

Journal Challenge

Prompt #3: Bird Observation Challenge!



Duration: Approx. 30-45 mins

Grade Level: Any age, 4 and up*! (Younger children will need an adult helper),

Location: An outdoor area where you can search for plants and animals!

Materials: Paper and pencil (Optional: colored pencils or other coloring tools, magnifying glass or binoculars)

Background: This prompt is the third in a series of [Oxbow Journal Challenges](#), and will introduce birding basics and nature journaling activities.

***For older learners:** Complete an optional challenge by using online or printed resources to identify your bird AND become citizen scientist by adding your sighting into the [iNaturalist database](#).

Summary & Goals:

Birds are a part of everyone's life, even if only as a part of the background. By learning how to carefully observe and identify some birds, you can become more aware of the wildlife all around you and your local environment in general. For this journal challenge, we will be looking for birds and observing and recording birds we see in the natural spaces that surround us.

Observation with the intent to record forces one to go beyond the 'obvious'. When the observer begins to record what they see through sketching and notes, all of a sudden, proportions and individual markings matter. Instead of seeing a bird as part of the background, we pay closer attention to the subject in order to collect enough information to sketch or take notes.

"Birds make any place a chance for discovery"

– David Sibley
(Audubon, 2013)



Students point out the defining "field marks" of familiar birds, using Cornell Lab of Ornithology's [Bird ID Cards](#).

The goal of this activity is to build observation skills in nature journaling while introducing concepts such as birding, habitat, field marks, and community science. No matter your style or experience, when it comes to birding, keeping track of the birds you encounter is part of the fun! Nature journaling is not about skill or being scientifically accurate – it's about documenting your thoughts and experiences.

Procedure Summary: Learn the basics of bird field marks, then venture outside to observe birds. Practice making observations and take a photo to reference. Record notes and sketches in your journal of birds that you encounter. Try to identify the species you encounter along the way,

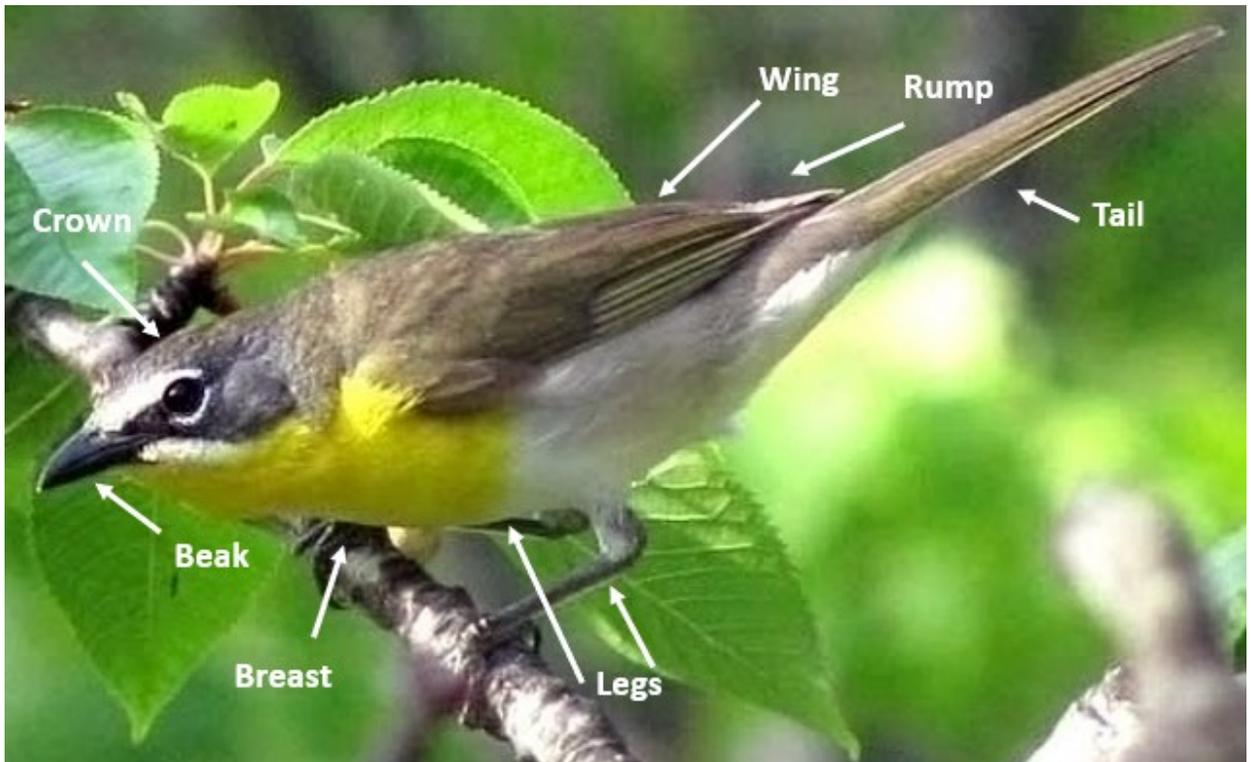
To aid in the success of this experience, adult helpers can scout locations where this activity might work. Adults can adjust this activity based on the age of their learner. Optional: Register for iNaturalist ([www.inaturalist.org](#)) ahead of time and record observations using your account. Use online or printed resources (see the recommended list below) to identify your bird!

