

TEXAS PARKS AND WILDLIFE

An Introduction  
to  
**Birdwatching**



# An Introduction to Birdwatching

Birding is probably one of the most cosmopolitan outdoor activities in existence. By all accounts, the ranks of birders are growing. Formerly called “birdwatchers,” birders come from all walks of life, from doctors to lawyers, teachers, policemen, corporate executives, truck drivers, merchants, young children, young marrieds and senior citizens. There are as many varieties of birders as there are birds. They range from intense perfectionists who travel the globe at the drop of a hat to see a species never seen, to the casual weekend hobbyist who enjoys watching the neighborhood birds at a backyard feeder or nearby greenbelt.



*What is the appeal? Why do so many people enjoy this activity?* While each individual birder may focus on different aspects of the pastime, I think all will agree, birding fulfills many of our basic criteria for what makes for good outdoor recreation. Birds appeal to our sense of aesthetics. Birds are beautiful and their extravagant plumages are dazzling to the eye. Their complex behavior is intriguing and their songs are varied, evocative and very pleasing to the ear.

Birds occur in a wide variety of places and are active both night and day. Birding is something you can do while doing other things—working in the backyard, tending the garden, walking or jogging in the park. Birds can brighten up the day and break the monotony of a dull routine.

More than that, you don't have to be rich to go birding. All you really need is a good field guide to the birds of North America and a pair of binoculars to start—some as inexpensive as \$30 or \$40. (Of course, when you get into fine optics and spotting scopes, the price can go up substantially). Flying round the world to New Guinea to get the Raghiana Bird of Paradise on your list will also set you back substantial sums.

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Birding always presents an intellectual challenge because there are lots of different species. And Texas is a particularly birdy state. Some birds, due to their cryptic or furtive nature, present great challenges to the birder. Frequently you need to sort many separate and incomplete clues to come up with the proper identification. The birder doesn't always get a good long look at the bird. Sometimes much of the bird's body is hidden behind foliage or it is flying away. Many times the light is terrible, or the bird continues to disappear from view.

Birding generally appeals to our intellectual curiosity: Birds have amazing and varied behaviors. Some things birds do naturally beg the question why are they doing this. Anting, pecking at their image in a car mirror or a window, preening activities, courtship displays, aggressive displays, hurt-wing displays. You will often be asking yourself "*Why is this bird doing that?*"

Birding definitely satisfies our sporting instinct: Listing, or as the English call it, "ticking," is sort of like hunting, but the quarry, a new bird for the list, does not go into the pot. It is quite a challenge to identify all the birds you see for there are many species to contend with. But there are also lots of clues. Sound, color, shape, size, place of sighting, behavior cues, time of year, time of day. Being the first to properly call a bird can be exhilarating. Identifying a life bird—one you have never seen—by yourself, can also give you a big boost. Adding species to your life list can become a great game you can play. It can be competitive among friends and birding companions, but more commonly you can just compete with yourself. Not to mention the hand to eye coordination you develop when training binoculars on a moving object. You have to be fast to get on to the bird and to get your binoculars focused correctly. Flying birds, especially those that fly away from the observer, present special challenges.

Birding, as a sport is non-consumptive and nondestructive to the environment. It results in no negative impact on the environment, and doesn't harm the "target" in any way. Spotting and identifying a bird—even misidentifying a bird, doesn't hurt anybody or any thing.

A person can bird while walking alone. It is a wonderful way to get away from the maddening crowd. But, it is also something you can do very well with the rest of the family, with your husband or your children, or with a larger group of like-minded people.

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Going birding is a great way to get out into nature, to keep in touch with the awe and mystery of the natural world. While you are birding you are also getting fresh air, exercise, and learning more about the various areas you visit. Seeing the wildflowers, trees, shrubs, vines, butterflies and other critters that share the birds' environment, helps you to appreciate how all the living parts fit into the whole scheme of things.

