

## **Birdwatching for Beginners**

**By Adam Trujillo**

Sometimes getting into a new hobby like birdwatching can be intimidating. But birdwatching is a fun activity for everyone, including beginners.

While the simple act of watching and enjoying wild birds is great a way to pass the time, the actual challenge comes in identifying which bird species you are looking at. That question can be hard, even for some of the most experienced birdwatchers! When trying to identify a bird, go slow and don't get discouraged. Birds can unfortunately fly away, making them harder to identify. Remember though, it's a marathon not a sprint.

If you are able to get a good field guide or a good bird app on your phone, and a good pair of binoculars, that goes a long way into helping you identify a bird. Make notes for yourself on the birds you encounter regarding identifying marks and then look them up when you have a chance. Once you are confident that the bird has the right colors, shape, size, and is in your area, you can successfully say you identified a species.

Perhaps the most obvious indicator for beginners is the color of the feathers. Some birds, like the male Northern Cardinal, are easy to identify because of their obvious feather coloration. But other, more pesky birds, give us a harder time. The female Northern Cardinal, for example, is a less obvious brown color with a bit of red tint.

There are also a few general rules to keep in mind when identifying birds. Generally, males have more color to them than the females do, so make sure you are not only looking for the bright colors. A cardinal is still a cardinal, even if its brown! Besides feather color, you can look for beak and leg color, body shape, leg length, etc. to help you identify species.

Other distinguishing features can include the position of the tail feathers, bill size, song, and habitat. Once you gain more experience in birding, you'll be able to look for one distinguishing feature on a bird, like a prominent crest or slanted bill, to be able to properly identify it. Even if you are only able to get a few seconds look at a bird, that may be all you need to narrow down your selection of what you are looking at.

Once you expand your repertoire of bird identification, you will be able to take quick glance and ID, rather than having to look through your field guide. Birding is a practiced field, not something to go into expecting 100% accuracy immediately. Again, you will have a field guide with you to help you out, and practice makes perfect. If you need more help, you can always reach out to another birder to help you.

When you feel you have reached a comfortable level of being able to identify birds, you can start to reach out and help organizations with species population and regional counts. The birding community here in Texas is large and welcoming, so you won't be alone! Remember, birding is a fun hobby, not a competition, so grab your binoculars, get your field guides, hit the trails and see what you can find.

Photo by Pete Romfh: Quintana Neotropical Bird Sanctuary is one of the many great birding spots in our area.