



Choosing the right field guide

Continuing our series on birdwatching essentials, **Niall Hatch** turns his attention to field guides.

Upon developing an interest in birds, many people feel a desire to put names to the different species they encounter. This can be overwhelming at first, what with all the different species and plumages that can be seen just in a garden, but happily, there are many bird identification books on the market to assist you.



These field guides help the user to identify birds 'in the field' – i.e., in the wild.

These books rely on a combination of illustrations or photographs and text to help you discern differences between different bird species and, indeed, between their different sexes

and ages. They are almost always designed to be small and portable so they can be carried in a coat pocket or small bag to facilitate use in the field. The driving need to keep both size and weight down means that the text is truncated, and image plates tend to be crowded with pictures so that maximum plumage variation can be presented in minimum space.

Many field guides highlight key identification criteria or "field-marks" to allow a birdwatcher to quickly find the most essential plumage details for separating one species from another. This may be done by way of arrows pointing to key parts of the body, by annotations to the pictures or simply by referring to key physical characteristics in the text.

A sound approach

A good field guide will not merely tell you what each bird looks like, it will also tell you what its songs and calls sound like. Certainly, the written word is not the best medium through which to convey the real sound of a bird's voice ("a-little-bit-of-bread-and-no-cheese"— really?), but such information can nonetheless be very helpful in identifying birds.

For example, a quick glance at photos or

illustrations of Willow Warblers and Chiffchaffs will reveal that they look confusingly similar: Their songs, however, could hardly be more different and are far and away the easiest way to distinguish between the two species.

Habitat and range

Crucially, a good field guide will also tell you the types of habitat a given bird favours and the times of year it will usually be found in a particular area.

Many feature colour-coded range maps showing where each species typically occurs and whether they are present year-round, only during the breeding season, only during the winter months or just on migration.

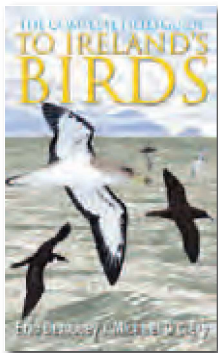
To return to the commonly-confused pair of Willow Warbler and Chiffchaff, imagine that it is December and you have seen a bird that you are certain is one or the other: a quick glance at your field guide will reveal that it must be a Chiffchaff, as Willow Warblers do not spend the winter here, though some Chiffchaffs do.

On finding an unfamiliar bird, use your field guide to consider and eliminate the common species before jumping to the conclusion that you

have found a rarity. This is particularly important to bear in mind when it comes to groups that confuse, such as waders and warblers.

Also, rather than merely using your field guide when actually out birding, study it at home. Familiarise yourself in advance with the various species you are likely to encounter in a given habitat or location at the relevant time of year. This will be time well spent and will increase your identification abilities markedly.

Only by getting to know the usual birds of a region well will you be able to recognise when an unexpected species turns up ... and turn up they do, as the 'Rare Bird News' section in each issue of *Wings* attests.



Also, remember that a field guide is just that – a guide, not a hard-and-fast rulebook. That said, the information given will apply to the overwhelming majority of birds and you should view it as highly persuasive.

Taxonomic order

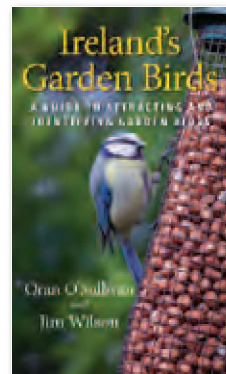
The order in which birds appear in a field guide is a frequent source of frustration for beginners. The best guides tend to be laid out in taxonomic order. This might seem to be random but in fact is anything but: it groups together bird species and families that are closely related in evolutionary terms.

This ensures that closely-related birds, which, after all, usually tend to be most similar in appearance to each other and favour broadly similar habitats, appear next to each other in the guide. And so a typical European guide will start with waterbirds, move on to landbirds and then to the true songbirds.

Starting out

If you are completely new to birdwatching, I would recommend starting with the birds you find in your own garden. Become familiar with these, their behaviour and their various plumages and, later on, you will have reference points against which to compare other bird species you encounter.