Tracking the seasonal movements of birds keeps you in touch with the passing seasons. The annual cycle, the mysteries of spring and autumn migration, birds are pre-eminent harbingers of spring and fall and subtly mark the passage of time

Birding can contribute positively to your feelings of mastery and self esteem. These feelings will increase as you get better at it. While identifying birds is very difficult in the beginning, as you practice and improve your observation skills and hand-to-eye coordination skills you will start to gain confidence and pride in your new found ability to take a number of clues and come up with a speedy and correct I.D.



Finally, amateur birders have contributed and continue to contribute much to the scientific knowledge of birds. Their input and personal observations when backed by notes, Christmas Counts, Breeding Bird Surveys, etc. help ornithologists and conservationists learn more about birds and the environment we all share and depend on.

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## HOW TO BECOME A BETTER BIRDER

Good birders are not born—they develop their skills progressively with time and practice. While there are many aids on the market to help beginning birders, such as books, videos, cassettes, CDs, and computer software, there is no substitute for field experience when it comes to mastering the art of birding. The more time you spend out in the field, the better you will become.

Buy a good field guide to the birds. This is no place to economize. There are several excellent publications on the market that are both portable and complete. A Texas birder needs a guide that covers bird species occurring throughout the United States. East meets west and north meets south in our great centrally located state. The National Geographic Society's Field Guide to the Birds of North America is a good one, as are the Peterson Guides and the Golden Guide. Many times these quality guides can also be found at your local second hand bookstore.

Learn the "topography" of the bird. Most good field guides have a diagram of a bird in the beginning of the book with the various body parts identified. Study the body of the bird diligently. Learn the terms and definitions of the various parts of the body, especially those of the feather tracts. This is how you will communicate with other birders and understand the descriptions in your field guide. Know which feather groups are visible in various body postures, i.e., when the bird is in flight or perched.

Another essential purchase is a good pair of binoculars. These will help bring the birds closer to you optically so you can better discern a bird's field marks, plumage pattern and color, as well as subtleties of behavior. While good optics can be expensive, the choice of brand is very individual. A good guideline is to buy the best optics you can afford. If you are a beginner, start with a cheaper model and graduate to a more expensive model as your skills increase. Remember, before purchasing, it's important to try them out yourself to see which size, weight, eye relief, field of view, and light-gathering abilities are best for you.

Buy yourself a high quality, compact notebook that fits easily in a vest pocket, book pouch, or backpack. Carry it with you at all times in the field, along with a

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waterproof pen. Keep good field notes, recording interesting observations as they occur. Make this a habit. Always record the time of year, time of day, weather conditions, and place (part of the state with a short description of habitat, vegetation type and geology if you know it). These notes will be invaluable for future reference. *Don't ever try to commit your observations to memory.* The mind simply forgets. Better to take detailed notes on plumage, shape, size, behavior, or any confusing observations. Often what you think is an unimportant detail turns out to be the key element to properly identifying a species. Don't wait to "bird" your field guide when you get home at the end of the day. Write down your observations carefully first, then check the field guide later. Making your own sketches with pertinent comments can also be helpful.

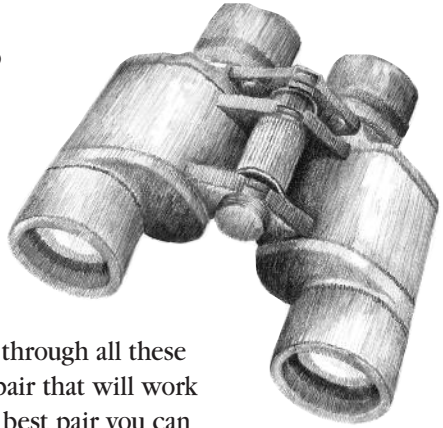
Start a personal bird life list. Keep a Texas bird list, as well. You will be amazed how many birds you can see in the Lone Star State. The Texas Bird Records Committee has recognized 636 species as Texas Birds. Without chasing vagrants or rarities, you could realistically rack up 450 Texas birds within a reasonable amount of time and effort. The list gets even larger as you bird the entire state at different times of year. And all kinds of lists are possible—yard lists, county lists, foreign country lists, you name it. Then, put your lists on computer if you have one. There are many excellent software programs available to help organize your observations whether you use the Macintosh or IBM PC compatible machines.

