

Quick Tips for Sketching Birds in the Field

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The tips below are geared towards birdwatchers of any skill level, although the practice of bird sketching can be especially useful for new birders in serving to strengthen your identification skills. Keep in mind that you are drawing from real life, not aiming for the precision and quality you see in the birding field guides. My goal is to make you comfortable sketching without quality judgements, and my hope is that you'll grow to enjoy the practice of sketching as a relaxing and fulfilling hobby! So here are your quick tips for sketching birds in the field:

- Always carry your sketching supplies with you so they'll be available at a moment's notice.
- Bring plenty of snacks, water, sunscreen, and other essentials because time will fly when you're sketching.
- Wait quietly and patiently so the birds will get used to your presence. Learn the habits of the species in your area so you will know when the best times are to observe them and where they tend to gather.
- Find a comfortable position and orient yourself so that your sketchbook is in the shade or shaded by your body; the glare of the sun on white paper can give you a headache and can also startle the birdlife.
- Use lightweight binoculars that are easy to hold in one hand while you sketch with the other hand.
- Using a spotting scope is great for sketching distant birds, especially if you have a portable field chair.
- Sketch lightly and loosely, keeping your pencil moving and avoiding wasting time erasing your marks.
- Try using the fewest lines possible to capture the bird's 'GISS' or overall impression of a bird's characteristics.
- If no birds are around, just doodle and wait – drawing some basic body forms in as practice.
- The faster the birds move, the smaller you should draw. Your thumbnail sketches can be as tiny as an inch.
- Glance quickly back and forth between your paper and your bird. Sketch, look. Sketch, look.

- If there are multiple species, focus on just one at a time until you've sketched it in a variety of poses.
- Start a small sketch and when your bird moves, just start a new one in the bird's new pose. As your bird or another comes into one of the same poses, just start up where you left off until each sketch is done.
- Remember that the most important identifying features of birds are generally the bill shape and facial patterns, followed by color patterns on the body, so focus on these first in your sketches.
- Don't worry about drawing legs and feet, they are rarely diagnostic. Instead watch for the field marks that your guidebook mentions and try to see and draw those.
- Avoid getting overwhelmed, so try drawing just one anatomical feature of the birds you are observing, like their bills or eyes. Sketch them from as many angles as you can in order to gain a full understanding of their form from any view.
- Practice sketching at different distances to learn its unique features visible, both close up and far away.
- If birds are moving too quickly to draw, just observe them intently, sketching from memory once gone.
- Try whispering the birds' identifying features to yourself – an orange crown, black eye-stripe, short bill, etc.
- Written notes are just as useful as drawings. Note the bird's colors, sounds, and behaviors on your sketch.
- Being farther away is sometimes better, you can focus on sketching a bird's silhouette.
- Try doing a blind contour drawing in which you just focus your eyes on the bird and not on the paper.
- The more you study birds and observe their habits the easier it will be to draw them in the field.
- If, when you are done sketching and you hate what you've drawn, don't fret! It is in the act of drawing that you learn. Place your energy on the *process* not the *product*, remembering that the act of sketching is just a method to focus your attention on a bird longer than you might if you were just glancing at it quickly enough to see its field marks to make an identification. Ideally, you are aiming to develop a deeper understanding of the form and behavior of the birds you sketch.