

For Liz and Lucy, my birdwatching buddies,
and for Tyra, who has all this to discover – C. B.

For Dad, thank you for all the
lovely walks – love Kate x

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BIRDS ARE EVERYWHERE!

You can probably see some from your window right now, whether you live in a big city, a town or in the countryside.

You can see birds in your garden, street or local park, or you can take a walk in a nearby wood, beside a river or along a beach. You can watch birds in your favourite local spot every day throughout the year. You can find places near you that are good for spotting birds, and you can visit places especially to see the bird life there.

This book will help you recognise most of the birds you see around you, and find out about how they behave.

Be a birdwatcher

There are lots of ways to enjoy birds. You can watch them on your own, with your friends and family, or join a group of bird fans. You can try to spot as many different birds as you can, or find out all about your favourites. You can draw them, photograph them, help to look after them and much more.

Some people call it birdwatching, some people call it birding – but whatever you call it, prepare to get hooked!

A nature reserve with a lake is a great place for spotting birds.



Birdwatcher's code

- *Be respectful of birds and their home. Remember, the birds' interests come first!*
- *Try to be quiet, patient and still when watching birds. Don't disturb or frighten birds, don't get too close, and keep away from their nests.*
- *Never take birds' eggs (it is against the law) or disturb nests.*
- *Follow the Countryside Code. Ask permission before you go on to private land, and don't walk on farm crops. Make sure you shut gates behind you.*
- *Protect habitats. Don't drop litter, or pick or damage any plants.*

HABITATS

A place where a bird lives is called its habitat. The right habitat will provide the right types of food and places to shelter and nest. Some birds can live in lots of habitats, while others can only live in certain habitats.

Gardens and parks

Gardens and parks are great places for birds to find food and water and somewhere to shelter and to nest. Trees, bushes and other plants provide food and attract insects for birds to eat. Nesting places include trees, sheds, roofs and nest boxes!



Find out how to encourage birds to come to your garden on page 116.



Towns and cities

Some birds are happy living in the middle of towns and cities – in squares and car parks, under bridges and on roofs and ledges. They nest in buildings as well as in trees and bushes, making the most of every scrap of green space they can find.

Fields and hedges

Many wild birds live on farmland. They eat the weeds, insects and small animals that are found in fields, as well as leftover crops. Farms often have hedges, which contain lots of plants that birds like, and are brilliant places for them to nest, shelter and hide.



Woods

Woodlands are some of the richest bird habitats in Britain. Just one tree can support thousands of insects and make thousands of seeds, so it's no surprise that woods are good places for birds. With so many places to hide, it can be tricky to see birds in woodland, but listen out for calls and songs.





Rivers and lakes

All living things need water, and where there's a lot of water there are lots of birds! Some eat the many insects, fish and other small animals that are found in or near rivers and lakes. Some make their nests on islands and in vegetation at the waterside. Some swim on the water, some dive down underneath it, and some just live next to it.

The seaside

Some birds live at sea, nest on cliffs and feed on fish and other sea creatures. Others are found on beaches or estuaries, which are the flat, muddy areas where rivers meet the sea. These places are rich habitats where birds can find food such as insects and shellfish. Birds come and go as the tide goes in and out.





Mountains and moorland

Some birds only live high above most farms and towns. The landscape may be huge stretches of heather moorland or conifer woodland with mountain streams. Many moorland birds are small and well camouflaged, so they are difficult to spot.

BIRDWATCHING THROUGH THE YEAR

Birdwatching never stays the same. It changes with the seasons – there are different birds to see, and the birds you see every day are doing different things. There's always something fun to watch!



In spring

- Look out for birds starting to make their nests.
- Watch for your first swallow.
- See baby birds as they hatch – waterbirds such as ducks, geese and swans are some of the easiest to observe.
- Why not get up early to hear the dawn chorus? This is when lots of different birds sing their songs very early in the morning, about an hour before it gets light. Robins, blackbirds and thrushes start the singing, then many other small birds join in.



In summer

- Get to know the young birds in your local spot. How many are there? How do they look different from the adults?
- Why not go on a boat trip to visit a seabird colony – it will be crowded, noisy and smelly but you will see some amazing birds!

On holiday

If you visit somewhere on holiday, have fun getting to know the birds that live there. Books or websites will tell you about the local birds and other wildlife.



In autumn

- Look out for swallows and house martins gathering, ready to head south for the winter.
- Clean your bird feeders and fill them up (remember, you can feed birds all year round).
- Watch for jays burying acorns.

