



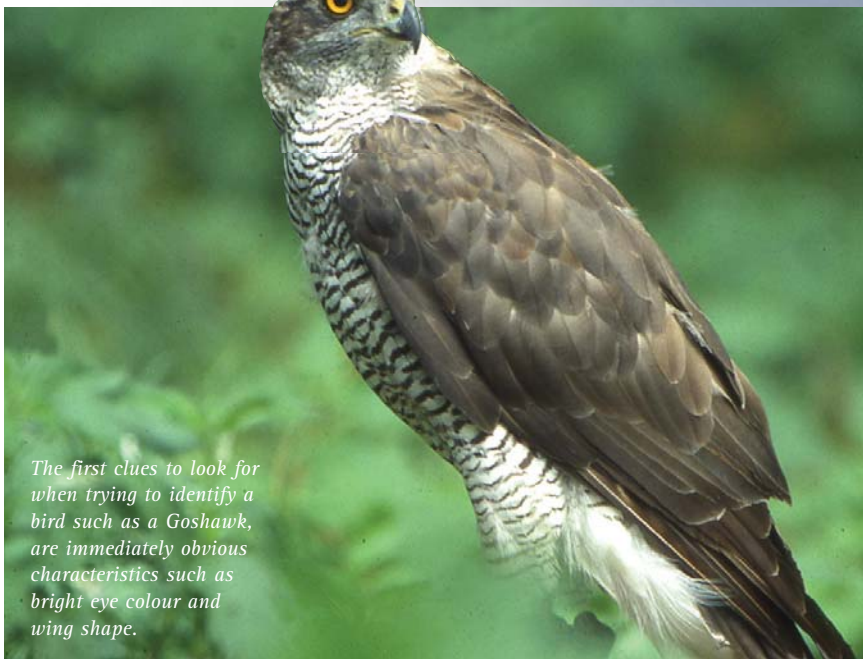
Basic Identification

It is vitally important to get to know bird families and the subgroups within them. Almost everyone can recognise a bird such as an owl or a duck, but by expanding your knowledge of the differences between the various groups of birds, you will be able to narrow down the possibilities when faced with identifying an unfamiliar bird. For example, knowing that terns have slender bodies, long, narrow wings, thin spike-like bills, forked tails and so on, will help you to distinguish them from gulls. Following on from this initial identification, if you know how Marsh Terns, with their shallower tail forks, darker plumage and

different feeding habits, differ from the rest of the tern family, you have reduced the possibilities once again, this time down to just a few species.

To make the learning curve gentler, it's a good idea to begin with a relatively easily separated group of species, such as the common ducks. Ducks are likely to be present together at many wetland sites and at town parks or wildfowl collections, such as those in the reserves of the Wildfowl and Wetlands Trust.

Start off with the males in breeding plumage – quite straightforward – and then graduate



The first clues to look for when trying to identify a bird such as a Goshawk, are immediately obvious characteristics such as bright eye colour and wing shape.



While the Swallow's shape is distinctive and easily recognised, there are many markings and colours that are unique to particular family members.

Birder's Tip



Don't forget to use your ears as well as your eyes when learning to identify birds. This can be particularly valuable where two or more species look very similar but have quite different calls or songs.

to distinguishing the females, which are much more similar to one another, but with practice and patience, possible to separate.

PLUMAGE PATTERNS

Given a reasonable view of a bird in good light, the first thing you will probably notice is the colour of its plumage, and then, as you look closer, any distinct patterns such as contrasting caps or head stripes, bars or spots on the breast or flanks, wing bars or contrasting tips, and pale rumps or dark tail bands. These will provide vital clues that will help you to pinpoint exactly what you are looking at.

Making notes while you are out birdwatching will not only greatly enhance your enjoyment, and (if sent in to county or

regional bird recorders) add to the understanding and protection of bird populations, but they will also help you in sorting out difficult identification problems. Always look at the bird first and then compare what you saw and recorded in your notebook, with the pictures in a good field guide.

To make this process even more useful, it is a very good idea to make drawings of what you see – though it is a bonus if you are a good artist, they don't need to emulate the professional artwork in your field guide: simple outlines will suffice. These can be based on an egg shape for the head and a larger one for the body, with distinct plumage patterns clearly indicated, using arrows and brief descriptions.