

A FIELD IDENTIFICATION GUIDE
• TO THE
Winter Birds
OF NORTHERN MICHIGAN



The Schoolcraft Conservation District is a government subdivision organized by the local community to provide natural resource management services and implement conservation measures that address local concerns. Our mission is to promote and facilitate the wise use of natural resources on private lands in Schoolcraft County, meeting the needs of both the current and future generations.



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Black-Capped Chickadee

With their chubby cheeks and round bodies, it's easy to see why black-capped chickadees are considered by many to be Michigan's cutest bird. As its name would suggest, the black-capped chickadee can be easily distinguished by the black coloring on its head and under-beak area. While its cheeks and underside are mostly white, it does have a yellowish-orange accent beneath its wings, with a light gray back and tail. Its song is a cheerful two or three note melody, with one higher note followed by one or two lower notes of the same pitch. An acrobatic species, the black-capped chickadee is known for hanging upside-down on branches and bird feeders.

Size: 4.5-6 inch length, 6.3-8.3 inch wingspan 

Backyard attractions: Use suet, sunflowers, or peanuts. Willow and birch provide good nesting habitats.

Habitat

Forest

Food

Insects

Nesting

Cavity



Tufted Titmouse

The acrobatic, fluttery-flighted tufted titmouse is commonly seen frequenting birdfeeders alongside chickadees and nuthatches. This bird does indeed have a tufted appearance thanks to its stocky neck and the crest of feathers on the back of its head that give it a unique silhouette. Similar to the black-capped chickadee, the tufted titmouse has a bluish-gray color on its back, with a white underside and an orange-yellow hue brushing its flanks. A black splotch paints its forehead. This species has an appropriately tittering song; its whistle is fast-paced and high-pitched, echoing the same note twice in quick succession within a longer series of repeats.

Size: 5.5-6.3 inch length, 8-10 inch wingspan 

Backyard attractions: Use sunflower seeds (best), suet, peanuts, or other seeds. Will build nests in birdhouses if available.

Habitat

Forest

Food

Insects

Nesting

Cavity



White-Breasted Nuthatch

This stealthy little songbird is known for sneaking along branches and trunks as it forages for insects. The white-breasted nuthatch is characterized by its large head which often cranes up as it climbs down trees. Both males and females share a similar silvery gray back and white underside with a rusty patch on their rear, though this rusty coloring is paler in females. Males have a black-capped head, whereas females sport a cap that's closer to a dark gray. Their nasally song is low-pitched, made up of a series of identical notes that repeat in rapid succession for two to three seconds. The white-breasted nuthatch is fairly easy to track down in deciduous tree stands.

Size: 5-5.5 inch length, 8-10.5 inch wingspan 

Backyard attractions: Use large nuts like peanuts or sunflowers alongside suet. Put up a nestbox to attract a breeding pair.



Red-Breasted Nuthatch

Slightly smaller than its white-breasted counterpart, the red-breasted nuthatch makes up for in energy what it lacks in size. As it flits through thickets of trees, it announces its presence with nasally, relatively low-pitched honks. The red-breasted nuthatch gets its name from the coppery coloring on its underside, which is paler in females. Its back is a bluish-gray, and their heads have a distinct pattern of black cap with a white stripe running just above either eye. When not at birdfeeders alongside flocks of chickadees, the red-breasted nuthatch can often be found creeping up and down the trunks of trees in search of insects.

Size: 4.3 inch length, 7.1-7.9 inch wingspan 

Backyard attractions: Use sunflowers, peanuts, mealworms, and suet. Put up a nestbox to attract a breeding pair.





American Goldfinch

The American goldfinch is easily recognizable thanks to its roller coaster flights and cheerful yellow coloring. Female and winter males are a dull, yellow-brown color, but males become a much brighter shade during the spring, when they also develop a black forehead. This species usually inhabits fields and floodplains, but they're a frequent backyard visitor--particularly in the winter months when food sources are scarce. Their twittering whistle forms a number of unique and complex patterns that can last for several seconds; these birds continue to learn new song patterns throughout their lives. Mated pairs make identical calls.

Size: 4.3-5 inch length, 7.3-8.7 inch wingspan



Backyard attractions: Plant native thistles and milkweed. Goldfinch will eat either from feeders or the ground.



House Finch

Notable for their ability to thrive in human-altered landscapes, house finches are a common visitor to backyards, even in urban and suburban areas. Originally native to the western US, this species has gradually moved eastward. Unlike other non-native bird species though, the house finch has received a warm welcome due in part to its cheerful color and song. Males are a beautiful, faded red from their heads down into their upper bodies, though they can also be a yellow shade dependent on their diet. Females are a grayish-brown with blurry brown streaks down their bellies (similar to tiger stripes). Their song is a long, fast string of widely varying short notes.

