

Spotting your first 100 birds

CHASING WILD GEESE

Food

Environment

Aural

Type

Habitat

Etymology

Resemblance

David Bradley



Scopelessly in love with birds

I've always had a soft spot for our feathered friends. After all, they're the great British wildlife that seems the most abundant and most accessible. There are more birds and more bird species than there are large wild mammals and domesticated animals put together, by a long way. If you start counting the latter: fox, badger, hare, rabbit, red deer, roe deer, fallow deer, muntjac, cow, sheep, goat, dog, cat etc you quickly come to a halt. But start listing the birds and the list goes on and on from barn owl and barn swallow to pied flycatcher and pied wagtail, firecrest to goldcrest, crested tit to great crested grebe. And, don't forget all those warblers: barred, Bonelli's, Cetti's, Dartford, fan-tailed, garden, grasshopper, great reed, icterine, marsh, melodious, moustached, reed, Sardinian, Savi's, sedge, subalpine, Western Bonelli's, willow, and wood.

I never took birdwatching too seriously. I was certainly never a twitcher chasing around hill and vale, coast and cove. I was happy to see a new bird, but never jotted down details, never ticked it off in the book.

Superzoom

That changed when superzoom lenses got cheaper. I had a few snaps of birds taken with a small zoom lens, but the purchase of an affordable 150-600mm lens brought the whole world closer. Especially useful for photographing the moon, the ISS or comets in the night skies. Of course, the lens might otherwise be redundant during daylight if it wasn't for the birds. Birds, I assume have absolutely no concept of just how close you can be through such a lens without really disturbing them.

Twitching or birding?

And so, my latent twitching, birding inclinations began to grow early in 2017. I had a lucky first day with the new lens: flighty blue tits in the garden and a sharp-eyed heron after our neighbours' goldfish in the pond. Lucky for those pesky piscine neighbour had protected them from such aquatic hunters with strong wire mesh. I got a nice close of the frustrated bird up from an upstairs window before he lumbered into the air to find breakfast

elsewhere. My first lunchtime dog walk in the winter sun, led me to a majestic kingfisher perched on the reeds. I'd spotted her once or twice before on walks without a camera. This time, she posed for a moment while I got her close-up all electric blue and saturated orange.

I started to blog about the birds and to build an online gallery. Trips to local nature reserves and country houses added more to the list as did trips to the coast. Before long, I had more than 100 different species: red kites, marsh harriers, hobbies, blackcaps, great spotted woodpeckers, green woodpeckers, house martins, house sparrows, tree sparrows, hedge sparrows, gannets, kittiwakes, puffins, razorbills, bullfinch, greenfinch, chaffinch, and so many more.

Who's counting?

Birders will tell you that identifying your first 100 is just the start, it gets serious and harder when you are targeting 250. So, here a selection of the first 100 birds you might see should you take up the sport and science of observing birds. Your mileage may vary, you might see a marsh harrier before you spot a hen harrier, and ringed plovers may come your way before golden plovers. You may also try to count lapwings, peewits, and green plovers as different species, but they are one and the same.

In less enlightened times people preferred to shoot birds with a gun and steal their eggs. But, with a camera you often get to hunt and shoot the same bird again and again. I hope this short guide gives you some clues as to what you might look out for and where you might look in figuratively bagging your first 100 birds.

There are plenty of birds to watch...about ten thousand species worldwide at the last count. So crack out the binoculars and your walking boots or just watch from your garden and maybe tick them off in your head after you confirm the species in the book. It's not a wild goose chase, honest.

As of April 2018, my life list stands at a mere 150.

David Bradley
April 2018

European robin



Rotund, perching | Brown, orange breast, white belly | Woodland, gardens | Seeds, invertebrates

Description

Passerine, or perching, old world flycatcher. Found across Europe, Western Siberia, and North Africa.

♂ ♀ Male and female look the same: mostly light brown but with distinctive orange breast with white belly below. Grey streaks on face. Thin, sharp bill.

Habitat

Furtive bird, lives in woodland, heaths, commonly seen in gardens. Follows mammals that disturb the earth, such as wild boar and gardeners. Eats insects, spiders, worms, berries, and seeds from the ground.

