

WINTER BIRD IDENTIFICATION CHALLENGE

Downsview Park's Winter Bird Challenge

Did you know that more than [215 species of birds](#) have been spotted in Downsview Park? Visit Downsview Park and explore the wonderful world of birds in winter. Throughout the Park we have posted images of common winter birds. Use the identification document to see if you can figure out which bird is which. For an extra challenge see if you can spot the actual birds that call Downsview Park home. Have questions about the birds you saw or the challenge? Email downsvieweducation@clc.ca we are happy to help you out! Take some pictures while in the Park and don't forget to tag us on social media @downsviewpark.

Community Challenge

Take a walk through your neighbourhood and see how many birds you can identify. Which species are present in your community? What birds did you spot that are not on this list?

Winter Bird Identification

Have you ever wondered what birds you are seeing when you are outdoors? Toronto is home to more than 350 species of birds, many of whom are seasonal visitors. Read through this document for common ways to identify the birds of Toronto.

Bird Vocalizations

Take a moment to stop and listen. What do you hear? The sounds of the forest (or city!) give you many clues as to who is around. Often the sound of a bird is what alerts you to who is around before spotting any birds.

Bird Songs

More complex than bird calls, these vocalizations are often used for breeding and verbally defending territory. Bird songs typically involve repetition and patterns. Most bird songs are heard during breeding season as vocalized by male birds. Some female birds, who defend territories in winter may sing songs only during winter season. Songs have specific characteristics by species but are unique to the individual bird.

Bird Calls

Short and simple compared to bird songs, these vocalizations are used year-round for practical purposes. Bird calls are how birds communicate with each other on a typical basis. As short as a syllable long, these calls may be used as alarms, warning when a predator is nearby, or when basic information needs to be conveyed to other birds.

Some common Toronto bird vocalizations are:

Chickadee: "Chick-a-dee-dee-dee-dee-dee." The more "dees" added the more alarmed the bird is.

Red-tailed Hawk: "Kee-eeee-arr." Sounds like a breathless shrieking sound that lasts 2-3 seconds.

Barred Owl: "Who-cooks-for-you."

Blue Jay: "Jay! Jay! Jay!"

Northern Cardinal: "Cheer-cheer-cheer-purty-purty-purty."

European Starling: "Wolf-whistle" (in a breathy way).

Downy Woodpecker: "Peeek" said sharply in a whinny.

Hairy Woodpecker: "Pik" said flatly and whinny.

American Goldfinch: "Pa-chip-chip-chip per-chick-a-ree" or "Po-ta-to-chip" while flying.

Colours, shapes and sizes

A quick flash through a sky, or a bird perched at a distance may be the first thing you see. Knowing common ways to categorize birds makes it easy. Size, how big is it? Can you compare it to very common birds, such as a sparrow or robin? That will be helpful in beginning the identification process.

Colours of birds can be a bit trickier for the beginner birder. Plumage, the feathers on a bird, can be impacted by age, sex or season. The Snowy Owl, known for its all white plumage, is only all white in males. Females and adolescents often have black markings on them. The bright red of the Northern Cardinal is probably a male, the females have a washed out colouring to them. In addition to variation due to sex, many birds are more faded looking in winter. The vibrant colours and perfect feathers of mating season are no longer needed, and energy is instead put into preserving warmth and finding food. A great example is the American Goldfinch. In the summer this bird is a bright yellow and black, but come winter it is often greys, light greens and muted yellows.

Looking at the shape and markings of a bird is a great way to improve the ease of identification. Notice the shape of the Northern Cardinal? Even with muted winter colours you know who it is. The golden colours of the American Goldfinch may be gone, but the white wing bars will help you identify them, even in the depths of winter.

Flight and Perch Patterns

Watching the flight of a bird gives you lots of clues as to who it is. Does it soar through the sky using wind currents? Are dozens, or even hundreds of the same bird flying together in a pattern? All of these are starting points for identifying common Toronto birds.

The beautiful red-tailed hawk uses air currents to soar in circles, thus avoiding exerting too much energy by flapping wings. The similarly sized turkey vulture, on the other hand, can be distinguished in flight because its soar is wobbly.

See a small bird perched on a high post watching over the area with its tail and head bobbing up and down? That just may be the American Kestrel. In flight they are easy to spot as they hover above prey almost like a helicopter frozen midair.

Have you ever noticed what looks like hundreds of birds flying together in a coordinated movement? Starlings, an introduced bird to Toronto, move in large groups. These noisy gatherings, called a "murmuration" of starlings are quite the sight!

Knowing about typical perching, flight and community behavior helps with identification in winter months.