Why not keep a bird diary, noting down every bird you see, and when and where you saw it? If you do the same year after year you can build up an idea of how the timings change or stay the same.



Migration

Many birds migrate, spending the summer in one part of the world, laying eggs and raising their chicks there, and flying to another part of the world for the winter.

In winter

- Keep topping up your bird feeders and enjoy watching the birds that come to eat.
- In freezing weather, make sure you put out water for birds to drink, as most water will be turned to ice.
- Look for flocks of fieldfares and redwings.
- Listen out for the few birds that sing in the winter, e.g. robin, song thrush, mistle thrush and great tit.
- Visit a wetland nature reserve where you'll see winter visitors – waders, ducks, geese and swans.

RSPB Big Garden Birdwatch UK

Every January, millions of people join in the Big Garden Birdwatch UK, counting the different birds they see in their gardens and telling the RSPB what they've seen. Find out more at rspb.org.uk/birdwatch.



What do birds do all year?

Each type of bird has its own busy schedule throughout the year. Keep watching as the year unfolds and you'll see them doing different things.

Robin

In **spring**, a male robin sings its loud, pretty song to attract a mate. The female makes a nest out of dried leaves and moss, lined with hair and feathers. She lays five to six eggs and sits on them for about 13 days. When the chicks hatch, both parents are busy feeding them for about 14 days until they leave the nest.

In **summer**, the spotty brown chicks hop around learning to feed. The parents might have another brood of chicks.

In **winter** and **spring**, robins quarrel with other robins to defend their territory. They sing a slower, sad-sounding song.



Blackbird

In **spring**, blackbirds sing from a high perch. They start very early in the morning. Male birds chase each other noisily and show off to females by running about with their tails fanned and wings drooped. The females build the nest. They lay three to five eggs and sit on them for about 14 days. When the chicks hatch, both parents feed them worms and caterpillars. The chicks leave the nest and hop about for a few days before they learn to fly.



In **autumn** and **winter**, when there are not so many worms about, blackbirds eat berries. They can cope with cold weather quite well.

All year, you can see blackbirds standing and tilting their heads towards the ground, looking out for worms moving under the surface.

Blue tit

In **spring**, blue tits find a nest. You might see blue tits 'courtship feeding'. This is when a male catches food for a female, so she can eat enough to have the energy to produce her eggs. Juicy caterpillars are their favourite. Then the female lays 7 to 14 eggs and sits on them for about 14 days. When the chicks hatch, the parents may catch hundreds of caterpillars a day to feed them!



In **summer**, chicks leave the nest. You may see groups of young blue tits with yellow faces.

In **winter**, blue tits fly from garden to garden looking for food. They quarrel with other birds at the bird table – they may steal food from great tits, and great tits may steal theirs!

Swallow

In **spring**, our swallows are travelling up western Africa. They arrive in the UK from April onwards.



In **summer**, swallows build nests out of mud and straw, lay eggs and feed their chicks. Watch swallows busily flying back and forth to the nest hundreds of times a day. They may have two broods in a summer.

In **autumn**, large groups of swallows gather ready to set off on their migration. Some of the chicks are only a few weeks old when they fly off on their long journey.

In **winter**, our swallows are in South Africa, feeding on insects there.

Winter at the lake

Winter is a good time to see waterbirds on lakes and ponds. Some ducks, geese and swans arrive to spend the winter here.



WHAT TO LOOK OUT FOR

To identify a bird, you need to look out for clues that tell you what it is and tell it apart from other birds. First of all, look at its size. Can you compare it to a bird you know well, such as a duck, pigeon or sparrow perhaps? Then look at its shape. Does it have a round body or a long body? What shape is its tail? What shape is its beak? How about its legs? Here are some examples of well known birds and their shapes.



Many birds look quite different in flight to when they are standing, with a flash of bright colours on their wings and tails.

***Beak** and **bill** are different words for the same thing.*

Feathers

Birds are the only animals with feathers. Feathers allow birds to fly, and keep them warm and dry. Their colours help birds recognise each other, attract a mate, and hide from predators. Feathers also help us recognise the birds!

Plumage is another name for feathers.

Moulting

Feathers get damaged and worn out easily. Birds lose old feathers and grow new ones. This is called moulting. Birds usually grow bright new feathers in spring and some may have duller-coloured feathers at other times of year.

Mallard ducks are a good example of this. There is a special name for the dull brown feathers male ducks grow – it's called 'eclipse plumage'. In late summer it looks like all the males have disappeared – but they grow their bright feathers again in autumn.