



Children's Museum of Houston

A Field Guide to Native Houston Birds

Background: This activity is intended to familiarize children with native Houston birds, introduce children to tools biologists use in the field and to enhance their observation skills. Texas is home to over 570 different types of birds each year. Some of these birds are permanent residents while others are migratory and just passing through. Birds are in virtually every ecosystem in Texas from the rivers to big cities. Biologists use field guides to identify birds and to learn more about their behavior. Birds can be identified by their appearance or song. Sometimes, if two birds look very similar, scientists must use other clues, like behavior or habitat, to decide what the species is. In this activity, children will create a field guide based on native Houston birds and will use this field guide to identify birds at school and home.



Materials:

- Scissors
- Stapler
- Crayons
- Worksheet (print double sided)
- Binoculars (optional)

Procedure:

1. Show the students the color field guide first so they can accurately color their field guide. You can print one out for each student or use a projector to show the image at the front of the classroom.
2. Give each student a worksheet, stapler, scissors and crayons.
3. Have them color the birds to match the color field guide.
4. Now have each student cut out each page of the booklet.
5. Then they should staple the pictures together to create a booklet.
6. After each student has their very own personal field guide, you should take the class outside to explore the playground or grassy area around the school. They should be looking for the birds in their field guide and see how many they can spot. You can choose to give each student a pair of binoculars to help with identification if you have them.

Questions to Ask:

- What is your favorite native bird?
- What time of the year do you see the most birds?
- What kind of behaviors have you seen birds doing? What time of day do they do those behaviors?

Extensions:

- There are several bird field guides available, and some just for kids. You can use these to find even more different species of birds.
- While identifying different birds, you can discuss the unique physical characteristics of each. Some of these physical characteristics could be adaptations, such as the shape of a bird's beak. Some birds crack seeds open, some drink nectar, some eat insects, etc. Each beak shape is adapted to the type of food the bird eats. Bird coloration is also another great adaptation. Some birds are dull colored, like house sparrows, which allow them to blend into their environment. Other birds, like male cardinals are red, to attract females.

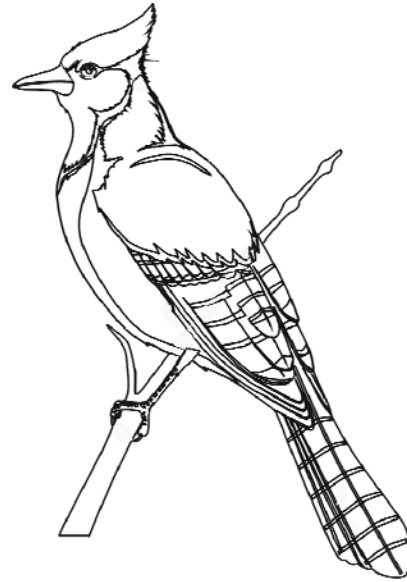
Resources:

- www.birds.cornell.edu is a great website from Cornell University all about birds
- The Life of Birds by David Attenborough is an amazing movie all documenting the unique and wonderful traits of birds all around the world.
- The Sibley Guide to Birds by David Allen Sibley is an extremely comprehensive field guide.
- Nations Geographic Field Guide to the Birds of North America by Jon Dunn and Jonathan Alderfer is another great field guide.
- How Do Birds Find Their Way? by Paul Mirocha
- Bird (DK Eyewitness Books) by David Burnie