Additional Resources:

<https://www.natureconservancy.ca/en/blog/50-bird-species-and-the-sound-they-make.html>

<https://www.toronto.ca/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/8ea3-City-Planning-Birds-of-Toronto-Biodiversity-Series.pdf>

<https://ornithology.com/>

<https://www.birds.cornell.edu/home>




<https://www.allaboutbirds.org/>







[https://www.npr.org/sections/13.7/2017/01/04/506400719/video-swooping-starlings-in-](https://www.npr.org/sections/13.7/2017/01/04/506400719/video-swooping-starlings-in-murmuration#:~:text=Murmuration%20refers%20to%20the%20phenomenon,seen%20a%20murmuration%20video%20before.)




[murmuration#:~:text=Murmuration%20refers%20to%20the%20phenomenon,seen%20a%20murmuration%20video%20before.](https://www.npr.org/sections/13.7/2017/01/04/506400719/video-swooping-starlings-in-murmuration#:~:text=Murmuration%20refers%20to%20the%20phenomenon,seen%20a%20murmuration%20video%20before.)




A special thank you to Elias Takacs and Riley Walsh for contributing the images for this information package. All photos were taken in Downsview Park by these avid birders.




WINTER BIRD "WHO AM I" GUIDE

	American Goldfinch	American Robin	American Kestrel
	 <p style="text-align: right; font-size: small;">Riley Walsh</p>	 <p style="text-align: right; font-size: small;">Elias Takacs</p>	 <p style="text-align: right; font-size: small;">Elias Takacs</p>
ID Tips	White wing bars with a notched tail and a conical beak. These small birds have an undulated flight pattern (they look like they are bouncing up and down while flying). Males have a faint hint of yellow on the head.	A large songbird, Robins are North America's largest thrush. They are famous for their orange chest, often overlooked is a black head that contrasts nicely against a white eye ring.	North America's tiniest falcon is slightly smaller than a pigeon. Both males and females have "sideburn" marks on the side of its head. Often seen hunting by hovering in one place or perched alone.
Habitat	Open weedy areas, often looking for seeds to eat.	In winter they move to moist woods where there are berries and fruit.	Open fields, meadows and prairie.
Migratory or Year-Round	Year-round	Year-round	Year-round
Fun Fact	American Goldfinches are almost completely vegetarian, relying on seeds for food. This is rare in the bird world as most species include insects in their diet, often while feeding their young.	In late winter and early spring, they can become intoxicated from exclusively eating fermented berries. Urban life has impacted Robins. Robins sing their morning songs, higher pitched in the city to be heard over traffic, before dawn.	Unlike humans, Kestrels can see ultra-violet light. This allows them to see the urine marks of their prey, helping them to know where to hunt.

	Black-Capped Chickadee	Northern Mockingbird	Northern Cardinal
	 <p>Riley Walsh</p>  <p>Elias Takacs</p>	 <p>Elias Takacs</p>  <p>Riley Walsh</p>	 <p>Elias Takacs</p>  <p>Riley Walsh</p>
ID Tips	A tiny spherically shaped bird with a short beak. Distinctive black cap and bib contrasting against a white head and belly. Often found in flocks acrobatically looking for seeds.	A robin-sized grey bird with a long tail and beak. They flash bright white patches on their tail and wings during flight. Will vocalize frequently from high perches, often including a series of mimicked sounds.	A large songbird with a very thick beak and a large crest on the head. Both males and females have a bold black face. Look for them perched near the ground.
Habitat	Forests or woodlots, sometimes in open fields or marshes.	Forest edges, open park land and backyards.	Shrubby forest edge, park land and backyards.
Migratory or Year-Round	Year-round	Year-round	Year-round
Fun Fact	The “Chickadee” call is used as a predator alert, calls with more “dees” are associated with a higher threat.	Northern Mockingbirds are lifelong learners, a mature male can learn around 200 songs throughout its life.	Females sing louder than males, a rarity for songbirds in North America. The name comes from European settlers who thought the bird’s colouring reminded them of the Catholic clergy’s robes.

	Dark-eyed Junco	Northern Shrike	American Tree Sparrow
			
ID Tips	Sparrow sized songbird. The top of their body is dark and contrasts a light underside. Look for prominent white tail feathers that are visible only in flight. Their beak is a light pink.	This predatory songbird has a black mask that stops short of its hooked beak. Its head is large compared to its body.	A plump sparrow with a bicoloured beak and an unstreaked underpart. Look for a dark dot in the middle of the chest and rusty cap.
Habitat	Open woodlands, roadsides and backyards.	Openings in woodlands or a lone tree in an open field.	Weedy fields, marshes, open forests, backyards.
Migratory or Year-Round	Migratory. Juncos breed in northern forests, often appearing in Toronto in late fall.	Migratory; these winter visitors breed in the far north.	Winter migrants
Fun Fact	Junco flocks usually have a hierarchy, during migration early arriving groups tend to rank higher. One of the most common bird feeder visitors across Canada.	Shrikes, nicknamed “butcherbird”, will store food for later by impaling dead prey on a thorn or barbed wire fence. Hunts by watching prey for the best time to strike. Will watch bird nests or mouse holes for opportunities.	Don’t be fooled by the name given to this bird by European settlers, American Tree Sparrows nest and forage on the ground and breed in scrubby lands at or above the tree line.