Song or call

"tik-tik-tik" but also melodic warbling

Scientific name

Erithacus rubecula

Etymology

Robin derives from the Latin word *ruber*, meaning red, pre-dating a European word for orange, and also giving us *rubecula*. *Erithacus* is ancient Greek and refers to an unknown species of bird.

Looks like

The robin resembles the dunnock, nightingale and redstart, but its rusty breast sets it apart.

More information

<https://bit.ly/Robin-Bird>

Common barn owl



Widespread, pale coloured owl | Woodland, farmland | Eats small mammals, birds

Description

Silent hunter with heart-shaped face and dark eyes. Nocturnal but in the British Isles will hunt at dusk to feed young. Keen-eyed hunter of farmland and heath. Preys on the wing or from a perch on rodents and other birds.

♂ ♀ Male and female both very pale, with buff back, head, and upper side of wings. Also upper speckled with grey and black, under wing white.

Habitat

Found everywhere there are small mammals in the undergrowth. Excludes polar, desert and some Pacific regions, and north of Himalaya.

Song or call

Hissing and snoring on the nest, "hi-wit" squeal

Scientific name

Tyto alba

Etymology

Barn owls may well nest in barns but before barns they would have only sought out hollows in trees and rocks. *Tyto* most literally translates as onomatopoeic: "hooter", a nickname for an owl; *alba* from the Latin word for white.

Looks like

The barn owl shares some characteristics with short-eared and tawny owls, but large and distinctly pale.

More information

<https://bit.ly/Barnowl-Bird>

Common blackbird



Plump thrush | Woodland, farmland, parks, gardens | Eats berries, insects | Tuneful song

Description

Passerine, or perching, bird in the thrush family. Native to Europe, Asia, and North Africa, also now present in The Americas.

♂ Male glossy black all over, yellow-orange ring around eye and similarly coloured beak. Sometimes white patches.

♀ Female similar size but dark brown and mottled breast and belly.

Habitat

Found in leafy woodland and farmland with hedgerows, also parks and gardens. Eats invertebrates, including earthworms, and berries from bushes and trees.

Song or call

Strong, melodious, *improvised* song. Fast alarm call and low "pik-pik-pik" call.

Scientific name

Turdus merula

Etymology

Obvious English name, worth noting that birds bigger than a blackbird are strictly not birds, but fowl, with some exceptions. *Turdus* is Latin for thrush, *merula* for black bird.

Looks like

Resembles other thrushes in size and shape, ring ouzel, and American robin. Glossy, black male, yellow eye ring and beak set him apart.

More information

<https://bit.ly/Blackbird-Bird>

Eurasian wren



Tiny brown bird | Woodland, hedgerows, ditches | Eats insects, seeds | Loud, melodic song

Description

Tiny, streaked brown passerine, or perching, bird. Lives across Europe and Asia from Middle East to Japan.

♂ ♀ Rusty brown with darker bars on wings, fainter bars on breast; pale stripe above eyes.

Habitat

Furtive and shy, seeks out darkest cover in woodland, hedgerows, overgrown ditches. Acrobatically grabs small insects, spiders and picks seeds from the ground.

Song or call

Startlingly loud and melodic song and sharp, rattling "tchit, tchit, tzer".

Scientific name

Troglodytes troglodytes

Etymology

The English name is Germanic but of unknown origin. *Troglodytes* is Greek, often used to mean cave dweller, but *trogle* means a hole and *dyein* to creep. The name scientific name is a tautonym (duplicate name) to mean this species is the archetype of the genus.

Looks like

Resembles the dunnock (*Prunella modularis*) but much smaller. Short, rounded tail angled upwards when perched.

More information

<https://bit.ly/Wren-Bird>

Red kite



Long wings, forked tail | Red, black | Wooded valleys | Carrion, smaller birds, invertebrates

Description

Agile and aerobatic medium-sized bird of prey. Found across western Europe and North-west Africa, sometimes migrates south and east in winter. Reintroduced to British Isles after large-scale extermination, now spreading widely.

♂ ♀ Male and female similar, male slightly smaller. Distinctly red underparts, black flight feathers, striking white patches, grey head, pale eyes.

