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BIRDING *by* IMPRESSION

TEXT AND PHOTOGRAPHS BY KEVIN KARLSON

A simpler method for field identification

Isn't it always the one that got away that generates the most excitement in any field sport? After the object of your search has deftly disappeared after a few teasing seconds, all sorts of "what ifs" and "darn its" quickly set in. Among birders, discussions of what really appeared in that moment occasionally rage for a long time (for example, the recent Ivory-billed Woodpecker sightings in Arkansas).

Conventional field-identification techniques—which rely on a carefully applied analytical approach to gathering information on a wild bird—are not well suited for determining the species in a quick sighting. Although a small number of dedicated birders eventually become proficient enough to identify birds under difficult sighting conditions, it takes years of in-depth study and field experience. Most of us just don't have enough time to dedicate that kind of effort to birding, and we prefer a more casual, easy-



A mixed flock of shorebirds flashes past you on the beach. How can you possibly identify the species seen in a split-second glimpse? By noting your impressions of size, general coloration, and shape. Practicing with mixed-species flocks of flying birds will greatly improve your skills. At right, the color of a Prothonotary Warbler (left) as well as its more evenly proportioned body quickly distinguish it from a Worm-eating Warbler.





Notice the overall shape of this juvenile Cooper's Hawk. The broad-based, somewhat round-tipped wings that extend perpendicular to the body in a glide, with a large head protruding past an imaginary line connecting the wrists, quickly distinguish this accipiter from the similar Sharp-shinned Hawk. A long, rounded tail completes the picture.

going approach. In the past, this has limited how far most birders can progress with their identification skills, but changes are brewing that may soon change this situation.

A simpler and surprisingly effective approach to field identification has been evolving in the birding community, with exciting results taking place across North America. I call this approach "birding by impression," because it relies on being able to recognize quickly the unchanging physical features of a bird along with important behavioral and geographic variables to make a near-instant identification.

Until recently, becoming proficient at bird identification required you to develop a working knowledge of ornithological terms and feather details, but impression-based birding relies more on common sense, keenness of observation,

and the ability to think in a nontraditional way. It is not intended to replace conventional identification techniques or to reduce the value of the important work accomplished by previous authors and field birders. Birding by impression is a simple, easy-to-use set of concepts that will enable birders of all levels to enhance their field skills. It has increased my own proficiency in bird identification and renewed my interest in studying every bird I see with different eyes.

It's exciting to speak with other accomplished birders who have had similar experiences using an impression-based approach. The fact that birders across the country have developed a similar approach independently is no doubt a reflection of its validity, but very little has been written about birding by impression.

When I'm presenting bird identification workshops, I often ask participants to describe how they are able to recognize friends and relatives in a crowd. Most of them say they can pick out familiar people by the way they walk or by their size and body language. One woman told me she could recognize her son, a long-distance runner, even at a great distance, by his distinctive stride. No one ever says they recognize people because of the size of their noses or the length of their arms. They almost always base their identification on overall impressions of their friends and relatives that they have developed subconsciously over time. They now recognize them instantly without having to think about or analyze who they are. This is the same basic principle used in birding by impression.

At a recent talk, a man who had served in the military during World War II told me that the techniques I use to recognize certain bird species quickly were very similar to the wartime training he had received. Navy psychologists realized long ago that by exposing pilots to rapid, repetitive visual images of various aircraft they might encounter, "after images" of the planes would form in their subconscious. He told me they often didn't have time to think about the type of plane speeding toward them but were able to recognize instantly its overall shape and dimensions from the impressions they had stored in their brains. (The Navy acronym for this was WEFT—Wings, Engine, Fuselage, and Tail.)

So more than 60 years ago, in World War II, a quick identification system based on impressions was considered superior to consciously analyzing an aircraft sighting. The same is true today with bird identification. If you make an effort to recognize and store in your mind the unchanging field impressions of size, overall shape, and movement styles of a variety of birds, you will vastly boost your effectiveness as a birder.

