



An introduction to ...
bird identification and recording





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8. Songs and calls
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1. Getting started - learn to walk!

Its like an apprenticeship.

Start locally and keep it simple. Stick to familiar territory and learn, for example:

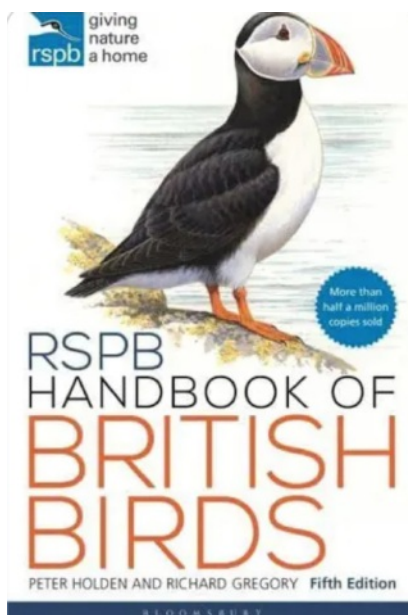
- Garden
- Local park, woodland or lake



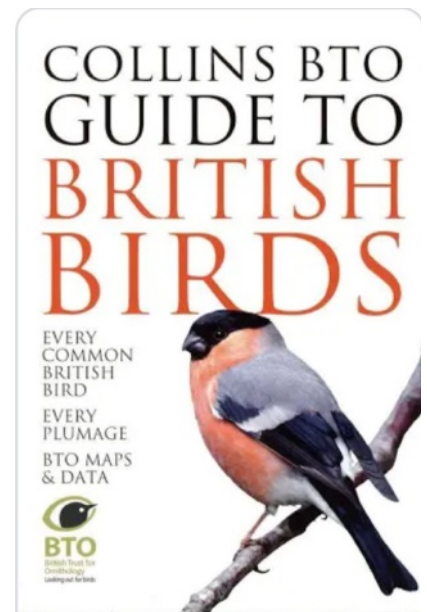
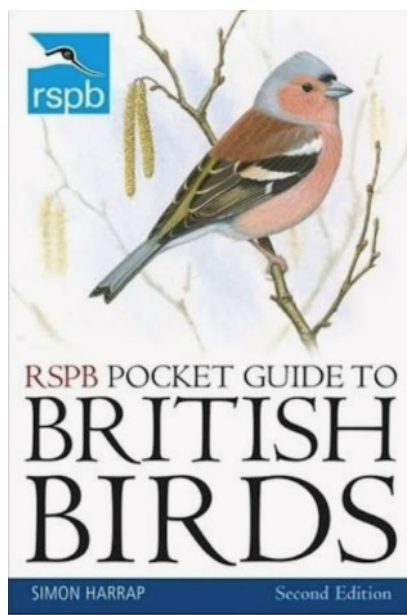
Ben Andrew (rspb-images.com)

2. Equipment - books

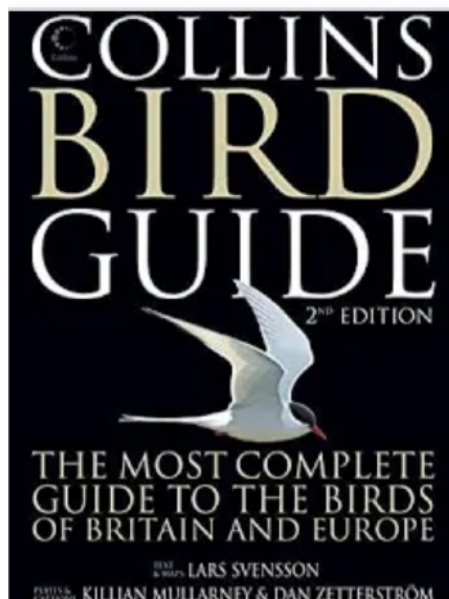
Start simple - books of commonest British birds (c250 species).
Study contents, memorise salient features of each species.
Learn the habitats and times of year different birds are seen.
Some books available as phone app.



Simple
illustrated



Simple
photographic



More technical

2. Equipment - optics

Start without! Teaches fieldcraft, improves observation skills

Binoculars

Decide budget: <£250; £250-£500;

£500-£750; £750-£1,000; >1,000+

Magnification: 7, 8 or 10x;

Objective lens: 32mm, 40mm

Higher magnification = lower field of view, light reception, increased vibration and handshake

Wider objective lens = wider field of view, greater light gathering capacity.



Telescopes

Decide budget: £300-£700;

£700-£1000; £1,000-£3,000;

>£3,000+

Magnification: 30x fixed; 30-70x zoom;

Objective lens: 60-115mm

Style: straight/angled

Accessories: tripod and cover

Where: most useful for large water bodies and estuaries, or sea watching.



3. Bird families

Wildfowl

Divers*

Seabirds*

Hérons, Storks

Rails, Crakes

Bustards

Skuas*

Terns

Sandgrouse*

Cuckoos

Nightjars

Kingfisher

Parrots*

Larks

Pipits, Wagtails

Waxwing*

Thrushes, Chats

Flycatchers

Nuthatch, Creepers

Crows

Sparrows

Buntings

Gamebirds

Grebes

Cormorant, Pelican

Birds of prey

Cranes*

Waders

Gulls

Auks*

Pigeons, Doves

Owls

Swifts

Bee-eaters*

Woodpeckers

Swallows, Martins

Wrens, Dippers

Accentors

Warblers

Tits

Shrikes*

Starlings, Orioles

Finches, Crossbills

The following illustrations are a selection of some of these but omits winter visitors and scarce passage birds.

Certain families and members of those marked (*) will at first be difficult for the beginner to see, especially inland and are also omitted.