Become acquainted with the birds of your area. Obtain state checklists, local checklists, State Park, Wildlife Management Area and National Wildlife Refuge bird checklists. Know the seasonal patterns of your area, when the local birds migrate and which species you can expect at which time of year (checklists can be very helpful here). *The trick is to reduce the number of possibilities.* Dealing with a possible five species is much easier than trying to cope with all 636.

When observing birds feeding in a mixed flock, see if certain individuals act aggressively towards one another. These interactions can be very subtle, so watch carefully. *Does there appear to be a pecking order among the various species of birds?* Determine which bird is dominant (titmice dominate chickadees, for instance). *Does age, body size, feather brightness, or sex affect the dominance hierarchy between birds of the same species or even between birds of different species?*

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## HOW TO CHOOSE THE BEST BINOCULARS FOR YOUR BUCKS



With all the different brands, styles and prices of binoculars to choose from, it is often hard to decide which pair is best for you. Binoculars can be purchased for as little as \$25 to as much as \$5,000. You should first get a basic understanding of how binoculars work so that you can sift through all these options. You will want to end up with a pair that will work best for your needs and wants, and is the best pair you can afford. In the case of binoculars, price truly does reflect quality—quality in what you will see, and quality in durability. However, you don't have to drain your savings in order to purchase a good pair of binoculars that will satisfy your personal goals.

Binoculars come in many different shapes, sizes and weights. The difference in view may be as much as seeing a general silhouette with simple shades of color, to seeing flecks of differing colors on different parts of the bird's body. The best way to decide this, if you aren't sure, is to try them out before you buy them. Borrowing a pair from a friend or testing them in the store are two ways to accomplish this task. The dealer may even let you field test them, try them out before you buy them.

The following are the basics on how binoculars work and how to apply that to your purchasing decision:

1. Binoculars are made up of an **objective lens** (focuses an upside down image), a set of **prisms** (to turn the image right side up again) and an **eye-piece** (to magnify the image). However, each time light enters a pair of binoculars and passes through each of these glass pieces, some of it is lost, thus promoting a poorer image. Improved technology has produced special glass coatings that reduce the loss of light (in some cases restoring as much as 95% of the lost light). But as you might have guessed, you will pay more for these coatings.

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2. Binoculars are described by the magnification power and the size of the objective lens (10x42, for example). The first number indicates how many times closer to you the image is brought, and the second number is the diameter of the objective lens in millimeters.
3. Exit pupils are the beams of light that come out through the eyepieces. It is calculated by dividing the diameter of the objective lens by the magnification power (for example 10x42 binoculars would have an exit pupil of 4.2). The size of the exit pupils work with (or against) your own eyes' pupils. Basically, in low light, larger exit pupils are better because your eyes' pupils will be enlarged, and visa versa. Decide under which conditions you will be using your binoculars most-low or bright light, larger or smaller exit pupils. Also, as we get older, our eyes lose the ability to adapt to lower light more and more. Therefore, smaller exit pupils will work better for older birders as well. And again, top quality binoculars, with their glass coatings and better optics, will facilitate a brighter picture.
4. The field of view is what you will see through your binoculars, represented by an angle or width measurement. If it is difficult for you to find the specific object you are seeing when moving from your naked eye to the binoculars, then you should consider binoculars with a larger field of view. Unfortunately, a larger field of view often means less powerful binoculars. It may also mean a shorter eye relief (the greatest distance between your eye and the eyepiece, in which you can still see the entire field of view). Those with eyeglasses may require a longer eye relief because their eyes may rest farther from the eyepieces.

Armed with the basic knowledge of how binoculars work, the following are some tips on what to do when testing out different pairs:

1. When testing, use each pair to focus on the same object, paying special attention to the detail of the image in the center and on the edges.
2. Note how comfortable each pair is to hold and to handle. Try them while hand-holding them *and* while they are supported by a stationary object. When trying them out in the field, make sure you use them for an extended period of time so that you will know how comfortable they will be in the long run.