“In order to see birds, it is necessary to become a part of the silence.”

-Robert Lynd

Activity STEP BY STEP:

1. **Review basic bird field marks.** Field marks are physical characteristics of birds that allow us to identify them. Focus on the following with beginning birders: size, shape, crown (or top of the head), throat, breast, rump, wing, tail, legs, and beak. Don't feel overwhelmed with this information – it's a lot to take in! Feel free to choose just a few of the field marks listed here to focus on. Size, shape, and overall color would be a great place to start and you can build up from there the more birding you do!



Some important field marks to become familiar with are: crown, breast, rump, wing, tail, legs, and beak.

2. **Grab a piece of paper**, something to write with, and a hard surface (like a big book or clipboard). If you have binoculars, a camera phone or camera, bring that along!
3. **Visit a natural space and take it all in.** Try to sit or stand in one place for at least 5 minutes to start. Using your senses, look and listen for living things! *What kinds of plants are nearby? Do you hear birds calling? Do you hear or see birds rustling in the bushes on the ground or up high in a tree?* Try to look closely and far off (like we did in the [zoom in/zoom out challenge!](#)). Record the **metadata** on your page!

Metadata is like a record. It gives context that makes the entry scientifically useful. You can get creative or just add a list that includes: Date, Weather, & Location!

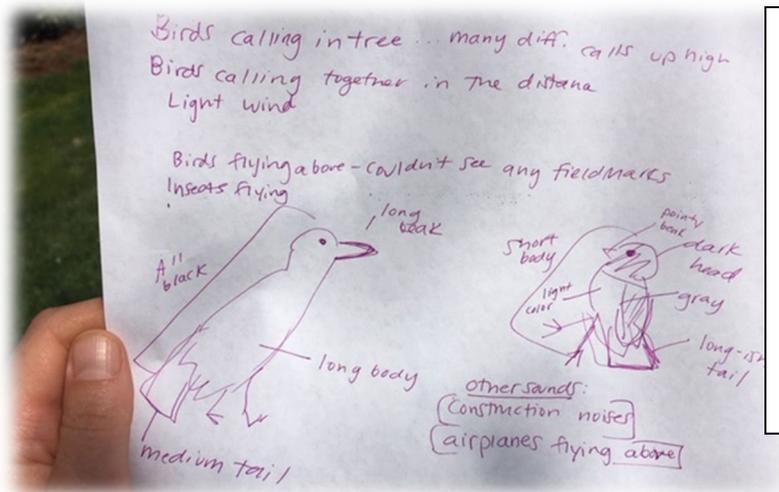
Photo credit: How to teach nature journaling; Laws & Lygren



Safety considerations:

Please do not approach wildlife or try to interact with wild animals. Be patient and respectful observers of nature. If you see a wild animal, be it a bird, a squirrel, or a bobcat, keep a safe distance and quietly observe.