There is a plethora of books dealing with the garden birds "of Britain" or "Britain and Ireland," but I would recommend going for one dealing with Ireland alone: **Ireland's Garden Birds** (The



Collins Press, 200pp, €15.00), by Oran O'Sullivan and Jim Wilson, is the perfect choice and is all you need to get started. Based on data collected over 20 years through BirdWatch Ireland's national **Garden Bird Survey**, it features all the information (and photographs) you

need to identify any bird likely to turn up in your garden. It's available from the BirdWatch Ireland shop at <http://bit.ly/2CFQXzN>.

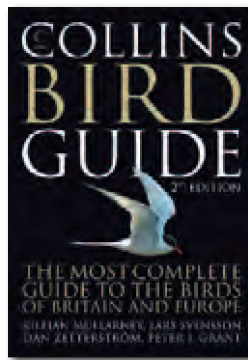
All-Ireland

Moving beyond your garden, there are two excellent field guides available on the birds of Ireland which I would recommend. The first is **The Complete Field Guide to Ireland's Birds** (Gill & Macmillan, 320pp, €20.00), by Eric Dempsey and Michael O'Clery. Wonderfully illustrated with quality paintings and featuring expert text and highly accurate range maps and annual occurrence information, it is an invaluable field companion. Available from the BirdWatch Ireland shop at <http://bit.ly/2n5E2gr>.

Also well worth purchasing is **The Birds of Ireland: A Field Guide** (The Collins Press, 280pp, €15.00), with expert text by Jim Wilson and stunning photos by Mark Carmody. The first photographic identification guide to the birds of Ireland, it boasts over 1,600 photographs of more than 260 different species, in an easy, quick-reference format. Available from the BirdWatch Ireland shop at <http://bit.ly/2Cwgjgb>.

Further afield

There are hundreds of field guides available, covering practically every country and region of the world. If birdwatching in Europe (or indeed North Africa or the Near East), however, you really need concern yourself with just one: the landmark **Collins Bird Guide** (HarperCollins,



399pp, €25.00), one of the finest field guides ever produced. With insightful text and maps by Lars Svensson and outstanding artwork by Killian Mullarney and Dan Zetterström, this book deserves a place

on every birdwatcher's shelf.

A quick word of warning, though: it contains so many species, most of which you will never find in Ireland, that you might find it off-putting at first. But as your skills develop, you will find it indispensable.

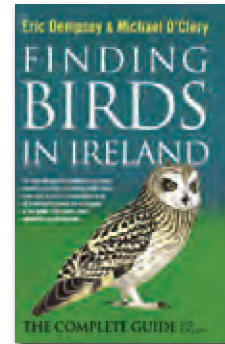
It's available from the BirdWatch Ireland shop at <http://bit.ly/2F2Ohul>.

Where to go

If you are wondering where best to go looking for birds in Ireland, there is an excellent book that will help you here: **Finding Birds in Ireland** (Gill & Macmillan, 400pp, €20.00), by

Eric Dempsey and Michael O'Clery. Featuring 550 of the best birding sites across all of Ireland, organised by county, and with clear, easy-to-use reference maps and text, it is worth every cent and will help you to find your targets. Available from the BirdWatch Ireland shop at <http://bit.ly/2CI8Xt5>.

And finally...



Books are wonderful tools for birders, but it is also very important to spend time in the field with more experienced birders who can teach you the things that books simply cannot. One of the best ways to do this is to go along on **BirdWatch Ireland branch outings**,

where you are assured of a warm welcome and expert assistance. Have a look at the 'What's On Guide' on pages 32-34 of this issue of *Wings* for details of upcoming events in your area, and have fun! ■

Buy your field guide from BirdWatch Ireland

➔ The BirdWatch Ireland shop stocks a range of field guides and other birdwatching accessories: please visit www.birdwatchireland.ie or call us on **01 2819 878** for more details and advice. You can also call into our shop at our offices in Bullford Business Campus, Kilcoole, Co Wicklow, to see our stock in person.

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