

GENERAL BIRD FAMILY CHARACTERISTICS – Roger Jay Schroeder, Marshall, Minnesota

This is a list of bird characteristics to look for in the different families of birds. Knowing these characteristics will help you to more easily separate similar species of birds within families, and may help you to become more familiar with the characteristics of a particular species.

Obvious characteristics are not mentioned such as coloration, and range. Most bird families with two or more species are included in the list. Characteristics in boldface are typical of the entire bird family, such as eye ring, and wing bars. Therefore, they should be looked at carefully to observe the slight differences between species. Specific markings between two very similar species are given on occasion.

FAMILY CHARACTERISTICS

Loons	bill size, shape and color, back markings
Herons	size, back, wing pattern (in flight), bill, leg/foot color
Swans	bill shape, coloration, size
Ducks	wing pattern (flight) eclipse plumage, head shape (Scaup)
Plovers	face/throat markings, bill color,
Gulls	size, leg, head & bill color, bill marks, wing pattern
Terns	bill and leg color, tail forks , hood , wing tip color
Kites	wing patterns, tail shape and pattern
Buteos	wing shape and patterns, size, tail banding, back, shoulders
Grouse	sounds, habitat, tail banding
Cuckoos	bill color, tail banding
Nightjars	vocalizations, throat marks, tail marks
Woodpeckers	sounds, wing patches, back markings, nape, crown
Jays	throat, bill size and color, range
Titmice	Crest, face marks
Chickadee	vocalizations, face markings, crown, range
Thrushes	eye ring , wing bars, behavior,
Thrashers	bill size and shape, front markings, habitat
Waxwings	wing .bars, tail banding
Warblers	vocalizations, rump, streaking, eye ring, wing bars, face
Towhees	face markings, habitat, back, crown
Sparrows	crown, tail patterns, eye stripes, front streaking face markings, habitat, vocalizations
Finches	wing bars, eye stripes, bill size, shape and color
Longspurs	tail markings, head color patterns

FAMILY CHARACTERISTICS

Grebes	bill color, face, neck
Ibises	face markings
Geese	color, bill shape (Ross'/Snow Geese)
Rails	voice, size, bill size
Sandpipers	bill size, shape & color, eye stripes, leg color, wing and tail patterns, behavior, breast markings
Eagles	tail and underside patterns (Bald immatures)
Accipiters	size, outer tail shape, front streaking, head shape
Falcons	size, face marks, tail banding (Peregrine/Prairie)
Doves	vocalizations, size, range, back, wing pattern
Owls	vocalizations, size, habitat, ear tufts, streaks or bars
Swallows	wing size and shape, tail shape, back, rump, throat
Flycatchers	tail marks, wing bars, eye ring, vocalizations
Crows/Ravens	size, range, neck (Common/Chihuahuan Raven)
Nuthatches	eye stripe, cap, flank color
Wrens	vocalizations, eye stripe, throat, tail size, size of bird
Shrike	range, bill shape, front barring
Pipits	tail markings, flight, vocalizations
Vireos	eye ring, eye stripe, wing bars, vocalizations
Buntings	eye strips (females) wing bars, bill size
Meadowlarks	vocalizations, tail pattern, behavior
Blackbirds	tail shape, size and shape of bill
Orioles	wing bars, face, head color pattern
Tanagers	wing bars, eye rings (females), face patch
Grosbeaks	general color, face, breast, & underwing color (females)