations and upload these to [xeno-canto.org](http://xeno-canto.org).



**SONOGRAM OF THE CALLS OF AN AGITATED LESSER WHITETHROAT**



► Record unusual sounds on your smartphone.

**3 Record**

Recording your observation in a BTO scheme or survey ensures that it is available for use in science and conservation at local, national and international scales.

► If you're confident about the identification, log your unusual sighting in BirdTrack ([www.birdtrack.net](http://www.birdtrack.net)), ideally as part of a complete list. You can do this in the field via the app, or back home at your computer. Alternatively, you can include the record in the survey you were doing at the time.

**4 Report**

Other birdwatchers may be interested in your observation, so think about opportunities to report your sighting through your local bird club or other news outlets.

► Tell the local bird recorder and, if there are no sensitivities about the bird or location, consider informing a bird news service e.g. BirdGuides or announcing it publicly on social media, so that other birdwatchers can enjoy your discovery and help to document it.

any mistaken conclusion it might have jumped to on the initial view. That's not to say first impressions don't count – they often do – but they can be misleading, and always benefit from follow-up observation.

If the bird vanishes, never to be seen or heard again, it may be best to consign it to the 'one that got away' pile, frustrating though that is. However, if it stays put, the next step is to go through a mental checklist and begin documenting the features you can see and hear. This is where careful, calm observation pays dividends, along with a trusty notebook and pencil. Whilst electronic notebooks

**Calm observation pays dividends, along with a trusty notebook and pencil**

and pads can be used, careful, written notes, and more importantly sketches drawn at the time, are worth their weight in gold. There can be shortcuts to the note-taking process, for example you might concentrate on the head pattern and primary projection on a warbler in the first instance – these pieces of information alone might be enough to clinch identification. However, as much information as possible will make things much easier when looking back through your notes and trying to put name to bird. Sketches are just that, they don't have to be works of art, just simple drawings that contain any distinctive features that you see, with short notes on colour, shape etc. If the only distinctive part of the bird is the head, the sketch might be of that only.

Evolution has equipped the human body with an amazing toolkit for detecting and categorising what's around us, and the notebook and pencil remain as powerful as ever for documenting the details of our observations. Twenty-first-century birders also have an array of apps and other technology at their fingertips to aid identification and capture supporting evidence. So get documenting your unusual sightings! ■

**Documenting observations: why does it matter?**

It's important for the biological record to have supporting evidence for observations of rare species so that records can be verified and any changes in patterns of occurrence reliably monitored. Ultimately, reliable data have the potential to inform conservation action.

Rapidly declining species pose a unique problem: observers might assume that because the species was present in an area a few years earlier, it is still there now. We should be willing to document sightings of species in areas where they have become scarce or rare – such as Willow Tit across much of its former range – even if it might seem like an unnecessary chore,

so that such declines can be accurately tracked, better understood and wherever possible, addressed.

**WHAT'S IN IT FOR ME?**

Taking notes, making sketches and using technology to document observations are great ways to become a better birder! The processes of note-taking and sketching undoubtedly attune your observational skills. Photographs and sound recordings are valuable supporting evidence that you can refer back to as the memory of the observation fades. They also make it easy to canvas opinion on the ID, through public forums like iSpot or by private correspondence with experts.