

FIELD CRAFT

Three ways to build skills at home

Becoming better at anything takes practice, and the best way to develop your bird identification skills is to look at and listen to birds in the field as often as you can. However, there are many reasons why it is not always possible to spend as much time outside as we might like, particularly in winter. Help is at hand though: there are plenty of ways to build your skills in the comfort of your own home, day or night and whatever the weather! Training Manager Nick Moran expands.

1 BECOME A BIRD-BOOKWORM

Simply thumbing through a fieldguide at home will help build familiarity with its layout, making it easier to find what you are looking for when you next reach for it outdoors. A good next step is to 'read around' – focus on one or a small number of species you find hard to identify, and compare the key identification pointers that are picked out about those birds in a few different books (or apps and websites, if you prefer).

A logical progression is to create your own comparison tables to summarise the main features of 2–4 similar species, as highlighted in the various sources you have looked at. When making any comparison table, we encourage you to start with structural differences. The remaining selection of features to include in each table will be determined by the birds you are studying: for example, a comparison of two wader species might include face markings, upper- and under-part pattern and colouration, and the length and colour of the bare parts (beak and legs). Try to come up with acronyms or rhymes to help you remember the differences; these often work best if you make up your own, rather than use someone else's. That said, it can be hard to improve on certain well-known memory aids, such as "a little bit of bread and no cheese" for Yellowhammer song.

For many species, other clues such as habitat, behaviour, seasonality, distribution and abundance should play an important role in helping you determine whether a particular identification is likely to be correct. You can include this type of information in your table, or make a separate table of 'other clues' for any species that you are comparing.

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BLACK-TAILED GODWIT
LEGS: Long

SUPERCILIUM:
Brightest in front of the eye

BACK PATTERN:
Plain

NECK: Longer, plain

BEAK: Longer and straighter



BARTAILED GODWIT
LEGS: Shorter (esp. above knee)

SUPERCILIUM:
Clearly extends beyond the eye

BACK PATTERN:
Streaked (like Curlew)

NECK: Shorter, streaked

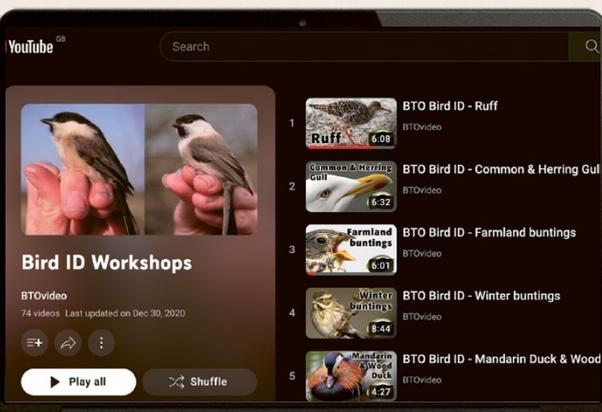
BEAK: Slightly shorter and more upturned

2 JUMP ONLINE

We offer a wide range of popular online bird ID courses to help you gain confidence in identifying songbirds, raptors, seabirds, corvids, waders, waterbirds and gulls, by both sight and sound. Our YouTube channel, BTOvideo, also has more than 100 engaging and instructional identification videos, found in the playlists 'Bird ID Workshops', '#BirdSongBasics' and 'Garden BirdWatch'.

You could also dip into the fabulous xeno-canto website to listen to songs and calls. If you do, we suggest starting with common species from your area that you don't currently recognise by sound. Use the 'Advanced search' tool to narrow down your search to the UK and the specific vocalisation you want to hear, such as song, alarm call or flight call. Look at the sonogram to help you visualise the sound – many of us find this really helps our brains to interpret and learn to recognise the sounds we are hearing, by connecting them with visual cues. Alternatively, if you find it easier to remember bird sounds when they are presented alongside some commentary, tune in to *Tweet of the Day* on the BBC iPlayer.

After spending time increasing your familiarity with a particular group, you could even try testing your knowledge with the Nord University 'BirdID' web pages (*BTO News* 341).

**TOTAL RECALL**

Briefly study an image of a bird, or the real thing, then look away and recall as many features as you can.

**3 MAKE A GAME OF IT**

Games can be a fun way to learn new skills, build confidence and commit identification criteria to memory. There are many home-made variations on the picture-quiz theme and even a few commercially available options, such as Bird Bingo.

Two games that have proved successful in BTO training courses are 'Describer-Identifier' and 'Total Recall', both of which can be played online as well as in person. Describer-Identifier is a game for two or more players, whereby one describes a bird's structural and plumage features from a fieldguide illustration or an online image, without mentioning habitat, size or any clues such as "It's a duck". The identifier(s) must work out what it is from the information given. An entertaining extension is for the identifier(s) to sketch the features given by the describer.

Total Recall (for all those Arnold Schwarzenegger fans out there?!) can be played alone or

with an unlimited number of people, and even in teams. Players look at an image of a bird for 15 seconds, then cover it and write down as many features as they can remember. The goal is to be as descriptive as possible, using accurate terminology. If you have yet to learn the various feather tracts, have the bird-topography diagram from a good fieldguide to hand. A variation is for one person or team to come up with questions about the bird's features for the other person or team, such as "What colour was its crown?" or "How many wingbars did it have?". So, find some decent bird images, make a date with your friends and enjoy! ■

Get involved If you try these games or know of any others that work well, please tell us about your experiences by emailing: training@bto.org

Find BTO online training courses at: www.bto.org/develop-your-skills

Try the Nord University Bird ID quizzes at: www.birdid.no/bird/quiz

Explore bird songs and calls at: xeno-canto.org

Looking to make the most of any outdoor birding this winter? Go online to read the Field Craft article from *BTO News* 333 at: www.bto.org/fieldcraft