Wildfowl



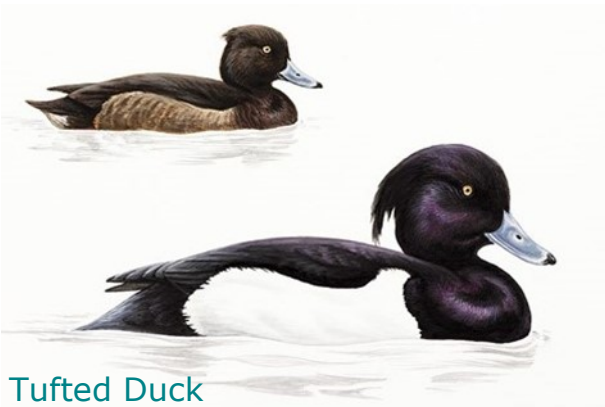
Mute Swan



Canada Goose



Greylag Goose



Tufted Duck



Mallard



Gadwall

Grebes and Cormorants



Great-crested Grebe



Little Grebe



Cormorant



Hérons and Rails



Grey Heron



Little Egret



Coot



Moorhen

Birds of prey



Sparrowhawk



Kestrel



Red Kite



Buzzard

Waders, Gulls, Terns



Redshank



Lapwing



Oystercatcher



Black-headed Gull



Herring Gull



Common Tern

Pigeons and Doves



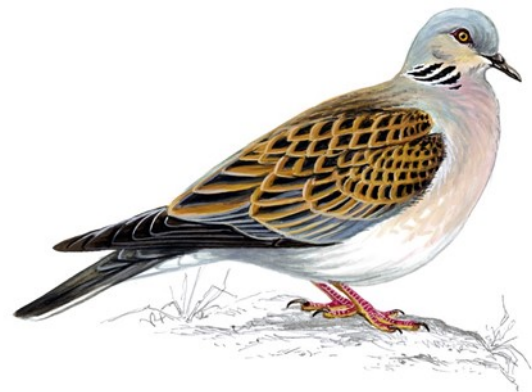
Collared Dove



Woodpigeon

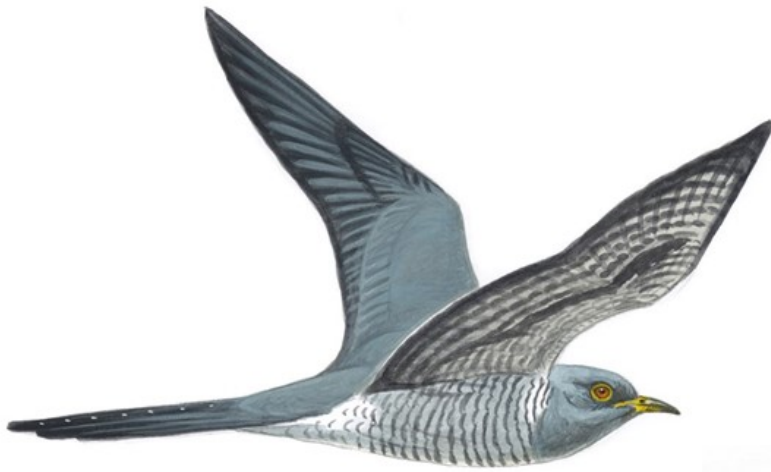


Stock Dove



Turtle Dove

Cuckoo, Owls, Swift



Cuckoo



Barn Owl



Tawny Owl



Little Owl



Swift

Kingfisher, Woodpecker, Larks



Kingfisher



Great Spotted Woodpecker



Green Woodpecker



Skylark

Swallow, Martins, Pipits, Wagtails



Swallow



House Martin



Sand Martin



Meadow Pipit



Pied Wagtail



Grey Wagtail



Yellow Wagtail

Wren, Dunnock, Thrush, Chat



Wren



Dunnock



Blackbird



Song Thrush

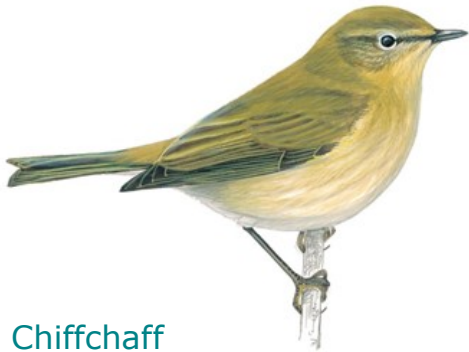


Mistle Thrush



Robin

Warblers and Flycatchers



Chiffchaff



Blackcap



Garden Warbler



Willow Warbler



Whitethroat



Reed Warbler



Lesser Whitethroat



Goldcrest



Sedge Warbler



Spotted Flycatcher

Tits, Nuthatch, Treecreeper



Blue Tit



Great Tit



Long-tailed Tit



Coal Tit



Marsh Tit



Nuthatch



Treecreeper

Crows and Starling



Magpie



Carrion Crow



Jackdaw



Rook



Jay



Starling

Sparrows and Finches



House Sparrow



Tree Sparrow



Goldfinch



Greenfinch



Chaffinch



Bullfinch



Buntings



Yellowhammer



Linnet



Reed Bunting



Identifying birds - shape

Compare an unfamiliar bird in shape to a bird you might know, for example is it slim or rounded?

Slim



Pied Wagtail

Rounded



Greenfinch



Redshank



Lapwing



Great Spotted Woodpecker



Woodpigeon

4. Identifying birds - size

Compare an unfamiliar bird in size to a bird you might know, such as Blue Tit, Blackbird or Woodpigeon.



Goldcrest
Wren
Chiffchaff



Blue Tit



Great Tit
Robin
House Sparrow

Starling
Pied Wagtail
Reed Bunting



Blackbird

Mistle Thrush
Great Spotted
Woodpecker

Stock Dove
Green Woodpecker
Lapwing



Woodpigeon

Magpie
Carrion Crow
Mallard

Identifying birds - posture

Compare an unfamiliar bird in shape to a bird you might know, for example is it upright or horizontal?