4. As you wait for birds to appear, feel free to **start sketching the habitat around you** – this can include plants, trees or even buildings nearby. You might want to write down any sounds you hear, whether it be birds calling in the distance, or sounds of construction or highways.
5. If 5 minutes pass with no sign of birds, **try observing in a new location**. If sitting still isn't working for you, feel free to incorporate this experience into a walk! Once you spot a bird, stop walking and proceed with steps 7-9.
6. **If you see a bird:** Pay attention to some general identification basics: *What was its size and shape? Did you see any colors? Was it moving or still?*
7. **Talk about your observation.** Discuss the behavior, movement, sounds, colors, and shapes before you start to journal. It's entirely possible the bird swooped right past you and you didn't get a clear visual. Fear not! Talk about it! *Was the flight smooth or bouncy? Did it fly into a tree or above a building? Did it seem to be large or small?*
8. **Time to journal!** Write down your reflections and observations in the form of notes and sketches so that you can remember all of the details before they escape your brain. Include notes that detail the type of environment it was found in and what sort of behavior it was expressing. Include arrows and labels. Feel free to take photos as well! If you are sketching based on limited information, fear not! **Start with basic details**, like the size of the bird. Was it small? Sketch a small bird! Simple as that! Feel free to add details such as the shape of its body, length/shape of its tail, and/or any other field marks you'd like to include. If you caught a decent glimpse, try adding more detailed field marks.



Your notes and sketches can be mere scribbles! Don't worry about being an amazing artist— simply focus on recording what you saw in a way that makes sense to you.

Add detailed notes about the birds' size, color, location. Note any other sounds you might hear! Where did you see the bird? What was it doing?

9. **If you don't see a bird:** Walk around your observation zone: do you see any signs that birds have been here before? Look for a nest, bird droppings, feathers or anything a bird might eat. Bird calls count as bird observations!

10. **Follow the steps in the Enrichment/Expansion section below** to identify your bird or contribute to the iNaturalist **community science** database!

What is community science? Also known as "citizen science," community science is an effort to include common community members in recording, identifying, and contributing plant and animal observations all over the world while contributing to large and ongoing datasets.

Guiding Questions:

- When attempting ID, consider the following: *What size is the bird? Could you hold it in your hand? Is it longer than your arm? Is its beak long, short, round, or pointed? What is the shape of its tail? Is the breast a solid color, or were there streaks or stripes?*
- What sort of clues could habitat tell you about what type of bird you might expect to see?
- Why do you think certain birds have different markings and colors?
- Do you think your birding observations would change during different times of day?
- If you don't see a bird, why do you think that is?

Conclusion:

Feel free to continue adding details to your journal entry afterwards. Maybe on a rainy day you can return to this sketch and add some color, or fill in the habitat surrounding your bird. If you were able to take a picture of the bird you sighted, refer back to it. Add detail & labels for your observations about the field marks!

For some scientific writing practice, create an official summary of your bird sighting, and if you've identified the bird, make a claim! Ex: "The dark blocked out markings on the head and crown of the bird, along with the small body, pale brown body, and it's interest in small seeds on the ground made me think the bird I saw was a Dark-eyed Junco." If you were to identify the bird pictured above in the field marks section, you could say, "Based on the yellow breast, small to medium size, erect, gray tail and gray upper body, I've identified this bird to be the Yellow-breasted Chat!"

Enrichment/Expansion:

Optional Challenge #1: Feel free to peruse incredible online resources such as Cornell Lab of Ornithology's "All About Birds" site to try and identify your bird! Use your notes, sketches, and/or photos, and visit online guides, guide books, or iNaturalist to learn more about what you've discovered. iNaturalist is an online community science database which includes millions of observations made all over the world!

Optional Challenge #2: Explore the iNaturalist site and submit your observation! Explore the map features (maybe start with a map in your state or town) and see what types of observations have been recorded near you.

Resources:

iNaturalist: <https://www.inaturalist.org/>

Student's Guide to Using iNaturalist: <https://collectionseducation.org/inaturalist/student-inaturalist/>

Audubon's "Why do birds matter": <https://www.audubon.org/news/why-do-birds-matter>

Cornell Lab of Ornithology "All About Birds": <https://www.allaboutbirds.org/news/?pid=1189>

The Beetles Project: Journaling with Students - <http://beetlesproject.org/cms/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/Field-Journaling-With-Students.pdf>

Book: *How to teach nature journaling: Curiosity, Wonder, Attention.* John Muir Laws and Emilie Lygren. Heyday; 1 edition. 2020.