Habitat

Breeds in woodland valleys, hunts in open country and scavenges dead birds and mammals, moves to lower altitudes in winter and will pilfer from rubbish tips.

Song or call

Long drawn out squeal "weee-ow-ee-ow", higher pitched than buzzard's stereotypical raptor call.

Scientific name

Milvus milvus

Etymology

Kite derives from Old English, cyta, most likely onomatopoeic of the bird's call. Milvus is the Latin name for the red kite and is a tautonym (duplicate name) to mean this species is the archetype of the genus.

Looks like

Most obviously resembles a black kite but for the colour, might also be mistaken for broader, sturdier buzzard.

More information

<https://bit.ly/Redkite-Bird>

Common kingfisher



Long bill, dart-like flight | Vivid blue, orange | Waterways, lakes | Fish, amphibians, invertebrates

Description

Electric blue upper body and head, vivid orange breast, white neck patch and vivid blue streak down back. Dumpy and yet fast-moving fishing bird with large bill for catching slippery fish and amphibians. Stumpy tail. Found across Europe and N Africa.

♂ ♀ Male and female similar but female has red on base of her bill.

Habitat

Nests in a burrow in river banks and lakesides, hunts from perch or hovers to dive for fish, amphibians, and aquatic invertebrates.

Song or call

Sharp multiple "pip-weee" call, prior to flight, also high trilling call early in spring.

Scientific name

Alcedo atthis

Etymology

Majestic, fishing bird gives us its common name. *Alcedo* of its scientific name is Latin for kingfisher and comes from the Greek *halcyon*, a mythical bird that made its nest on still waters. *Atthis* was a beautiful maiden of mythology, a favourite of Sappho of Lesbos.

Looks like

Resembles no other British bird, but related to kingfishers in other countries and to the Australian kookaburra.

More information

<https://bit.ly/Kingfisher-Bird>

Mute swan



Large, white, graceful waterfowl | Slow-moving waterways, lakes | Aquatic plants, invertebrates

Description

Large, white waterfowl with long, elegant S-shaped neck, orange bill with black bulb at top, and large webbed feet. Eats water plants, insects and snails, as well as crop plants on farmland. Native to most of Eurasia.

♂ ♀ Male and female similar but male larger and black bulb is larger. Males can aggressively deter predators from getting too close to mate and cygnets.

Habitat

Will nest alongside still or slow-moving freshwater, rivers and streams, lakes, large parkland ponds.

Song or call

Less vocal than other species of swan, makes grunting, snorting sounds, and hisses when threatened.

Scientific name

Cygnus olor

Etymology

Ironically, the name swan is from Proto-Germanic *swanaz* meaning singer; although the mute swan has no song. Both parts of its scientific name, *cygnus* and *olor*, are simply Latin words for swan.

Looks like

Resembles the less well known, migratory whooper swan and the Bewick swan, both of which have a more goose-like appearance than the mute swan.

More information

<https://bit.ly/Muteswan-Bird>

Eurasian blue tit



Small, blue white and yellow | Woodland, parks, gardens | Berries, seeds, invertebrates

Description

Small, passerine, or perching bird, very flighty and noisy. Mostly yellow belly, blue cap and back, white face with black eye band. Eats berries, seeds, insects, and spiders.

♂ ♀ Male and female are similar but the male's cap is a deeper blue.

Habitat

Makes mossy nest in tree holes and hollows as well as in bird boxes. Can be found almost anywhere there are trees, woodland, gardens, parks, farmland.

Song or call

Chatty bird vocal "zee-zee-zee" call and "krrrr" alarm..

Scientific name

Cyanistes caeruleus

Etymology

The term tit, simply meaning small animal or object. But tita in Norwegian and titr in Icelandic specifically a small bird. Cyanistes from the ancient Greek meaning dark blue and likewise caeruleus Latin for cerulean also meaning dark blue.

Looks like

Resembles the less colourful, mainly buff and black-capped coal tit and larger yellow and black great tit.

More information

<https://bit.ly/Bluetit-Bird>

Common kestrel



Relatively small, brown raptor | Woodland, heath, mountain | Small mammals, birds, invertebrates

Description

One of the smaller birds of prey. Easily recognized for its hovering flight although also soars to hunt. Speckled brown back, black tips to long, grey tail feathers. Dark eyes encircled with yellow. Native to most of Eurasia and Africa.