Upright



Mistle Thrush

Horizontal



Song Thrush



Robin



Dunnock



House Sparrow



Pied Wagtail

5. What affects the look of a bird?

Cold or windy weather: Can make a bird look 'hunched' or 'fluffed-up', can alter shape of posture.



Light: In bright light, birds can look pale or dark in dull light. Back lit birds can look darker, brighter if lit from below.



What affects the look of a bird?

Posture: Perched on a branch, birds can look upright or if feeding on the ground, more horizontal.



Ben Andrew (rsqb-images.com)



Jack Farrer (rsqb-images.com)

6. Identifying birds - wings

Does the bird appear to have pointed or rounded wings?

Pointed



Kestrel

Rounded



Sparrowhawk



Redshank



Lapwing



Song Thrush



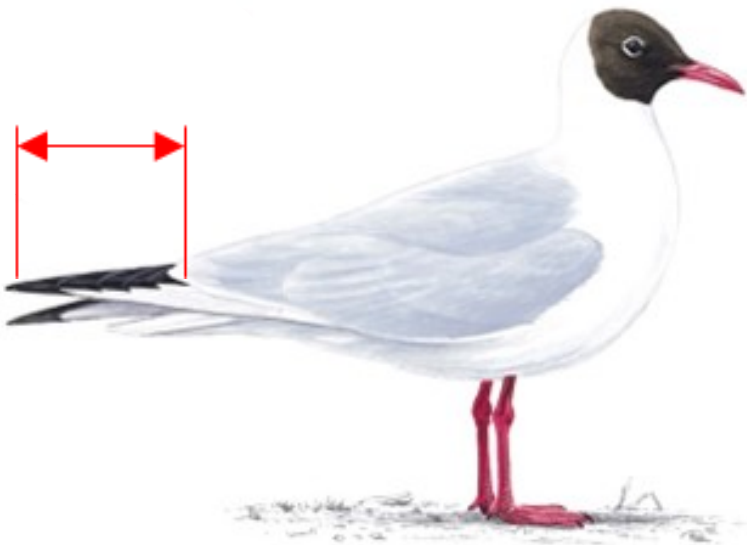
Green Woodpecker

Identifying birds - wings

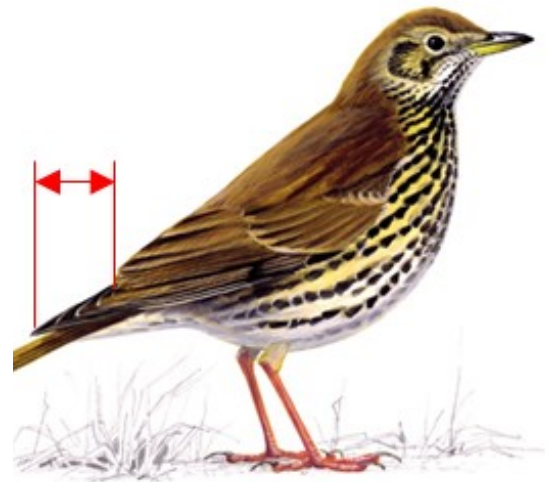
Does the bird appear to have long or short wings?

Long

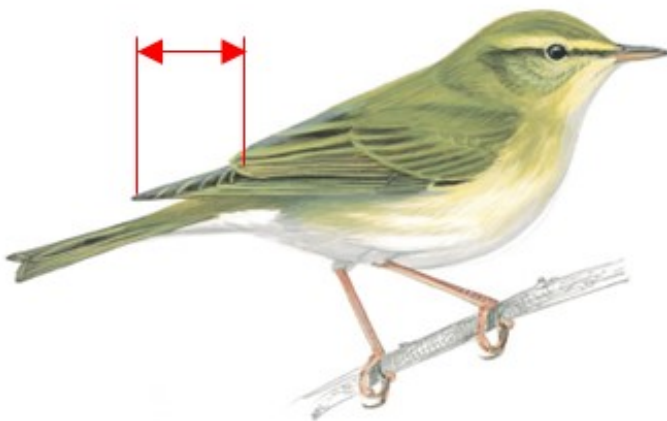
Short



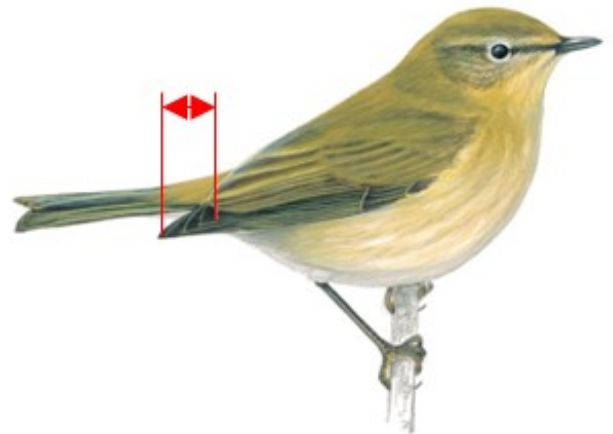
Black-headed Gull



Song Thrush



Willow Warbler



Chiffchaff

Identifying birds - tails

Does the bird appear to have long or short tail?

Long



Long-tailed Tit

Short



Blue Tit



Blackbird



Starling

Identifying birds - tails

What sort of shape is the birds tail - is it square, pointed, rounded, forked, notched or wedged?

Square



Song Thrush

Pointed



Reed Warbler

Rounded



Buzzard

Forked



Swallow

Notched



Goldfinch

Wedged



Magpie

Identifying birds - beaks

To reduce competition for food, birds have developed different sizes and shaped beaks. Some long for probing or stabbing, some chunky for eating large seeds and others thin for catching and eating insects. Below are a selection of different types of beak and their uses.



Fine seeds



Large seeds, fruits



Invertebrates, fruits



Invertebrates



Plants



Fish, amphibians



Meat



Invertebrates

Identifying birds - feet

Birds also have different shaped feet and length of legs. Some adapted for climbing trees, or swimming, others for running, walking hopping or wading. There is considerable overlap in this behaviour with some species both walking, running and hopping, as you will see on the next page.