Before continuing, I should mention that I spent many years birding before I began using these techniques. I have been a serious field birder for 28 years, and I make my living primarily as a bird photographer, author, and photojournalist. I was a member of the New Jersey Bird Records Committee for 12 years, and I have spent many years studying the identification of North American birds, both in the field and through the available literature. For my first 25 years of birding, I took a conventional approach to field identification and had a good deal of success. My peers considered me proficient as a birder, but I personally felt that my field skills had stalled for about 10 years. I was resigned to being a very good but not great birder. This changed unexpectedly about three years ago, when I was working on a new book, *The Shorebird Guide* (Houghton Mifflin, 2006). My coauthors Michael O'Brien and Richard Crossley gave me an ultimatum: either change the concept of the book to focus on impres-

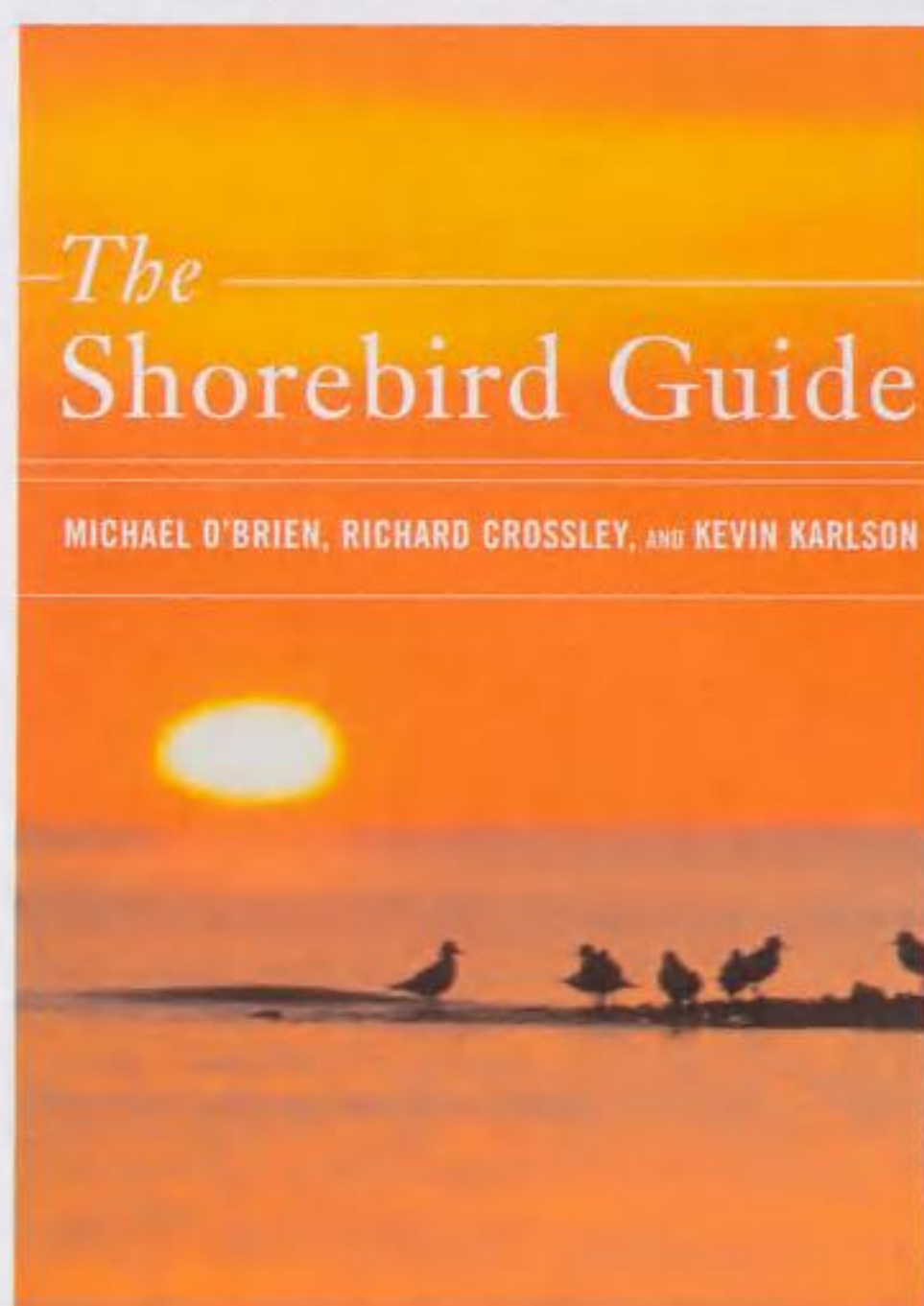
At right, the size difference, overall plumage appearance, and leg color make it easy to distinguish a Greater Yellowlegs (left) from a Marbled Godwit, even when their heads are tucked in.