♂ ♀ Female larger than the male and paler outer wing than the male's black. Both black-speckled back on brown, but female more rufous (reddish-brown) than male's chestnut brown back and more speckled. Male has grey head,

Habitat

Nests on cliffs, quarries, abandoned buildings, and disused crows nests. Hunts over grassland and along verges where voles might emerge.

Song or call

Whining call on the wing: "khee-khee-kheee".

Scientific name

Falco tinnunculus

Etymology

Kestrel also known as a windhover from castrell, from obscure French crecerelle meaning rattle. Falco meaning falcon from Latin word falx, sickle, referring to the claws. Tinnunculus, Latin for kestrel.

Looks like

Common kestrel is similar to the smaller and rarer lesser kestrel. Also resembles sparrowhawk and merlin.

More information

<https://bit.ly/Kestrel-Bird>

Yellowhammer



Yellow/brown perching bird | Seen on heaths, farmland | Eats seeds and insects | Distinctive call

Description

Passerine, or perching, bird in the bunting family. Native to Eurasia.

♂ Male has bright yellow head, streaked brown back, chestnut/rufous rump, and yellow underparts.

♀ Female has less yellow and more brown streaks on breast.

Habitat

Lives on farmland and heath, can often be seen perching high on a bush or hedgerow. Eats seeds in summer and also insects in winter.

Song or call

"Two slices of bread but no cheese"

Scientific name

Emberiza citrinella

Etymology

The hammer part of its name comes from the German word for bunting, *ammer*, first recorded in 1553 as *yelambre*. The *Emberiza* part of its scientific name also comes from the Old German *embritz*, meaning bunting. *Citrinella* is an Italian word for a small yellow bird.

Looks like

Resembles other birds including girl bunting, ortolan bunting, and female reed bunting, but for its distinctive, bright yellow plumage.

More information

<https://bit.ly/Yellowhammer-Bird>

Common linnet



Finch-like | Seen in open country, farmland | Eats seeds, berries | Chirrupy call

Description

Passerine, or perching, bird in the finch family, Fringillidae. Found across Europe into western and central Siberia; non-breeding in N Africa and SW Asia.

♂ Male in summer has a red breast, red head-patch, and grey nape.

♀ Females lack the red, have white underparts, and buff-speckled breast.

Habitat

Shy, but seen in open country, farmland often perching conspicuously on bushes, hedgerows. Eats seeds and berries from the ground.

Song or call

Twittering sound to call, but also makes sound like saying its name repeatedly: "linnet-linnet-it" call.

Scientific name

Linaria cannabina

Etymology

English name from species' fondness for flax seed from which we make linen. Second part of scientific name from its liking for hemp (*Cannabis sativa*). Linnets were formerly known as Carduelis because they resemble the chaffinch, goldfinch. DNA reveals separate family Linaria, meaning linen weaver from the Latin.

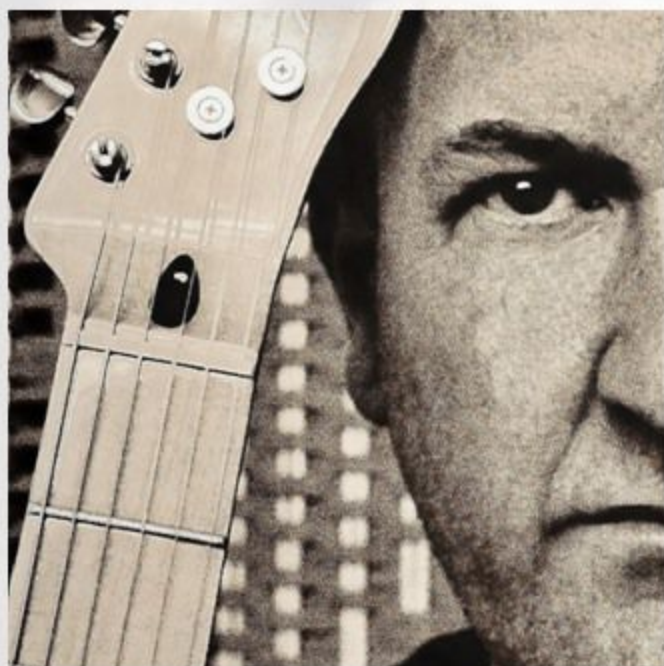
Looks like

Chaffinch shape and size, with big beak. Resembles wite, redpoll. Red blush of male's breast sets it apart.