Short legs - hopping



Long legs - running, walking



Toes - climbing



Webbed feet - swimming



Long legs - wading



Long legs, hooked claws - reaching and grabbing prey



Identifying birds - habits

Walk - wildfowl, waders, raptors, Starling, pigeons

Run - waders, egrets, thrushes, Starling, larks, wagtails

Hop - thrushes, finches, warblers, raptors, Starling

Dabble - (peck food on water's surface) geese, ducks, Coot

Dive - ducks, Coot, grebes, Cormorant, raptors, terns

Sift - (sweeping motion in water) waders, ducks, egrets

Paddle - (*dance* on ground or in water) gulls, waders, egrets

Hover - terns, Kestrel, Buzzard, Kingfisher, warblers

Soar - raptors, gulls

Feeding - pick, peck, probe, stab, grab



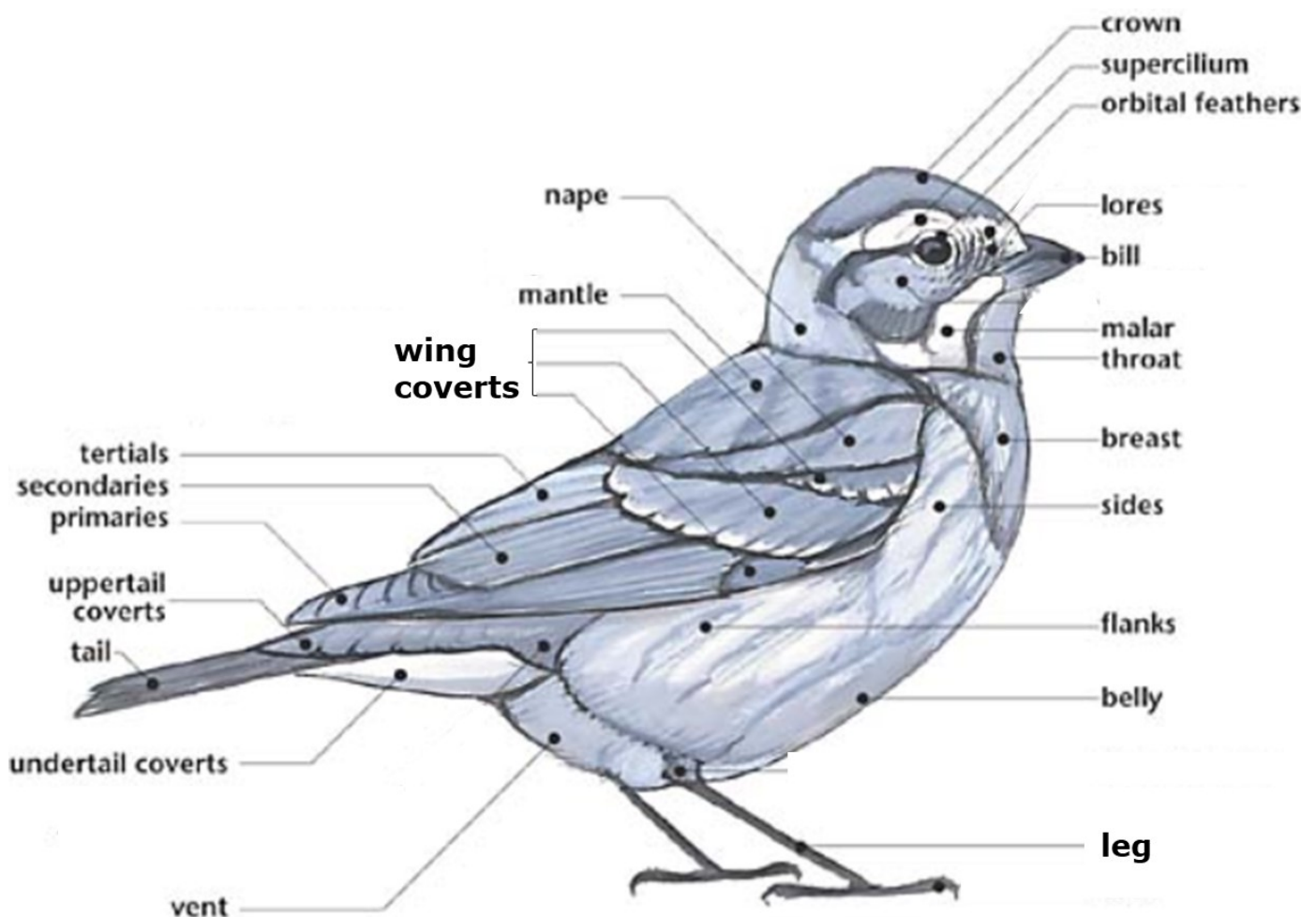
Ben Andrew (rspb-images.com)