Cardinal



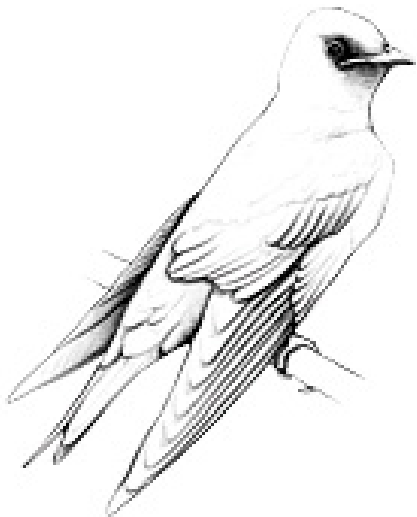
Blue Jay



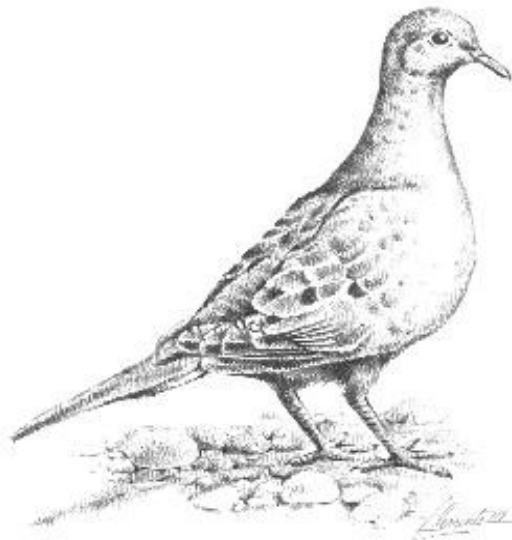
Your Personal Field Guide to Houston Area Birds



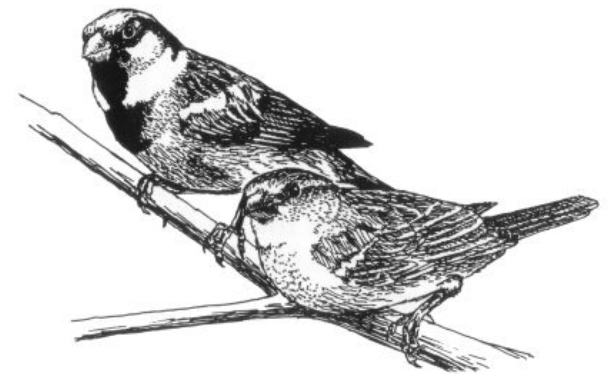
Purple Martin



Mourning Dove



House Sparrow



Glossary of Terms

conical—cone shaped

conspicuous—easy to see

crested—feathers on the top of a birds head which make a point such as a Blue Jay or Cardinal

lancet-shaped—coming to a sharp point

mournful—sad

plumage—feathers

Information and photographs came from B.C. Robinson's *Birds of Houston*.

Additional information from John H.

Rappole and Gene W. Blacklock's *A Field Guide Birds of Texas*.

Drawing of the birds came from Texas Parks and Wildlife Press's *Learn about Texas Birds*

Blue Jay

Identification Marks:

11-12 inches tall

Crested head

Back, head and tail are blue

Neck and stomach are lighter

Black necklace and large white patches on their wings

Habitat:

Neighborhoods, parks and yards

Song:

Calls with a screechy "Jay! Jay!" song

Behavior:

Noisy, conspicuous, energetic

Cardinal

Identification Marks:

7-9 inches tall

Male bright red

Female dull red-brown

Both have prominent crest

Black face

Heavy, orange, conical beak

Habitat:

Wooded or semi-wooded areas, neighborhoods, parks

Song:

High-pitched "what-cheer, what-cheer"

Behavior:

Male and female often travel in pairs, loud, repetitive song note.

House Sparrow

Identification Marks:

6 inches tall

Mostly brown over back and lighter below

Males have black throat

Chestnut nape and eyestripe

Gray on side of face

Habitat:

Throughout city except deep woodlands

Song:

"chip cheap chip chip chi-chi-chi chip cheap"

Behavior:

Hops on ground in small flocks, noisy and active

Mourning Dove

Identification Marks:

11-13 inches tall

Pink-brown plumage on underparts, darker brown above

Lancet-shaped tail shows white-tipped outer feathers in flight

Whistling sound make on take-off

Dark spots on wings

Habitat:

Yards, parks, neighborhoods

Song:

Mournful "cooo-coooo-coo"

Behavior:

Feeds on ground in small flocks

Purple Martin

Identification Marks:

7-8 inches tall

Male deep, glossy purple-black

Female duller with gray underparts

Short broad-based wings

Long forked tail

Habitat:

The sky during the day

They live in Martin houses at night and during day

Song:

Various "quirk"s and "querk"s repeated in a short harsh series

Behavior:

Flies by alternating wingbeats with gliding