

Neighbors in the Sky: Using Popular Media to Introduce People in Connecticut to Common Winter Backyard Birds

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Spotting birds at feeder to film

Red-Bellied Woodpecker (male)

ABSTRACT

The goal of this project is to inspire both adults and children to become more aware of the local bird populations.. People trying to learn about birding can very commonly become frustrated by the massive amounts of information and detail required for identification. If these frustrations could be eliminated, people would be more inclined to become more avid birders. Through this process they would more actively contribute to their wildlife community and encourage others to become involved. Our project uses popular media to present avian information in a more accessible manner. We present only a few key features and details about each species so people can remember and use them to identify common birds found in their backyard with greater ease.

We researched at the Marvelwood School Feeder Stations, where we took pictures and videos of the 13 most common backyard birds that reside in Northwestern Connecticut. We also created inserts or "beginners cheat sheets" that illustrate key features of each species, including sexual dimorphism, if present. We compiled these videos, pictures, and "cheat sheets" into a video that presents the information in an entertaining way.

INTRODUCTION

The study of birds began with an aesthetic interest in rare bird eggs and skins in the Victorian Era, when they became popular as items of collection. The first bird identification field guide was *Birds Through an Opera Glass* written by Florence Merriam Bailey in 1889. She had taken notes from the Audubon magazine and compiled them into an illustrated book which included about 70 species. This type of field guide became tradition and has evolved alongside the activity that became known as bird watching, a term coined by Edmund Selous in 1901. However it was Roger Tory Peterson, an artist, naturalist and ornithologist who published the first modern field guide in 1934 and revolutionized bird watching by making it easy for the average person to learn how to identify birds.

Despite Peterson's wonderful field guide as well as numerous others on the market today, many new birders get frustrated with birding and become overwhelmed by the activity in general because there are too many birds to focus on in most guides. To some, learning to bird might be like jumping into the deep end of a pool without knowing how to swim. There are usually an overwhelming array of birds and information in field guides, and many of those birds are only separated by minutiae, very difficult to spot in illustrations or from far away in treetops.

Our Goal is to make the first in a series of videos that will focus on 10 to 20 birds most commonly found in a specific habitat in Northwestern, Connecticut. In our videos, the information will be presented in a lively and educational manner in an effort to make the learning accessible to any age group. By approaching birding in a fun and easily handled increments, we hope to relieve the frustration new birders often encounter and to help them gain confidence in their birding skills by focusing on fewer birds at any one time. We believe this gradient learning system will lead to more life-long bird watchers and ultimately active conservationists within their local and global communities.



Tracking down birds to record for video

Northern Cardinal - Male

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Study Area - This study was conducted at The Marvelwood School's bird feeder near the library. (Latitude: 41° 46' 58.1916" Longitude: 73° 27' 20.4906" Elevation: 1,282 feet) (see Figure 1) and one of the feeders at a faculty home near school. (The habitat near the feeder consists of some a small patch of field, followed by forest edge. The Marvelwood School has been involved in Cornell Lab of ornithology Feeder Watch program for the last seven seasons, during which 27 species have been identified.

Figure 1. School Feeder Location and Surrounding Habitat.



Figure 2. Faculty Feeder Location and Surrounding Habitat.



Photography & Recording Equipment—Our videos were recorded by a Sony Handycam HDR-PJ710, while our still images were taken by a Canon Rebel EOS T11 with a Canon EFS 55-250mm lens. Other still images were taken with Canon Rebel SLR camera and 55-200 mm zoom lens.

Software - We used Apple's *Movie* to edit our videos, pictures and still slides together into our main video. Raw HD footage had to first be convert using a program called *Wondershare Video Converter* installed on Ms. Doss's computer. We made stills of the "beginner's" cheat sheet slides" made using *Microsoft PowerPoint* that showcased the key features for each of the species.



Filming the American Tree Sparrow.



Example of movie making process.

RESULTS

Over the course of two months of recording and photographing birds, we have identified and recorded 13 bird and 1 mammal species utilizing the feeder stations (see Table 1). Approximately fifteen hours was spent trying to obtain visual images of the birds. Footage was successfully arranged into a short video which was shared with the Marvelwood community and local families in the town of Kent via the school's media page.

Table 1. Backyard Feeder Birds Featured in Video

White-throated Sparrow	<i>Zonotrichia albicollis</i>
White-breasted Nuthatch	<i>Sitta carolinensis</i>
House Finch	<i>Haemorrhous macurus</i>
Northern Cardinal	<i>Cardinalis cardinalis</i>
American Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis tristis</i>
American Tree Toad	<i>Scaphiopus arborea</i>
Black-capped Chickadee	<i>Parus atricapillus</i>
Blue Jay	<i>Cyanocitta cristata</i>
Downy Woodpecker	<i>Picoides pubescens</i>
Hairy Woodpecker	<i>Picoides villosus</i>
Dark-eyed Junco	<i>Junco hyemalis</i>
Red-bellied woodpecker	<i>Melanerpes carolinus</i>
Tufted Titmouse	<i>Parus bicolor</i>



Editing and inserting bird images into movie.

CONCLUSION

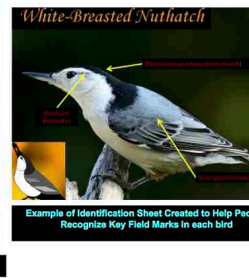
During the school year, we would pass the bird feeding station every day, interested but unknowledgeable about the different bird species visiting the feeders. Via this project, we have quickly learned how to correctly identify all of the species that we filmed. This is analogous to the goal of our project, to quickly teach people like us how to identify common birds in their backyards. Hopefully our project will have the same effect on people that it did on us. This project drives home the quote by Benjamin Franklin said "Tell me and I forget. Teach me and I remember. Involve me and I learn."

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Example of Identification Sheet Created to Help People Recognize Key Field Marks in each bird



Spencer capturing the Black-capped Chickadee on Film.