7. Bird parts, colours and patterns

Parts of the body

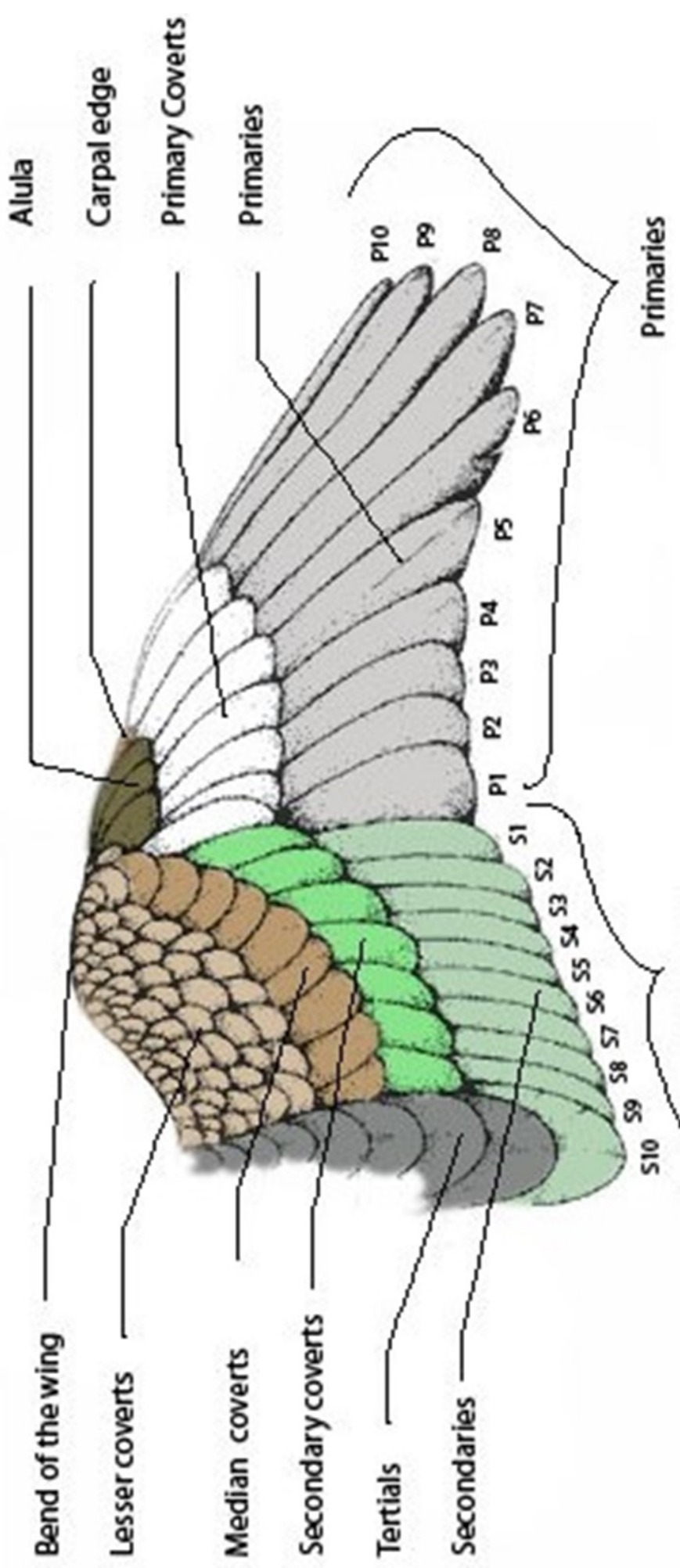
It's useful to familiarise yourself with names for the external features that identify parts of a bird's body and wing. This helps when trying to describe the colours and patterns of a bird you are unsure about. It also helps to understand descriptions you will read in bird books.

This page describes the main body parts, and the following pages look at the wing.



Helpful tip. You might consider keeping a copy of this and the following wing illustration or similar, stuck on the inside of your note book as a prompt when out in the field.

