

Field Exercises

Sometimes we reach a plateau with our birding skills and can find it difficult to continue improving our identification abilities. One way to change this is to break out of normal habits of observation and concentrate on some specific aspects of the ID process. Following are some activities that can prove helpful in this regard. They can be useful no matter the skill level, and can even add some challenges during slower birding seasons.

Undertails: Identify as many birds as possible by undertail alone.

- Concentrate on observing overhead birds; use the Undertail Finder before and after this exercise.
- Look at each of the undertail components: make notes or verbal observations on the color and shape of the vent, undertail coverts, and tail.
- Compare the length and color of the tail to the undertail coverts.
- What is the overall shape of the bird including the tail and body?
- Does the tail appear to be a different length when seen from below than from above?

Wing Feathers : Study several species and learn the topography of the wing.

- Can you see the primary coverts?
- On the median and greater coverts, are the tips lighter, creating wing bars? Are the feather edgings paler?
- How long are the wings and how far do the primaries extend past the secondaries and tertials in the folded wing (its primary projection)?
- If you get a look at an open wing, how does the topography compare with the closed wing? Where are the primary coverts in each case? The tertials?

Aging and sexing: As far as possible, age and sex every warbler you see.

- For each species seen, read the aging and sexing information in the Master Pages, and note the important characteristics for that species.
- Look for subtler characteristics. Is there a color difference between the primaries and the coverts on the folded wing?
- Are the feathers worn or fresh looking, or a mix of both? What does that tell you?

Faces: ID as many warblers as possible by face alone.

- Is there an eyeline? If so, how far does it extend before and behind the eye?
- Is there also a supercilium, and if so, how long is it? Does it contrast strongly with the eyeline?
- Are there eye arcs or an eye ring? How wide and how contrasty are they?
- Do the throat and back contrast with the head?
- Is there a cheek patch? What color and shape is it? What does it connect with, if

anything?

Behavior: Focus on studying behavior

- How is the bird feeding?
- Is it sallying, hovering, or looking under leaves?
- Where is it in the canopy? High, low, on the ground?
- Is it flitting from place to place, or moving more methodically?
- How is the bird moving its tail? Does it wag it or move it from side to side? If so, is it a regular movement?
- Does it flash white in the tail when it flies?

No Binoculars: ID as many birds as possible without using binoculars.

- How is the bird behaving?
- How large is the bird?
- Does the bird have any general contrast pattern or color that is diagnostic?
- What species are most likely in your area, and at that time of year?
- Are there any vocalizations to use in the ID process?
- Once you've made a tentative ID, be sure to follow up with binoculars (or have a friend do it), to confirm. Without confirmation, your observations will not be as valuable.

Calls : Begin to separate warblers by call.

- Listen for the very short vocalizations that warblers (and other species) are making. Can you distinguish any flight calls or are they all contact calls?
- Start with only one parameter: does the call rise, fall, or remain steady?
- Review the Call Finder and add one other parameter, such as pitch or complexity. What more can you hear in the call?

Songs (Sections) ID as many warblers as possible by song alone.

- Re-read the "How to Listen to Warblers" section, for a refresher
- Note how many Sections are in each song you hear.
- Are you hearing 1-Element, 2-Element, or 3-Element Phrases?
- Are there many Elements, or just a few?
- Are there buzzes or trills?
- Can you count the number of Elements, or are they too fast to do so?
- Do the Elements rise, fall, or remain steady in pitch?
- Does the song have a single quality, or a mix of qualities (i.e., Buzzes and Clear tones)?
- How long is the song overall? Short? Long?
- If at all possible, confirm your ID by finding and looking at the bird.