ARTHUR MORRIS/BIRDS AS ART



No other American bird forages like a Black Skimmer, flying low over the water with its lower mandible submerged to catch fish. Kevin Karlson's new book, *The Shorebird Guide*, coauthored by Michael O'Brien and Richard Crossley, takes an impression-based approach to identifying birds.



sion-based identification or they would not be interested in continuing the project.

At first I was angry. What they said implied that the field techniques I'd honed for years were less effective than this seemingly oversimplified approach. Although I still had reservations, I finally agreed to be a guinea pig and give this unproven approach a chance. Looking back, I now realize that the hardest part of learning how to apply this simple field discipline was to unlearn my old habits and embrace a conceptually different mindset in my birding.

I didn't have an immediate breakthrough but began seeing definite results about six months into my experiment. I started noticing subtle features in overall shapes of common birds and observing fine structural details that I had not seen in 25 years of birding. I concentrated on the most obvious physical characteristics—size and structure—of every bird I saw, regardless of the location or whether or not I was using binoculars. I stored this information in my mind and added more details every time I saw these birds.

Before long, I was quickly identifying familiar species as they flew past, before my analytical mind had time to process the details. The most striking example of my personal success oc-

curred while I was leading a group of birders at Bolivar Flats, Texas, in April 2005.

Out of the corner of my eye, I spotted a brownish, medium-sized, short-billed, long-winged bird flying quickly past. Someone immediately called out "golden-plover." Imagine my surprise when I realized the voice was my own. I had identified and called out the correct name of a rapidly moving, sideways-glanced shorebird, without consciously analyzing all of its field marks. The group was openly impressed by my quick call, but what amazed me even more was my speed and my almost unconscious identification of this previously troublesome bird in flight.

How was I able to make this call without consciously analyzing the bird's field marks? By correctly determining that the bird's overall size and shape fit a large plover and that the uniform brownish color of its upperparts, especially the rump, eliminated Black-bellied Plover. The geographic location ruled out Mountain Plover.

I am still intrigued by the speed with which my mind processed all of this information and how I called out the identification without being concerned about making an incorrect identification. I knew instantly that birding by impression had significantly improved my skills. I understand that this discipline is not foolproof and mistakes will occasionally occur,

but I feel that the benefits greatly outweigh the negatives. After all, everyone makes mistakes, and they should be regarded as opportunities to learn, not as a reflection of shortcomings.

Birding by impression stresses learning the basics of a bird's relative size, structure, behavior, habitat use, general coloration, and voice. These field characters are far less variable than plumage details, so they create a more reliable starting point for initial field identification. You can easily identify many birds solely by applying these concepts. Although determining the identification between some extremely similar species may require you to analyze the bird's plumage and structure more fully, such cases are actually rare.

The beauty and effectiveness of this approach lies in its simplicity. You don't need to know the fine points of feather anatomy or have prior experience with birds. Because field descriptions involve unchanging parts of a bird's anatomy, combined with other straightforward variables, birders of all skill levels can immediately engage in a common-sense dialogue about the bird in question. They can save the endless discussions of plumage variations for a later time, after the species has been identified.

Once you adopt it, this simpler technique will eventually become second nature, part of your unconscious thought process. You should start by forming detailed impressions of the birds in your own backyard, particularly when they're flying, and use these as benchmarks for sizing and comparing with unfamiliar birds.

Even if I tried, I could not go back to studying birds solely using my old conventional identification approach. It is difficult to improve on the increased accuracy and the sense of personal accomplishment you get using an impression-based approach.

Birding by impression works best if you note several basic field characters. Don't base your identification on just one concept—use all of your impressions to come to a fast, accurate conclusion. Don't be discouraged if you don't see immediate results. Practice is the key to success in all disciplines. I've given a number of workshops using this discipline at various national birding festivals during the past two years and have had an enthusiastic response from birders of all levels, especially beginners.

Here is a list of basic impressions you should follow. The first two, size and shape, are the

most important to determine right away, and the rest can follow in random order.

SIZE. This is definitely the most important feature. You can estimate size by comparing the unknown bird with familiar birds nearby or even with an inanimate object such as a soda can or discarded shoe. If you don't see anything nearby, ask yourself: Is it as large as a robin? As small as a sparrow? A close size estimate eliminates many possible choices. (Recently one non-birder reporter compared



a Semipalmated Sandpiper's size to a stick of butter when I asked her how big it was.)