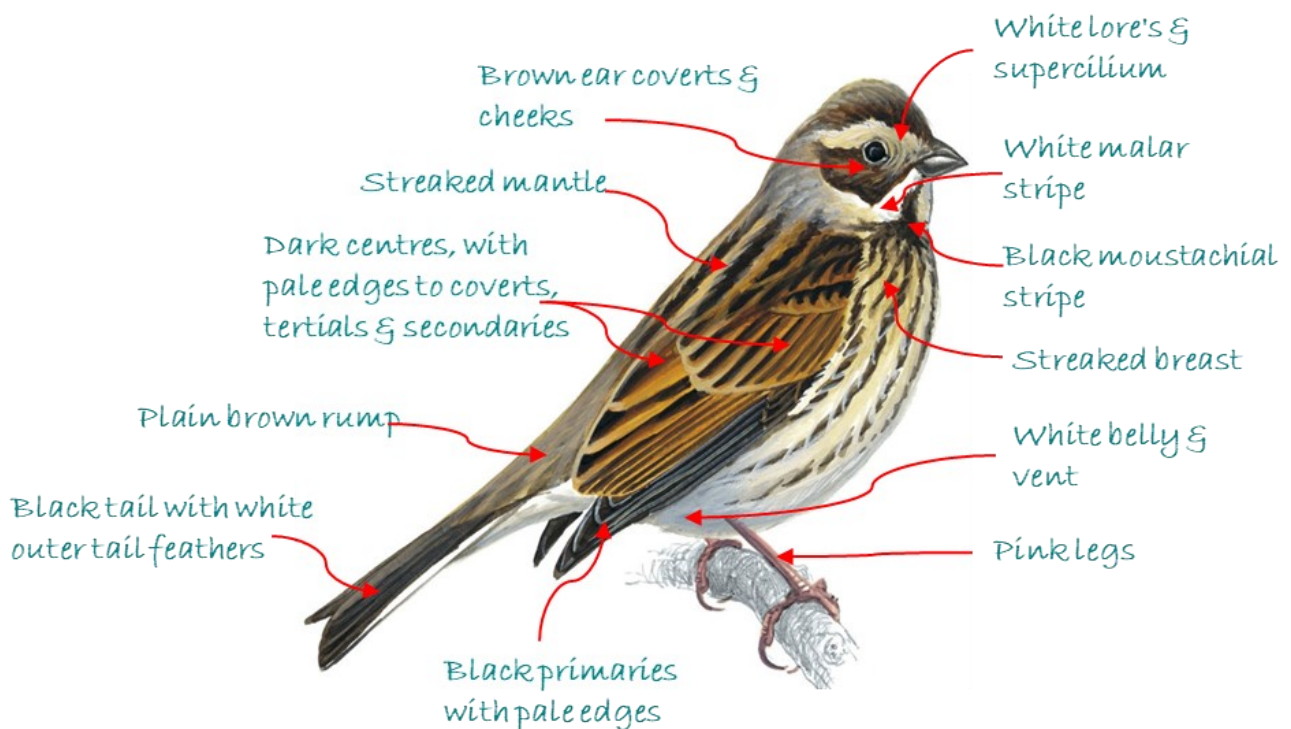
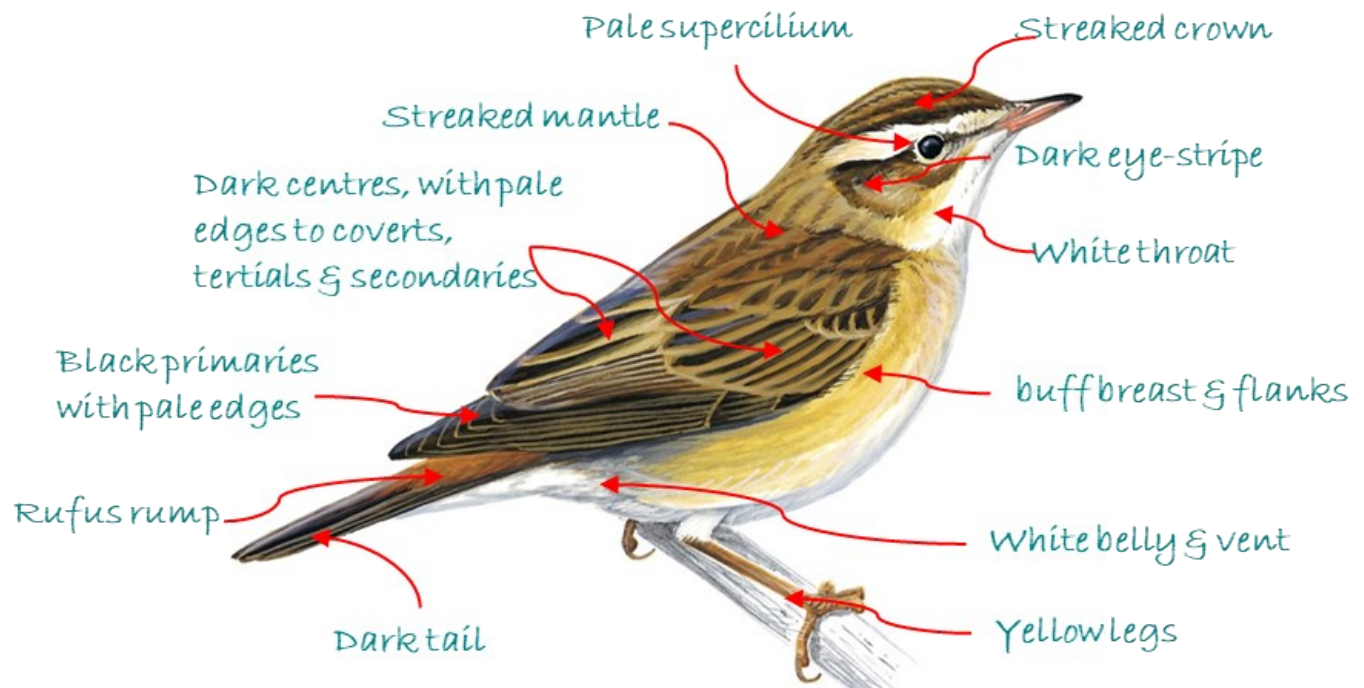
Parts of the wing



Helpful tip: The '**wing-span**' is measured from tip to tip across the body of a bird. The '**wing-length**' is measured on a closed wing, from the bend of the wing to the tip of the longest primary.

Body colours and patterns

Below are examples of how a bird might typically be annotated to describe the colours and patterns of the plumage.

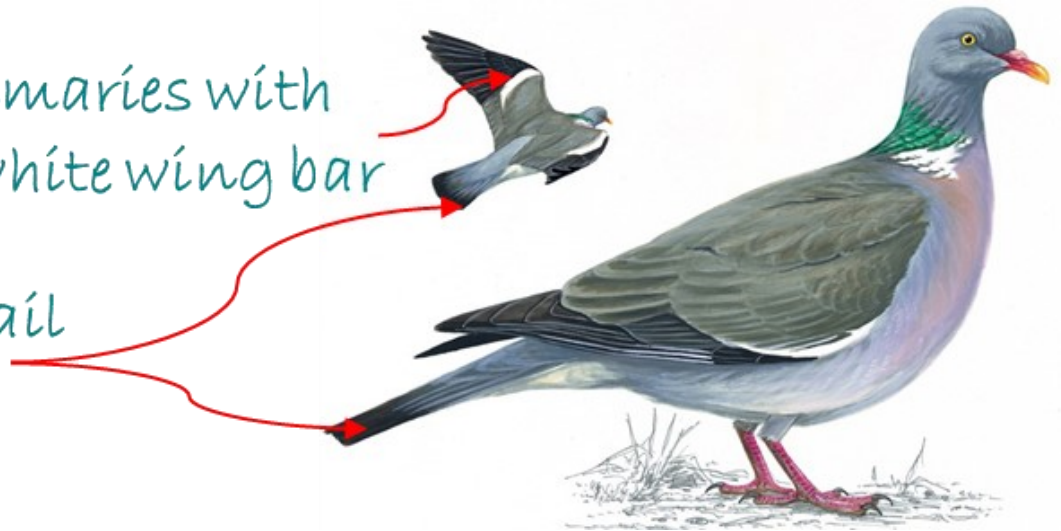


Tail, rump colours and patterns

Many birds have distinctive colours and patterns on their tails and rumps. Below are a few examples you might encounter.