More information

<https://bit.ly/Linnet-Bird>

David Bradley



Fairly tall, bald | Writes on science, makes music | House, garden, woodland, coast | Omnivorous

Description

Seated or walking, flightless, travelled widely in Europe, USA, southern Africa, Australia.

♂ Male, pair bonds for life and produced a brood of two offspring, one male, one female both doing rather well. Recruits other mammals for entertainment, currently yellow subspecies of *Canis familiaris* sp *labradorensis*.

Habitat

Gregarious, social species, often to be found talking, if not talking, then drinking, and often both of those at the same time as singing. Eats and drinks almost anything with the exception of celery and apple-based alcoholic beverages.

Song or call

Frequent, repetitive "hah-hah-hah" and Geordie waffling.

Scientific name

Homo sapiens bradliensis davidii

Etymology

Familial name derived from father through human Western European tradition, means "broad lea", and suspected of denoting farming ancestry. David, from the Hebrew, meaning beloved, second given name of late, maternal brother.

Looks like

Resembles various other middle-aged, Caucasian male humans including Woody Harrelson, Christopher Eccleston, or perhaps more accurately Nicholas Lyndhurst.

More information

<https://sciencebase.com>

Bird words

A short and light-hearted glossary of birding terms, twitchers' slang, terminology, you might hear the more enthusiastic birder use if you fail to hear the alarm call and are not quick enough to leave the hide while you have the opportunity.

Birder, birding – Someone interested in watching birds, their avian-related hobby (not to be confused with *Falco subbuteo*).

Twitcher, twitching (derog.) – A person who will apply unusual effort or expense to see a rare bird they have not seen before, their hobby.

Ornithology – The branch of the zoological sciences that deals with birds, the endothermic vertebrates known as *aves*.

Ave – Any of the 10500 or so known species of bird all of which have common evolutionary ancestry in the theropod dinosaurs of which *Tyrannosaurus rex* is one example.

RSPB – Royal Society for the Protection of Birds, charitable organisation with an obvious mission statement; also likes nature in general.

BTO – British Trust for Ornithology, pretty much just birds, thank you.

Hide – A screened area or wooden hut on a reserve, often with narrow viewing windows obscured by flaps to allow birders to remain hidden from the birds they intend to watch. Often the cause of BVD.

Beardie – Bearded Reedling (Bearded Tit), *Panurus biarmicus*. The species is neither bearded, nor a tit. Also derog. of celebrity birdwatcher Bill Oddie.

Shortie – Short-eared Owl (*Asio flammeus*)

Shag – A crested species of seabird (*Phalacrocorax aristotelis*), not to be confused with the Cormorant (*Phalacrocorax carbo*)

Showing well – Applies to the relative visibility and activity of a bird at a given site. As in the Beardies are showing well at Titchwell.

Pom-starring – A bird *showing* really, really well, it's *jizz* causing all kinds of ecstasy in the *hide*.

BVD – Better view desired, often the result of spending many an hour in a *hide* while a given *lifer* is elsewhere on a reserve and only fleetingly seen from said hide.

Tick – Whether BVD or *showing well*, a newly sighted bird for one's *life list* or year list is ticked off in one's proverbial notebook, on the "app" or simply in one's head.

LBJ – Little brown job, small bird of bland colouration seen so briefly that a *positive ID* is not possible. See BVD.

UFR – Unidentified flying raptor, the equivalent of an LBJ but for the multitude of high-flying hunting birds. See BVD.

Positive ID – Definitive identification of a bird based on its *jizz* and other factors. Rarely BVD, except in the context of photography and almost certainly not LBJ or UFR.

Jizz/Giss – The overall impression of a bird based on size, shape, colour, *plumage*, posture, flight, movements, song and call, habitat, and location, awareness of *jizz* provides for a *positive ID* even in the face of BVD.