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3. Avoid binoculars that zoom, are fixed-focus, or that focus each eyepiece separately. For birding, these types of binoculars will only hinder you.
4. Remember that binoculars can be a long-term investment, so you should enjoy using them—they should *always* enhance your experience and should *never* be a burden!

### THE IMPORTANCE OF SOUND IN IDENTIFYING WILDLIFE

Most folks tend to be visually oriented. We are, like most birds, mainly diurnal (daytime) creatures and depend heavily on our eyesight to identify what we see around us. Interestingly though, relying on your sense of hearing and your ability to recognize sounds can be far more valuable in properly identifying an animal than you might think. *Why is this so?* As wildlife biologists who work long hours in the field have found out by experience, you just do not always have the luxury of seeing the critter that is somewhere nearby. Most animals are shy and reclusive. They may be hiding from predators. They will definitely be hiding from you. They may even be hiding from their prey. A sit-and-wait predator gains a lot by being inconspicuous or well nigh invisible. For this, they wear fur, feathers or scales that blend in subtly with the colors and texture of their environment. They may take cover in dense vegetation or thick foliage. There are big pay-offs for an animal that does not stand out like a sore thumb. Other animals are mainly abroad at night when light levels are exceedingly low to absent. Learning to recognize the sounds of the night—the mating calls of frogs, the distinctive hoots, calls and screeches of various owls and nightjars, the grunts, snarls and thumpings of nocturnal mammals—will give you a huge advantage in figuring out which species is just around the corner, high overhead or hopelessly hidden in the grass. Indeed, animals use these same auditory clues to recognize each other, their enemies, and/or otherwise neutral members of their environment.

Individuals vary in their ability to learn and recognize bird songs, most folks admit that it is easier to remember visual images than bird songs. Sound memory can be very ephemeral—hard to pin down, harder to hold on to over time. Sound learning takes practice, but there are lots of tips, tricks and aids to speeding up the

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process. *So how can we learn to be good “sound detectives?”* Follow these guidelines to becoming a good listener:

1. Buy any of several audio guides that are currently on the market that help a person learn the songs and calls of the birds of his or her region. Peterson Field Guides to bird songs of both eastern and western United States offer short examples of bird vocalizations in taxonomic order, keyed to the pages of his field guides. A great source of tips and helpful hints in learning bird songs is given by Richard Walton and Robert Lawson in their *Birding by Ear* series. Listening to these guides, in short learning sessions, over and over, is a sure way to improve your skills.
2. Many species of birds occurring in Texas say their name, birds like the killdeer, willet, marbled godwit, long-billed curlew, chachalaca, Northern bobwhite, Eastern phoebe, Eastern pewee, dickcissel, rufous-sided towhee, and Carolina chickadee. Learn which ones they are.
3. If you are out in the field and hear a bird call or song that you do not recognize, listen intently. Then do your best to try to track down the singer. There is no quicker way to learn a new sound than to associate the new song or call with the actual visual image of the performer, especially if you have worked hard to find it. That is associative learning—a powerful tool in learning sounds.
4. Try to learn which species of birds have similar songs in your area. For instance, some people have a hard time differentiating between the trill of the pine warbler, the swamp sparrow, the dark-eyed junco and the chipping sparrow. They are all different and easy to recognize when you hear them one after the other. But sometimes, when you hear just one of them, they are harder to pin down without the luxury of comparison. Knowing what habitat you are in helps to eliminate possibilities.
5. Make up your own memory jogging devices to associating the sounds you hear with the animals that make them. Your own personal word associations are often better than another person's. Most importantly, learn the species of your neighborhood well. This helps give strength to the foundation of your “mental sound library.” Finally, practice, practice, practice!

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## WHAT TO LOOK FOR IN THE FIELD

Once you have made your tentative identity of the bird by sound, you can check your accuracy by finding the bird in the field. Field marks—those essential clues to proper identity—will show up somewhere on the body of the bird. Bills, plumage color, crests, wing-bars, eye lines, etc. can be especially diagnostic. Rump patches, white superciliaries (eyebrow feathers), crests, mustaches, gular sacs, decurved bills, long legs, spurs, long or short tails—any of these details can be diagnostic. Behavior is also important. *Is the bird hitching up or down a tree, is it running or hopping, hovering, gliding or soaring, flapping constantly, having undulating flight, etc.?* Habitat counts. *Is the bird wading in the water, is it gleaning insects at the top of a tree, is it flycatching, hover gleaning, is it displaying or doing a courtship display?* Songs and call notes are all species specific. There are lots of clues. All you have to do is put them together and bingo, with practice you will come up with the correct identity of the bird!