Black primaries with vertical white wing bar

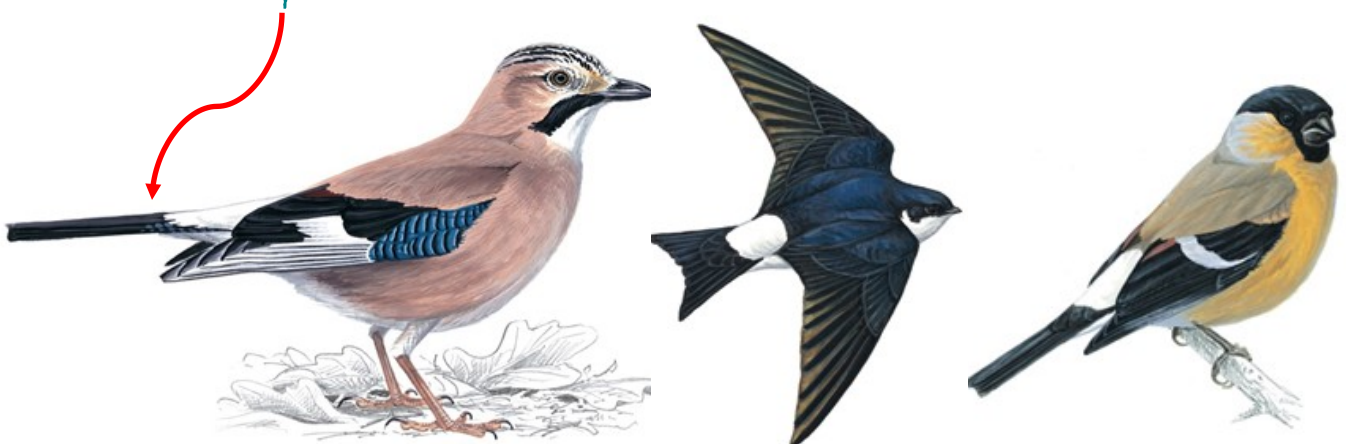
Black tail band



Barred tail



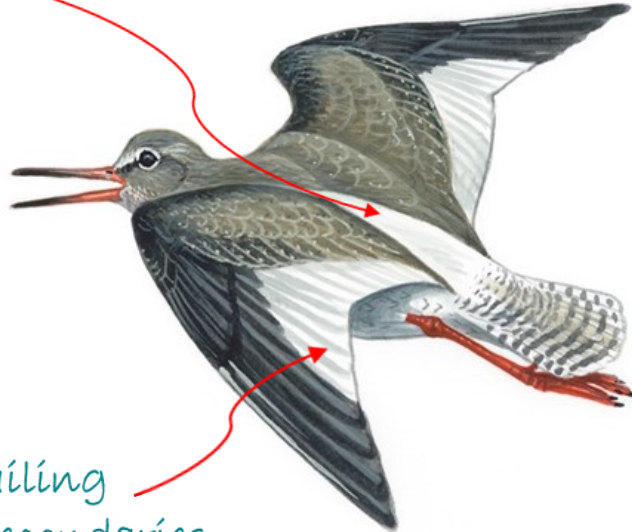
White rump-black tail



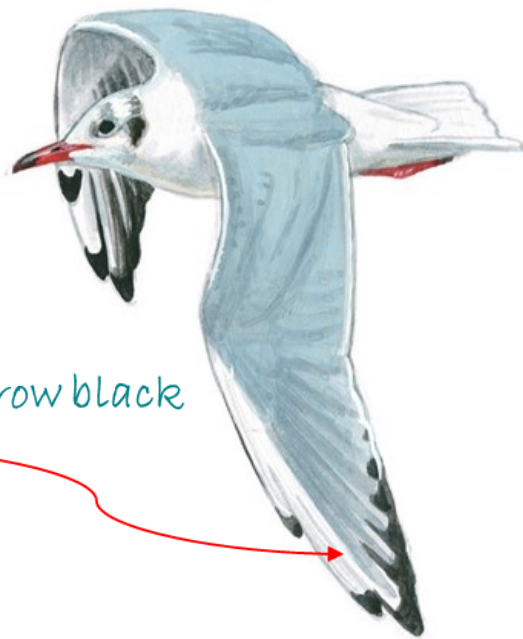
Wing colours and patterns

Many birds have distinctive colours and patterns on their wings. Below are a few examples you might encounter.

White v-into back &
barred tail



White wedge trailing
primaries and secondaries



White leading and narrow black
trailing edge



Gold wing bar

8. Songs and calls

Song

With some practice and perseverance, song is perhaps the easiest to learn!

Birds tend to sing only for a limited period of the year. This is generally mid-January to mid-June, peaking in April and May.

It is best to start learning from January onward when a few of our common resident birds start to sing and there are no leaves on trees to hide the bird singing.

The quiet period for bird song is outside of the breeding season. Birds will also become quiet and elusive when they have a brood. If it is a multi-brooded species (for example Song Thrush) once the brood has fledged the male will begin singing again, between broods.

Some birds such as Grasshopper Warbler or Nightjar, can change the pitch of their song by turning their heads.

Birds can also *throw* their voice to sound as if they are singing from elsewhere.

Windy weather can also have a similar effect of *throwing* and *dulling* a bird's song or call.



Leslie Cater (rspb-images.com)

Calls

Calls are primarily a means of contact - staying in touch with each other and other species. Hence the term often used is a 'contact call'. They are used for example as a means to say: "I'm here", "I've found food" or "danger".

These are perhaps the most difficult and confusing to learn, and can only really be mastered from hours spent in the field listening.

Many species use similar sounding whistles, *tuts*, *clicks* and *tecks* that are difficult to tell a species apart.

Hearing birds giving a distress call in flight is often a good way of finding a bird of prey. The agitated call of Starlings, Crows or Gulls being good examples.

Birds such as House Sparrow or Blackbird also utter a different distress call for ground predators such as cats, compared to what they would use for an aerial predator such as a Sparrowhawk.



9. Identifying the mystery bird

Narrow it down

When you see or hear an unfamiliar bird there are a number of questions to ask yourself:

- Where am I (habitat)?
- What time of year is it (season)?
- Looks and sounds like (compare to a familiar bird)?

In time, with practice and experience your brain will naturally go through these processes to narrow the field.