Plumage – Feathers, critical to a bird's *jizz* for a positive ID. Plumage can vary from mating to non-mating season, between winter and summer, *chick* to *juvenile* to adult.

Scope – Telescope, usually tripod mounted for viewing distant birds. The bigger, the better (usually), although clarity and lack of chromatic aberration are often more important to the view.

Bins, binoculars – Usually lightweight and less powerful alternative to carrying a scope. However, many birders will carry both as the wider viewing angle and stereo vision of a pair of bins compared to a scope will allow them to scan the horizon

more quickly, for instance, before focusing the scope on a distant *lifer*.

Digiscope, digiscoping – Taking photos with camera or smartphone aligned with the eyepiece of a *scope*. Many *birders* will use a special adapter to clip camera and scope together for this purpose.

Ringling – Trapping and tagging of a bird, usually done by officials from *BTO*, *RSPB* or other conservation bodies for the sake of scientific studies of particular species. Also used people who keep and show birds, such as pigeons.

Stringing – Deliberately reporting a sighting of an interesting bird in a given location when said bird was most certainly not present, used maliciously by a rare breed of *twitcher* and *birder* with the intent of ruffling feathers (see *plumage*).

Juvenile – A young, immature bird, usually one that is no longer considered a *chick* and has fledged.

Chick – A baby bird.

Song, call, alarm call – Vocal birds often make different sounds depending on activity, a song may be a territorial or courtship sound, whereas a call may be a more passive sound made while roosting, an alarm call does what it says.

Yearlist, life list – Most *birders* keep records of the different species they see, often noting *jizz* and other relevant information. A year list would, as the name suggests, be the birds that person has seen in a calendar year, whereas a life list, obviously, is a list of all the birds the person has seen. By definition every bird on a life list is initially a *lifer*.

Lifer – A bird seen for the first time by a *birder* and added to their *life list*.

Mega – A very rare bird, one that will be a *lifer* for almost everyone who sees it.

Megatrick – A really good sighting due to the bird being a mega or otherwise difficult to find because it rarely shows well. Almost always a *lifer* for most *birders* that see it.

Raptors – Birds of prey including *Eagles*, *Hawks*, and *Owls*. See *UFR*.

Resident – Species that remains in its native territory throughout its lifecycle and does not migrate, although some residents nevertheless do migrate periodically and some migrants may become *vagrants* or residents depending on circumstances, such as climate change.

Migrant – Species that relocates depending on seasonal and lifecycle factors, commonly from one part of the world to another.

Vagrant – Species that is usually thought of as a *migrant* that is seen in a part of the world where it is not commonly seen.

Dirtbird – (Offens.) Any common bird an experienced *birder* has seen many times before. Of course, every bird one sees is initially a *lifer*. It is not nice to use this term for any of our feathered friends.

Passage migrant – A bird seen in a given location only during its *migration* from one place to another and does not spend any substantial period in that location.

Passage – The journey(s) made by *migrant* species.

SOB – Spouse of *birder*, a bird enthusiast's significant other, commonly less interested in our feathered friends than said enthusiast. Often to be seen on reserves lugging heavy bags, coats, flasks, picnic hamper, and other accoutrements, while the enthusiast strides ahead to the likely spot where their latest *lifer* is *showing well*.

Occam's razor – Useful tool for novice *birders* when reporting a rare species with *jizz* close to another common species. Occam's razor suggests that the simpler explanation is more likely than the exceptional. E.g. a Curlew Sandpiper at Minsmere was more likely to have been a Dunlin.

Spotting your first 100 birds

CHASING WILD GEESE

David Bradley has been a freelance science writer for almost 30 years and has always had an interest in wildlife.

It is only recently, however, that he has taken to tramping around the British countryside and coasts with the aim of looking for and listening to our feathered friends and maybe snapping a few with an over-sized zoom lens on his digital camera.

To assist him in his task he has steel toecapped walking boots, a rather patient labrador and an even more patient wife.



This is the ~~10~~¹¹-bird sampler of Chasing Wild Geese, find out more about the 100-bird book and to register your interest, please visit David's website:

<https://sciencebase.com/birds>