Size: 5-5.5 inch length, 7.9-10 inch wingspan



Backyard attractions: Use small black oil sunflower seeds (preferred) or hulled sunflower seeds.





Common Redpoll

Don't be deceived by the common redpoll's tiny stature: this small finch is surprisingly hardy, thriving in the arctic tundra and northern boreal forests. Despite favoring the north, the common redpoll is a nomad through and through, sometimes dipping down into the central US in its travels. Their name comes from distinctive red or pink cap on their foreheads, which is especially vibrant in males, trailing down to their chests. The rest of their plumage is primarily brown and streaked. Their typical sounds include a series of twittering or chattering notes which vary in intensity and pitch; they're most vocal during flight or when gathered in large flocks.

Size: 4.7-5.5 inch length, 7.5-9 inch wingspan 

Backyard attractions: Use small black oil sunflower seeds (preferred) or hulled sunflower seeds.

Habitat

Forest

Food

Seeds


Nesting

Shrub



Pine Siskin

The pine siskin is a small nomadic finch characterized by a sharp beak, slim body, and short, notched tail. Their plumage is brown and streaked, with subtle yellow wing bars and a touch of yellow on the edges of the tail feathers. These agile fliers are known for the acrobatic maneuvers, including when they swoop down to forage for seeds. This energetic flight style is echoed in their lively, twittering songs, which are fast paced and almost frenetic in the variety of chirruped notes. Pine siskins are known for their irruptive behavior; populations may migrate irregularly in search of food, leading them to be seen in areas outside their typical range.

Size: 4.3-5.5 inch length, 7-8.7 inch wingspan 

Backyard attractions: Use thistle, nyjer, or other small seeds such as millet or hulled sunflower.

Habitat

Forest

Food

Seeds

Nesting

Tree



Pine Grosbeak

If you want a bird that's hard to miss, look no further than the pine grosbeak. Topping out at ten inches in length, the pine grosbeak is a Goliath compared to other finch species. If its size weren't attention-grabbing enough, these birds are also vibrantly colored, with males sporting a reddish-pink color pattern and females a golden yellow or orange. Both males and females have gray wings with white along the feather edges. They are typically found in coniferous forests, especially those dominated by pine trees. Their songs are comprised of a variety of trilling, warbling, and twittering notes that rise and fall in pitch over a period of two to five seconds.

Size: 8-9.8 inch length, 13 inch wingspan



Backyard attractions: Large tube feeders or platform feeders are best. Use black oil or hulled sunflower seeds.



Evening Grosbeak

Seeing a canary-yellow evening grosbeak can be a much-needed breath of fresh air in the dreary gray of winter. Heavysset and measuring around seven inches in length, the evening grosbeak is larger than most other finches. Males are particularly noticeable with bright yellow plumage on their bodies and black wings marked by white patches. Their large, conical beak is a pale greenish-yellow. Females are less vibrant, featuring a more subdued yellowish-green coloration with dark wings. Their most common call is a short, warbling trill of individual high-pitched whistles. These social birds can often be found gathering in large flocks.

Size: 6.3-7 inch length, 11.8-14 inch wingspan



Backyard attractions: Use sunflower seeds or plant trees or shrubs with berries or buds (especially maples).





House Sparrow

Originally native to Europe, the house sparrow was imported to the states from England in 1850 and is now widespread across the Americas. While easy to attract, this species is considered a nuisance by some as it has a tendency toward being territorial and aggressive, often driving other birds away from feeders and nestboxes. Compared to native North American sparrows, the house sparrow has a shorter beak and tail and fuller chest. Males and females both have mottled brown backs, though females tend to be lighter and lack the gray crown of males. Their songs are made up of simple, individual chirrups or cheeps.

Size: 6-6.7 inch length, 7.5-10 inch wingspan 

Backyard attractions: Often considered a nuisance due to competition with native species. Eat most kinds of feed.

 **Habitat**
Urban

 **Food**
Omnivore

 **Nesting**
Cavity



Dark-Eyed Junco

As one of the most common North American forest birds, dark-eyed juncos are easy to find on nature walks and in backyards alike. A member of the sparrow family, these birds are known for their high-pitch, two-note trill that they carry for one to two seconds. Although their coloration varies widely, they generally have a dark gray or brown back with a white underbelly; females are usually browner overall. The dark-eyed junco enjoys coniferous woods, but this species tends to stick close to the ground for both feeding and nesting; these birds can often be found jumping around open lawns in search of seed.