### Here are some helpful hints:

1. **Try to put the bird in a basic family.** While we may look at color first, you would never compare a reddish duck with a reddish tanager. So you ask yourself, is it a duck, is it a dove, is it a heron, is it a gull, is it a hawk, is it a sparrow (a little brown jobbie)? This is where you start.
2. **What is its size?** Compare it to a familiar bird, a crow, a robin, etc. When you have established that the bird is smaller than a crow, but slightly larger than a robin, you have already narrowed down the field considerably. Remember, different weather conditions, distance, and the presence of only one bird (with no opportunity to compare) makes size assessment all the more difficult.
3. **What is its shape?** Is it slender like a cuckoo or chunky like a robin? What do the wings look like, how long are the legs, what is the shape and length of the bill? Is the tail long or short—is it notched, forked, wedge-shaped, rounded?

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4. **How does the bird behave?** Does it pump its tail, does it wag its tail, does it dart out from a perch sallying for insects, does it feed on the ground, does it hover, or is it a glider? Does it wade in the water, does it teeter or bob while it walks near water? For that matter, does it walk or hop, or both? These are all excellent clues.
5. **Observe its flight characteristics.** When it flies, is it a straight trajectory, undulating, lurching, soaring? Does it travel in flocks, in pairs or alone?
6. **What are the specific field marks?** Plain breast, streaked or spotted breast, wing bars, white outer tail feathers, flash pattern, white rumps, white bands on tail, or patches on wings or on rump, stripes over the eye, through the eye, around the eye? Does it wear spectacles? Does it sport a jaunty crest or wear a black mask? Does it have a whisker stripe or a red throat patch?
7. **What is its voice like?** A long melodic warble, a hoarse caw, does it say its name *Chickadee-dee-dee-dee*, etc.? Does it have a distinctive call note or scold? Does it rustle dead leaves when it forages on the ground, does it drum like a woodpecker or make whistling sounds with its feathers?
8. **When is it found?** Is it here only in the spring and fall, thus a migrant? Is it here all the time, a permanent resident? Is it here only in the winter or only in the summer? Does it show up unpredictably? Check your field guide maps and regional check list to support your call.
9. **Where is it found?** This is one of the most important questions. Is it always found near the coast at the beach, in mudflats, in brackish or freshwater marshes, or is it a denizen of inland desert scrub, rocky outcrops, open fields, prairies, deep woods, or bottomlands, along fence-rows and edges of thickets and woods, etc.? Habitat is by far one of the best clues to the identity of your bird. Most birds are dependably habitat specific. You will not find a sanderling foraging along the side of the road in West Texas, or a ladder-backed woodpecker in a spartina grass salt marsh.

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## BIRDING ETHICS AND NOTES ON CONSERVATION: GOOD RULES FOR ALL BIRD WATCHERS

**The American Birding Association and National Audubon Society recommend the following guidelines:**

1. Take care not to disturb either the birds or their habitat. Walk softly on the land.
2. Stay on established pathways and keep motor vehicles on established roads and parking areas.
3. Avoid harassment; don't disturb birds that are nesting or their nesting areas. Do not handle eggs or young or tarry too long at a working nest.
4. Don't over-use playback tapes or screech owl recordings to call birds in. Don't use these if endangered or threatened birds may be present.
5. Don't trespass on private property. Respect landowner's rights to privacy. Always ask permission first.
6. If looking to find endangered species, follow all USFWS refuge and state management area rules and regulations.
7. Avoid "tree-whacking" to arouse cavity dwellers. Undue disturbance may cause the bird to abandon its nest and young or even kill young inadvertently in an attempt to escape.
8. Divide larger groups of people into smaller, more manageable numbers. Small groups cause less disturbance. When possible, carpool.
9. Leave no litter or trash. Pack your garbage out of wilderness areas. Ingested items can kill.
10. Support local and national bird conservation organizations.