Pitfalls

There are a few things to consider, and as discussed include the affect of light on colour, size and shape. Also the weather can make plumage look 'fluffed-up' when it is cold or windy.

You should also consider that adult and juvenile birds may have different plumages through the year. For example, the Black-headed Gull has a chocolate brown head only in summer and a white head in winter. Chaffinch and House Sparrow also have different coloured head patterns in winter.

Juvenile waders have different patterns to adults and a flock of birds may be in different stages of moult and each may look different. In some birds there are also variation in size which can be noticeable.



Ray Kennedy (rspb-images.com)

Taking notes

It is useful to carry a notebook and record what you see. A good collection of notebooks are like diaries and make for some nostalgic reading. Also record the time and length of your visit, the weather and naturally the location.

Many people take photos of birds they see and cannot identify. But a notebook saves carrying extra equipment around, is traditional and you can record anecdotes of the event you would not capture on a camera.

Taking notes and sketches of an unusual birds you see will help identify it later. If it is a particularly scarce bird locally or even nationally, it contributes as evidence to help verify your record.

It is important you later transfer your records to the BTO BirdTrack website. There is also a mobile phone app for BirdTrack to enter records directly when out, although it does take away the fun of a notebook.

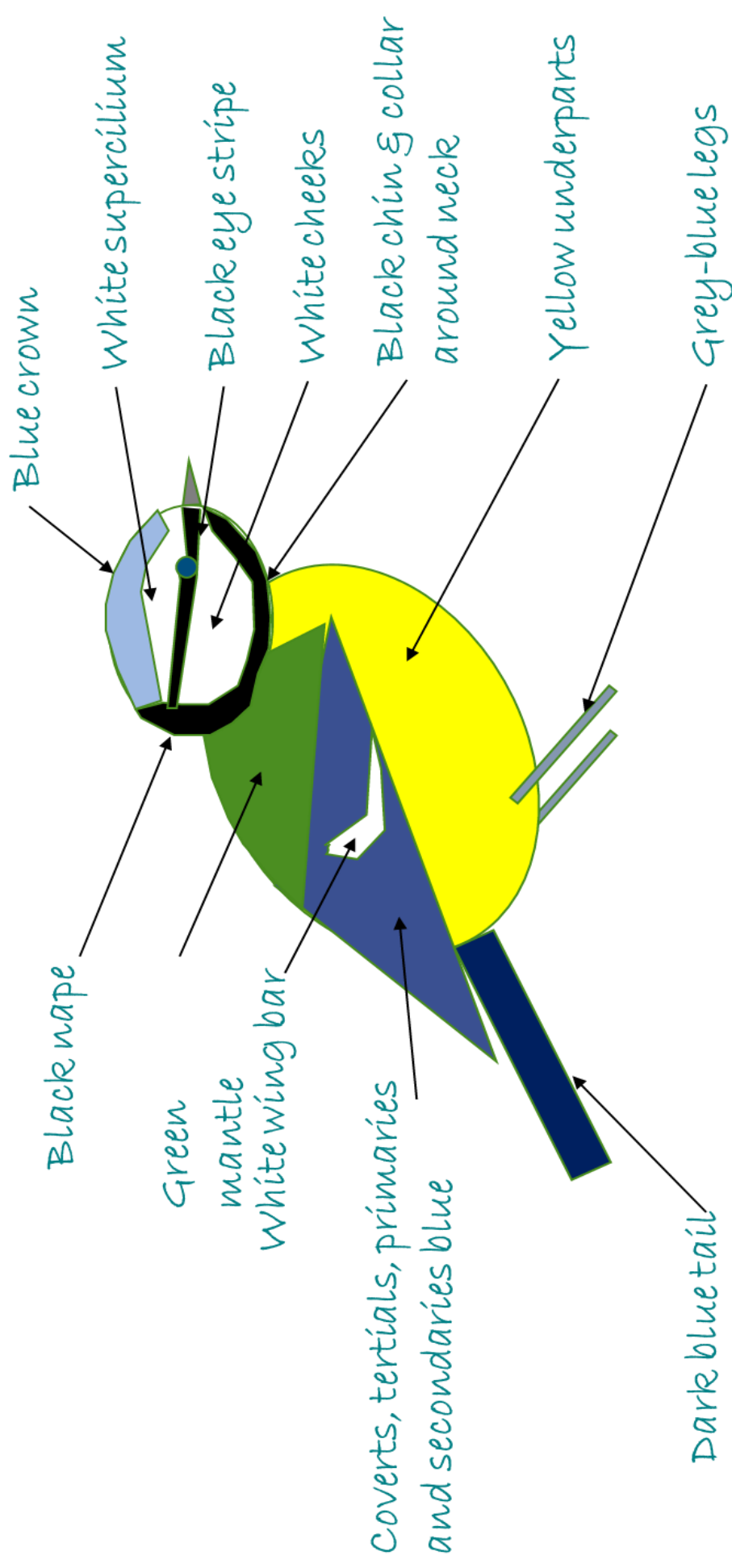
Visit: <https://www.bto.org/our-science/projects/birdtrack>

When sketching and annotating an unfamiliar bird, you don't need to be a great artist, as you will see on the next page. If you can make the shape up with a series of circles, ellipses, triangles and rectangles with a few labels, that is all that's needed. If you are submitting a record for a scarce bird, then note weather, time, previous experience of the species and from how far and long you observed it for.



Katie Nethercoat (rspb-images.com)

Field notes



Part cloudy, good visibility, observed @ 08:25, watched for 2 minutes from about 10m away with 7.5x42 Zeiss binoculars. Smaller than a sparrow & flitted among canopy of hawthorn bush, picking at small insects. Occasional calls a sí-sí-sí. I believe this is a bluetit. I have seen this species 100's of times in all habitats. I'm 100% certain





Protecting habitats, saving species
and helping to end the nature and
climate emergency.

**Nature is in crisis.
Together we can save it.**

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