SHAPE AND STRUCTURE. These closely related terms are vital to your initial identification impression. For our purposes, shape represents overall body configuration (for example, fat and dumpy versus slender and tapered), whereas structure includes individual features such as bill shape and length, leg length, and wing-to-tail comparisons. Try to look at each bird with an artist's eye, and mentally sketch its outline. After a while, your descriptions will become concise and standardized. Instead of using sometimes confusing ornithological terms, your impression might include the descriptions "fat and dumpy with a short stubby bill" or "slim and tapered with medium-length, dark legs." With practice, these first two impressions often narrow your choices to several, or even one, species.

BEHAVIOR. The manner in which a bird feeds, flies, walks, or reacts to danger may help you to establish its identity. Note a bird's movements over time or its manner of flight and form a

A Piping Plover sits with her three-day-old chicks. The kind of habitat where a bird lives can help you identify it. The Piping Plovers that nest along the Atlantic are virtually never found away from a coastline. The ones nesting in the interior are only found inland during breeding season, beside the edges of rivers and lakes. They spend the rest of the year on the coast.



picture of its typical behavior. For example, does a shorebird feed in a sewing-machine fashion by probing in one location, or does it move constantly while picking at the surface? Does a raptor fly straight from wood line to wood line, or does it fly over open spaces with periodic buoyant movements?

Sometimes a particular behavior is not helpful, especially if a bird is out of place during migration. Many birds—such as Dunlins, Red Knots, starlings, blackbirds, grackles, and White Pelicans—are usually seen in large flocks outside the breeding season. This can be helpful to know if you see distant flocks.

HABITAT. The habitat where a bird resides or forages may help you to identify it. Some birds are rarely found away from certain habitats. We see Sanderlings along open beachfronts, Reddish Egrets in saltwater or brackish coastal areas, and Pine and Cape May warblers feeding in coniferous trees. Note the habitat a bird is using and add it to your overall impressions. But remember that migrating birds are sometimes forced to use uncharacteristic habitats.

OVERALL COLORATION. The general coloration of a bird should be an important part

of your first impression. Instead of analyzing individual feathers, note the overall color or combination of colors and their location on the bird's body.

VOCALIZATIONS. The songs or calls of a bird, particularly in flight, are often diagnostic by themselves. When in doubt, jot down your best description of a call note or song and compare it with possible choices in a field guide. It is difficult to remember these vocalizations later, so try to write down your impressions in the field at the time you hear them.

COMPARISONS WITH NEARBY BIRDS. This is the ace in the hole of birding by impression. I cannot overemphasize its importance in the identification process. Is the bill short or medium length? Are the legs long or short or in between? Is the body bulky and front heavy or slender and evenly proportioned? You'll be able to answer such questions when you compare the unknown bird directly with nearby birds. When you are trying to separate very similar species, such as Long-billed and Short-billed dowitchers, direct field comparison is the best way to learn subtle differences in shape, structure, and plumage.

For some birds such as the flashy Roseate Spoonbill (above), overall color is almost enough to seal its identification. The unique spatula shape of a Roseate's bill, combined with its bright, pinkish-red body color and large size, rules out a flamingo.



Above, identifying birds with similar size and shape, such as the Surf-bird (left) and the Black-bellied Plover, requires attention to detail. The plover's longer, dark legs, puffier head shape with large eye, and longer, all-dark bill are distinctive. The Surf-bird's body is also slightly smaller and more compact. At right, for birds with similar plumage, such as Long-billed (left) and Short-billed dowitchers, a side-by-side structural comparison is useful. The long-billed has a thicker neck, a bulkier chest, and a noticeable hump-backed look.

After forming your initial impressions, consult field guides or use conventional plumage and field-mark approaches to fine-tune your conclusion. Feather analysis, molt timing, and other technical identification tools are useful for determining the age and sex of certain birds and to solidify identifications between similar species. But if you just want to know what you are looking at, impression-based identification is usually sufficient.

The best part of this technique is that it's fun. It's also easy to learn and apply, and your field skills will increase greatly over time. Practice is

the key, but you can practice almost anywhere you go, even without binoculars. For every bird you see, add a little more information to your personal mental database. You will not feel intimidated in the company of experts, because your field skills will also be quick and accurate, your descriptive language simple and direct. So go out and have fun using this approach, wherever you happen to be, because that is what birding is all about. ■

Kevin Karlson is an author and wildlife photographer based in Cape May, New Jersey.