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11. Support the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department Nongame and Threatened and Endangered Species fund. All moneys donated go towards management of nongame birds, wildlife and their habitat.
12. Support the National Audubon Society and Texas Nature Conservancy, two organizations that also work tirelessly to preserve, purchase and restore avian habitats.

Keep in mind we are all sharing this planet with these beautiful avian creatures. It is important to remember that the more habitat we irreversibly modify and destroy, the fewer birds there will be for us and our children to enjoy. We are temporary stewards of this land. We must safeguard it and hopefully pass it on in better condition than we found it. Great-grandchildren unborn may wish to continue the study of ornithology or the science of birds. Let's do our best to pass our natural heritage rich in bird species on to them!



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## TOPOGRAPHY OF THE BIRD

While all birds naturally don't look exactly like this Golden-crowned Kinglet, this brochure does illustrate the various parts of the body and feather areas that most birds share. It's a good idea to look this picture over and get yourself familiar with the body of the bird and what specific terms birdwatchers use to talk about the various parts of the bird. In this way, when two or more people are looking at a bird, they will all know to what particular part of the bird they are referring. Of course almost as important as speaking correctly about the various parts of the bird, it is essential that we are able to point out to others where the bird is located. Is it flying above us at 12:00 o'clock, is it singing at the top of that liveoak tree near the fence, is it skulking on the ground to the left near the edge of the water? The better you are able to describe where the bird is in relation to the landscape and other birders, the faster the I.D. will be clinched.