	Downy Woodpecker	Hairy Woodpecker	European Starling
	 A Downy Woodpecker is perched on a tree branch, facing right. It has a black and white patterned back and a white belly. A small red dot is visible on its head. The photo is credited to Riley Walsh.	 A Hairy Woodpecker is perched on a tree branch, facing right. It has a black and white patterned back and a white belly. A small red dot is visible on its head. The photo is credited to Elias Takacs.	 A European Starling is perched on a tree branch, facing right. It has a dark, iridescent plumage with a yellow beak. The photo is credited to Elias Takacs.
ID Tips	Small woodpecker with a “downsized” beak, about half the length of its head. Males have a red dot on the back of their head, both sexes have outer white tail feathers with black dots.	Robin sized woodpecker with a beak that is almost the length of its head. Males have a red dot on the back of their head, their outer white tail feathers lack a black dot.	Chunky bird, slightly smaller than a Robin, with a slender beak. In flight their short-pointed wings make them look like a 4-point star (hence the name). In winter they have beautiful white spots, their summer plumage features purplish-green iridescence.
Habitat	Fond of open deciduous woodlands but can also be found in backyards, orchards and urban parks.	Mature forests where they can forage along the trunks and main branches of large trees. They can also be found in parks, backyards and cemeteries.	Very common in towns, suburbs and rural areas near human settlements. They feed on the ground and in parking lots and can be found perching on wires, trees or buildings.
Migratory or Year-round	Year-round	Year-round	Year-round
Fun Fact	Downy Woodpeckers eat food that larger woodpeckers can’t access, often foraging for insect larvae living in the stems of weeds.	Hairy Woodpeckers’ foraging skills have helped to controls orchard pests like the Coddling Moth.	Starlings were first introduced to North America in the 1890s. Shakespeare enthusiasts released 100 starlings in New York City’s central park in celebration of the birds that were mentioned in Shakespeare’s plays. There are now more than 200 million living in North America, and they are widely considered a pest bird that can compete with native birds (like the hairy woodpecker) for nesting cavities. Starlings often group together in large groups with hundreds or even thousands flying together. These large groupings are called a “murmuration”.

	Red-tailed Hawk	Snow Bunting	Snowy Owl
			
ID Tips	Large hawk with broad wings and a short tail. Look for a dark band of feathers across their belly and a dark “wrist” on the front underside of the wing. Adults have a rusty or cinnamon coloured tail, juveniles have a brown tail with banded stripes.	Snow Buntings are smaller than a robin but larger than a sparrow. Their winter plumage features a mixture of brilliant white, rusty buff and dark wings. In winter they will form flocks where they will forage for food on the ground.	Large white bird with piercing yellow eyes, the heaviest North American owl. Females have a varying amount of dark streaking, sometimes giving them a salt and pepper look. Their head is smooth with no ear tufts. They are often seen sitting on the ground or perched on mounds, poles and solitary trees. They can be active during the day or night.
Habitat	One of the most common North American hawks, this bird can be found in most open areas. Look for them soaring high in the sky or perched on buildings, poles or tall trees. They hunt small mammals on the ground, but do not generally view cats or dogs as a food source.	Look for these birds overwintering in open weedy fields or along the shores of lakes and oceans.	Look for overwintering birds along shorelines or in open agricultural fields, airports, grasslands and shorelines.
Migratory or Year-round	Year-round	Migratory, these winter visitors spend their summers breeding in the high arctic.	Migrants, Snowy Owls breed on the treeless arctic tundra.
Fun Fact	Courting Red-Tail Hawks will soar around each other in circles. The male will dive and then shoot back up at almost the same steep angle. After a couple of swoops, he will approach the female from above and briefly touch her. Occasionally the two birds will grasp talons and jointly plummet in spirals towards the ground before pulling away. Nicknamed the ‘Hollywood bird’ because the sound of a red-tailed hawk often is used when eagles are soaring in movies.	Breeding and nonbreeding snow bunting look quite different. This change in plumage isn’t the result of growing new feathers (molting), instead the change from brownish to white occurs when males rub their heads and bellies on snow, wearing down brown feather tips and revealing immaculate white feathers below.	Snowy Owls have exceptional hearing that allows them to hunt small rodents such as voles, even if the vole is sheltering under snow.