Activity: Birdwatching

Objectives: Students will be able to identify ten birds by size, shape, color, song, habitat, and behavior. Students will be able to discuss and identify bird adaptations.

Materials: Bird field guides, binoculars, clipboards, pencils, checklists, and activity sheets

Background: Birdwatching can be a lot of fun year-round. By visiting different habitats at different times of the year, the students will find different birds. Many birdwatchers or birders have a yearly or life list. These lists can be extensive. Some Iowa birders have big day counts, where birdwatchers try to visit as many habitats and areas as possible all over the state, to observe and count the most species of birds in one day. A successful big day count in Iowa may include 150 or more species. Not all species live in the same habitat, so try to visit several different types of habitats.

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So how do you begin to watch birds? Look at the types of habitats in your area. Determine what season will be best. Spring and fall are good times of the year because many bird species are migrating. The best time to see birds is early morning or late afternoon. Many of the activities in this booklet have been written to facilitate this activity.

Procedure: Arrange the students in small groups with binoculars, pencils, clipboards, checklists, and birdwatching activity sheets. They will fill out the sheet as they walk.

For each bird the students see, observe its body size. Is it sparrow-sized (six inches), robin-sized (ten inches), or crow-sized (20 inches)? Try to pick out field marks to help identify the bird. Does the bird have an eyestripe like a red-eyed vireo or an eye ring like a Nashville warbler? Does it have a crest like a cardinal or does it have a crown stripe like a golden-crowned kinglet? Is the bird plain or is the breast spotted like a wood thrush or streaked like a brown thrasher?

Look at the body shape. Is it chunky like a starling or slender like a cuckoo? Is the tail forked, notched, square-tipped, round-tipped, or pointed? Look at the bill size. Is it an insect-eating beak, a long stabbing beak, thick for nut-cracking, or very long for probing? Are the legs long like a heron or short like a wren?

Does its tail have a a bright-colored flash pattern? Is the tail striped along the side of the tail like a junco or does it have a band at its tip like a kingbird? Do the wings have wing-bars like the goldfinch or none like the robins?

Observe the habitat. Was the bird seen in fields, meadows, or brushy areas? Cities or towns? Deciduous woodlands, freshwater ponds, lakes, or marshes?

How does the bird behave? When it flies, does it dip up and down (undulate) like a goldfinch or fly in a straight line like a dove? Hover like a kestrel or soar like a gull or hawk? Beat its wings slowly like a heron or rapidly like a duck? Does it climb trees like a nuthatch or hop on the ground like a robin? Does the bird flick its tail or dart after an insect like a flycatcher? Is the bird wading in water like a heron or does it run along the shoreline like a shorebird? All of these behaviors are clues to help identify the bird.

After identifying as many characteristics as possible, use the field guides to identify the birds. Select ten common Iowa birds and go birdwatching to find those birds. Despite your best efforts, there will always be some birds you can't identify. With some practice, however, you should be able to identify most of the birds you see. That is part of the challenge of birdwatching.

Activity : Birdwatching ID Sheet

Size: Is the bird larger than a sparrow (six inches), a robin (ten inches), or a crow (20 inches)?

Shape: Body shape: plump, sleek, thin, short, streamlined
Beak shape: thick, thin, long, short, stabbing, straight, curved
Head shape: crested, plain
Tail shape: forked, notched, square-tipped, round-tipped, pointed, long, short
Leg shape: long, short, feathered, featherless
Foot shape: webbed, lobed, talons, perching

Color: Wingbars, rump patch, eye ring or stripe, crown color
Breast pattern: streaked, spotted, plain

Habitats: In what type of habitat is the bird observed?

Behavior: How is the bird acting?

Song: Identify words to the sound.

Size	Shape	Color	Habitat	Behavior	Song	Species

How to Use Binoculars

For beginning birders of any age, first attempts to use binoculars (also called field glasses) can be frustrating. A bird that is easily seen with the naked eye is difficult to relocate through field glasses, perhaps giving enough time for the bird to fly away. Only repeated practice makes the process easy.

Finding a moving bird without binoculars isn't very difficult; the human brain naturally picks up small movements in the field of vision. Once the bird is seen, however, the watcher's eyes must hold their position while the binoculars are raised and focused. If the eyes (or the bird) move, don't search with the binoculars. It is always faster to take the glasses down, relocate the bird, and try again.

Practicing with mock binoculars helps to train the eye muscles. Use two paper tubes glued together side by side for your mock binoculars. (Toilet tissue tubes are ideal.)

Practice on a near object. Spot it, then sight it again through the mock binoculars. Distant objects are slightly mor e difficult to relocate, as are small birds. Practice the process of spot and resight until that part of bird watching becomes second nature.

Focusing the group's attention on a small bird in a large landscape is a challenge made easier by transposing the face of a clock on the area being observed. If the group is looking for a bird in a tree, for instance, the top of the tree would be twelve o'clock. If the bird is closer to the center, give an approximate position relative to the center and its nearest clock position. ("Warbler left of center, about ten o'clock")

Field Glasses

You don't need binoculars to enjoy birds. In fact, watching birds only through field glasses may inhibit you from seeing the rest of the environment - the "big picture" of the bird's world. Still, binoculars are magical. They move you up close to see details you could never see without them. Use binoculars as much as possible to add to your outdoor experience.

If you are purchasing binoculars for bird watching, look for something lightweight. A heavy, high-power pair will be hard to hold steady. Those little birds in the treetops are hard enough to find as it is. Binoculars are usually marked with two numbers. The first number is the power of magnification. Many good birding binoculars are 7 or 8 power. With binoculars of higher power, you may have difficulty focusing on subjects closer than 20 feet. The second number, after the X, measures the width of the lens at the larger end. In general, the wider the lens, the brighter the image. Most birders use 7X or 8X 35 binoculars because of their versatility. Binoculars of 8X50 will bring more light and detail to your eye, but the weight and size may be uncomfortable for long use. Even so, 8X50 binoculars are best scanning for birds over a distant landscape (beach, marsh, open field, or sky). You may be able to use them more comfortably if you can prop your arms on the ground or against a car.

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