## PARTS

Eye line

Crown

Lore

Moustache

Breast

Crest

Eye ring

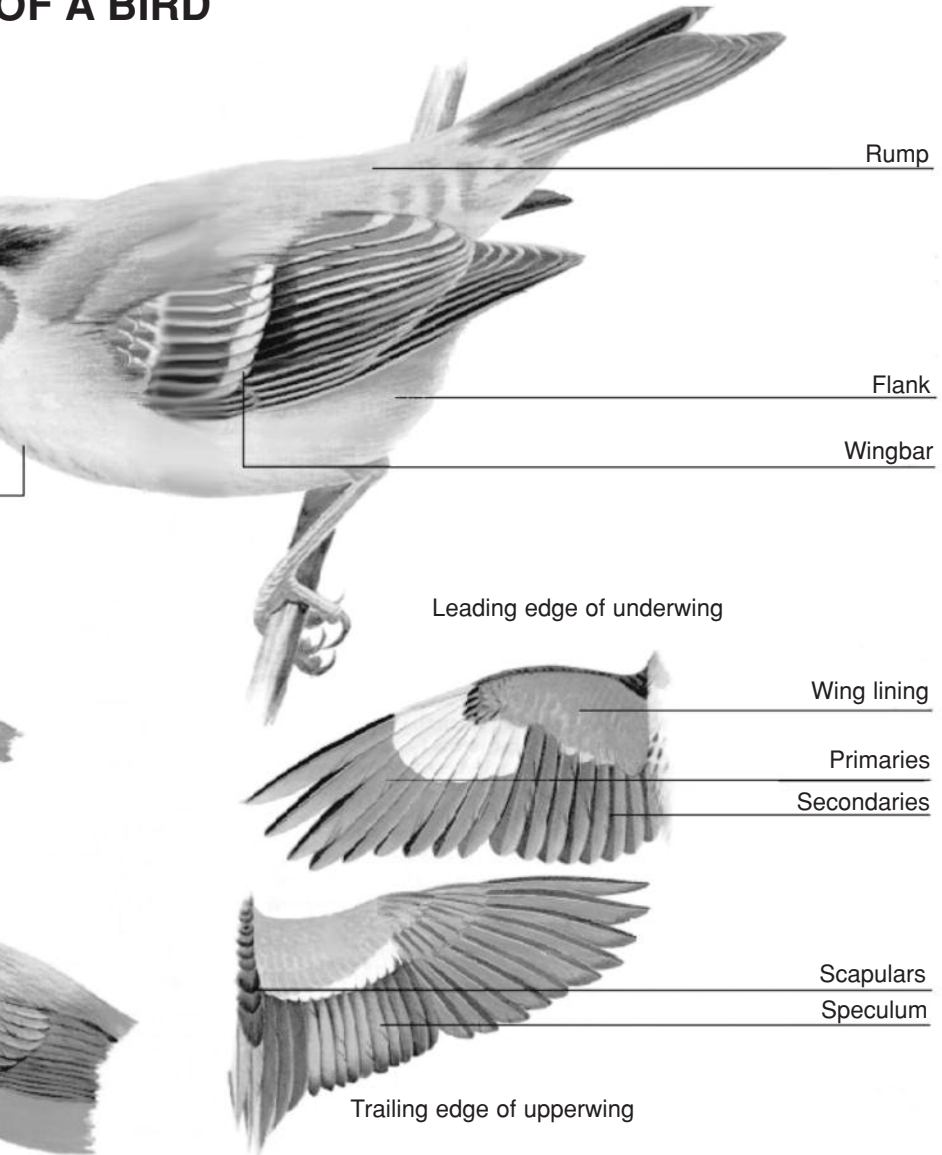
Cheek

Original art by John P. O'neill

Texas Parks and Wildlife Department, Nongame and Urban Program  
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## OF A BIRD





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## BIRD CHECKLISTS FOR STATE PARKS AND WILDLIFE MANAGEMENT AREAS

These booklets must be obtained from the individual park.

Birds of Abilene State Park  
Birds of Balmorhea State Park  
Birds of Buescher and Bastrop State Park  
Birds of Bentsen-Rio Grande Valley State Park  
Birds of Big Spring State Park  
Birds of Black Gap Wildlife Management Area  
Birds of Brazos Bend State Park  
Birds of Caprock Canyon State Park  
Birds of Cedar Hill State Park  
Birds of Choke Canyon State Park  
Birds of Colorado Bend State Park  
Birds of Copper Breaks State Park  
Birds of Davis Mountains State Park  
Birds of Devils River State Natural Area  
Birds of Del Rio and vicinity  
Birds of Dinosaur Valley State Park  
Birds of Enchanted Rock State Natural Area  
Birds of Falcon State Park  
Birds of Fort Leaton State Historic Site  
Birds of Fort Parker State Park  
Birds of Franklin Mountains State Park  
Birds of Galveston Island State Park  
Birds of Garner State Park  
Birds of Goliad State Park  
Birds of Goose Island State Park  
Birds of Guadalupe River State Park/Honey Creek State Natural Area  
Birds of Hueco Tanks State Historic Site  
Birds of Huntsville State Park  
Birds of Inks Lake State Park  
Birds of Kerr Wildlife Management Area  
Birds of Kerrville/Shreiner State Park

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Birds of Lake Arrowhead State Park  
Birds of Lake Brownwood State Park  
Birds of Lake Corpus Christi State Park  
Birds of Lake Livingston State Park  
Birds of Lake Mineral Wells State Park  
Birds of Lake Somerville State Park  
Birds of Lake Texana State Park  
Birds of Longhorn Cavern State Park  
Birds of Lost Maples State Natural Area  
Birds of Lyndon B. Johnson State Historical Park  
Birds of the Marathon Basin  
Birds of Martin Dies, Jr., State Park  
Birds of Matagorda Island State Park  
Birds of McKinney Falls State Park  
Birds of Meridian State Park  
Birds of Monahans Sandhills State Park  
Birds of Mustang Island State Park  
Birds of Palmetto State Park  
Birds of Palo Duro Canyon State Park  
Birds of Pedernales Falls State Park  
Birds of Resaca de la Palma State Park Site  
Birds of San Jacinto Battleground State Historic Site  
Birds of Sea Rim State Park  
Birds of Seminole Canyon State Park and Historic Site  
Birds of South Llano River State Park  
Birds of Sheldon Lake State Park  
Birds of Tyler State Park

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