

Mecklenburg Audubon Society

Beginning Birders: Bird Words



For the neophyte bird watching terminology used by more experienced birders and/or ornithologists can be confusing and sometimes frustrating. Here are a few basic terms Cornell Lab of Ornithology and Audubon thinks beginning bird watchers should become familiar with -

Natural History Words

Adaptation: A special physical or behavioral ability that has allowed a species adjust to a particular way of life.

Distribution: The geographic area(s) where a given species of bird can be found.

Niche: The role a bird plays in the ecosystem, including what it eats and where it lives (habitat).

Non-native Species: Birds that have been released from or have escaped captivity. In some cases (House Sparrows, Rock Doves, and others), such species have become established in North America.

Population: The total number of individuals of a single species inhabiting a given area.

Taxonomy: The way bird scientists classify bird species based on their similarities to or differences from one another.

Behavior Words

Diurnal: Used to describe birds that are active during the day. Most birds are diurnal.

Dominance: The ability of one bird to control the actions of another.

Flock: A group of birds made up of either the same or different species.



Habitat: The environment where a particular species of bird lives. Forests and wetlands are both examples of habitats.

Home Territory: The total area a bird inhabits while living in a given place.

Hovering: A technique a bird uses for various reasons, including to search for food. To hover, a bird remains stationary in mid-air, usually by rapidly flapping its wings

Migration: An extended journey a bird makes from one place to another (for example, when a bird flies from its wintering areas in South America to its breeding area in North America.)

Nocturnal: Used to describe birds that are active at night. Most owls are nocturnal.

Permanent Resident: A species of bird that does not migrate and so spends the entire year in the same region.

Roost: A place where a bird sleeps, sometimes in groups.

Food and Feeding Words

Carnivorous: Flesh-eating birds (usually fresh or live as opposed to carrion). Raptors (hawks and owls) are carnivorous birds.

Crop: A sac inside a bird where its neck meets the body. It holds food before digestion.

Frugivorous: Birds that feed primarily on fruit such as the Cedar Waxwings.

Granivorous: Birds that eat grains or seeds, such as the Rock Pigeon.

Grit: Small pieces of rock, shell, or other hard substances that birds eat to help them digest other foods. Grit helps grind up coarse vegetable matter.

Herbivorous: Birds, such as the Canada Goose, that primarily eat plants.

Insectivorous: Birds that eat mainly insects. Swallows are a good example.

Nectivorous: Birds that feed largely on the nectar of flowers or the juices of fruit, such as hummingbirds.

Omnivorous: Birds that eat anything that is considered digestible/edible. American Crows are a common example.

Piscivorous: Fish-eating birds. The Osprey is piscivorous.

Predation: When one animal kills another for food. The animal that is taken is the prey, and the animal doing the taking is the predator.

Raptors: Generally hawks, eagles, falcons, and owls. These birds prey upon mammals, smaller birds, and other animals.



Feather/Plumage Words

Camouflage: Having a color and/or pattern that allows a bird to blend with its habitat.

Crest: A tuft of feathers on the top of a bird's head.

Field Mark: A characteristic or combination of characteristics such as color, shape, or specific marking (eye rings, wing bars, breast stripes), by which a species of bird can be distinguished from other species

Molt: Process by which a bird renews part or all of its plumage by shedding old, worn feathers and growing new ones.

Plumage: All the feathers that cover a bird's body.

Preening: The process by which a bird cleans, arranges, and cares for its feathers, usually by using its bill to adjust and smooth feathers.

Sexual Dimorphism: When male and female birds differ in plumage.