

Bird Identification: Step-by-Step

Module 6 · Online Birding Enthusiast Course · curriculum by Joe Grosel (1966–2021)

Joe Grosel's gift to birding was insisting on a method. Identification is a process — and the process becomes the skill you carry into every birding moment for the rest of your life. The EcoTraining framework: SSBHVC.

6.1 The SSBHVC framework

Size → Shape → Behaviour → Habitat → Voice → Colour. Colour is LAST, not first, because light deceives — the same bird looks different in shade, sun and overcast.

6.2 Size

Compare to a known reference (sparrow, dove, crow, eagle). Learn the size of 5–10 'yardstick' species and you can size any unknown bird instantly.

6.3 Shape (jizz)

The general impression of size and shape. Hornbill silhouette, raptor profile, duck shape — your eye can ID 'family' before details register.

6.4 Behaviour

Hovering, soaring, undulating flight, hopping vs walking, tail-pumping, wing-flicking — behaviour often nails species when colour fails.

6.5 Habitat

Where you saw it. Reedbed, forest canopy, open grassland, riverine, scrubland — habitat removes 70% of possibilities before you start.

6.6 Voice

Often the single most reliable ID. Many cisticolas can only be told apart by voice. Use the Merlin Sound ID app to verify in the field.

6.7 Colour

Now look at colour. Note patterns, not just hue. Streaks, bars, blotches, contrasts. Then check field marks against guides.

6.8 When to put the guide DOWN

Watch the bird first. Don't dive into the book while the bird is still there — you'll miss it. Take mental notes, then check.

6.9 Using technology

Merlin Bird ID (Cornell, free) for sound and photo ID. Roberts Bird App (paid, southern Africa specific) for authoritative reference. eBird and BirdLasser for logging.

Key Terms

Jizz	General impression of size and shape — overall character.
Field marks	The 3-5 features that distinguish a species.
Search image	Mental pattern your brain matches against to recognise.
Sound ID	Merlin's algorithm that identifies birds from audio.
LBJ	Little Brown Job — a tongue-in-cheek term for tricky drab birds (larks, pipits, cisticolas).