Size: 5.5-6.3 inch length, 7-10 inch wingspan 

Backyard attractions: Use sunflowers, peanuts, cracked corn, or oats. Prefers platform feeders or feeding from ground.

 **Habitat**
Forest

 **Food**
Seeds

 **Nesting**
Ground



American Tree Sparrow

American tree sparrows are one of the most common visitors to Michigan birdfeeders. With fluffy feathers, these birds are very plump in appearance, their chubby bodies balanced out by a long tail. Their feathers are a mix of reddish-brown, white, black, and gray, with a coppery streak crowning their rounded heads. Their song is composed of sweet, high-pitched whistles that create a variety of patterns, though their songs tend to fall downward overall. Each song lasts one to two seconds. When they're not perching on branches or bushes, American tree sparrows frequently hop around on the ground in search of seed.

Size: 5.5 inch length, 9.4 inch wingspan



Backyard attractions: Use sunflowers, cracked corn, peanut hearts, or millet.



Bohemian Waxwing

With its silky-smooth feathers and bright accents, the bohemian waxwing brings a unique beauty to any yard it visits. Its black, bandit-like mask and black bib are set against a peach backdrop, and its light gray body is interrupted by yellow splashes on its tail tip and wings. The underside of its tail is a rusty orange. These social birds tend to travel in groups sometimes numbering into the thousands as they search for berries and other fruit. They emit a very high-pitched, rapid trill. Unlike many songbirds, the bohemian waxwing has no breeding territory; this species is always on the move, travelling tens of miles each day.

Size: 6.3-7.5 inch length, 13 inch wingspan



Backyard attractions: Plant a fruit-bearing tree or bush (preferably with small fruits as bohemian waxwings swallow them whole).





Cedar Waxwing

Cedar waxwings are very similar to bohemian waxwings in both their appearance and behavior, though they are slightly smaller. Like bohemians, cedar waxwings have a black mask across their eyes. Their heads are a brownish-peach color which gradually fades into a silver on their lower bodies and wings, which have red tips. Their lower bellies and the tips of their tails are a bright, highlighter yellow. Cedar waxwings whistles a short, high-pitched sigh in addition to its rapid trilling song. Due to their fruit-heavy diets, cedar and bohemian waxwings have been known to become occasionally intoxicated from eating overripe fruit.

Size: 5.5-6.7 inch length, 9-12 inch wingspan

Backyard attractions: Plant dogwood, serviceberry, cedar, juniper, hawthorn, winterberry, or other fruit-bearing natives.

 **Habitat**
Forest

 **Food**
Fruit

 **Nesting**
Tree



Northern Cardinal

Thanks to its Christmas-red color, the male northern cardinal is arguably Michigan's most iconic winter bird. Between its color and silhouette--complete with a long tail and dramatic crest on its head--males are easy to spot as they swoop down toward birdfeeders against a backdrop of white. Females, while not as immediately eye-catching, have the same distinct silhouette and are a beautiful shade of light reddish-brown. The northern cardinal is a common sight in backyards, preferring shrubs, hedges, and wood margins. Their cheerful, two to three second song is a string of lilting whistles that progressively gain speed.

Size: 8.3-9 inch length, 9.8-12 inch wingspan

Backyard attractions: Will eat most kinds of feed but prefers sunflower. Leave undergrowth to provide habitat.

 **Habitat**
Forest

 **Food**
Seeds

 **Nesting**
Shrub



Blue Jay

Like the northern cardinal, blue jays are remarkable for their striking color and prominent head crest. Its name is a giveaway: both males and females share the same brilliant blue shade down their backs, mottled with shards of white and black on their tails and wings, as well as a white or gray underside. The blue jay's call is just as striking as its appearance: it's most commonly made up of a single or double jeer, not unlike the *beep beep* of the *Loony Tunes'* Roadrunner. When a blue jay gets particularly vocal, its warbling, laughing song can even resemble a monkey. This species is most likely to be found on forest edges, particularly where oak trees are present.

Size: 10-12 inch length, 13-17 inch wingspan 

Backyard attractions: Prefer tray or hopper feeders. Use peanuts, sunflower seeds, or suet.

 **Habitat**
Forest

 **Food**
Omnivore

 **Nesting**
Tree



Hairy Woodpecker

The larger of two twin species (the downy woodpecker being its counterpart), the hairy woodpecker is marked by a zebra-striped head, long beak, and black and white back that's interrupted by a solid white streak down its spine. Hairy woodpeckers are adaptable birds that can be observed in a range of environments, including backyards. Their most common call is a sharp *pik*, and like other woodpeckers, they use their drumming sounds to communicate and establish territory. Also like other woodpeckers, they are known to prey upon other birds including nuthatches and chickadees, so take extra care when trying to attract them.

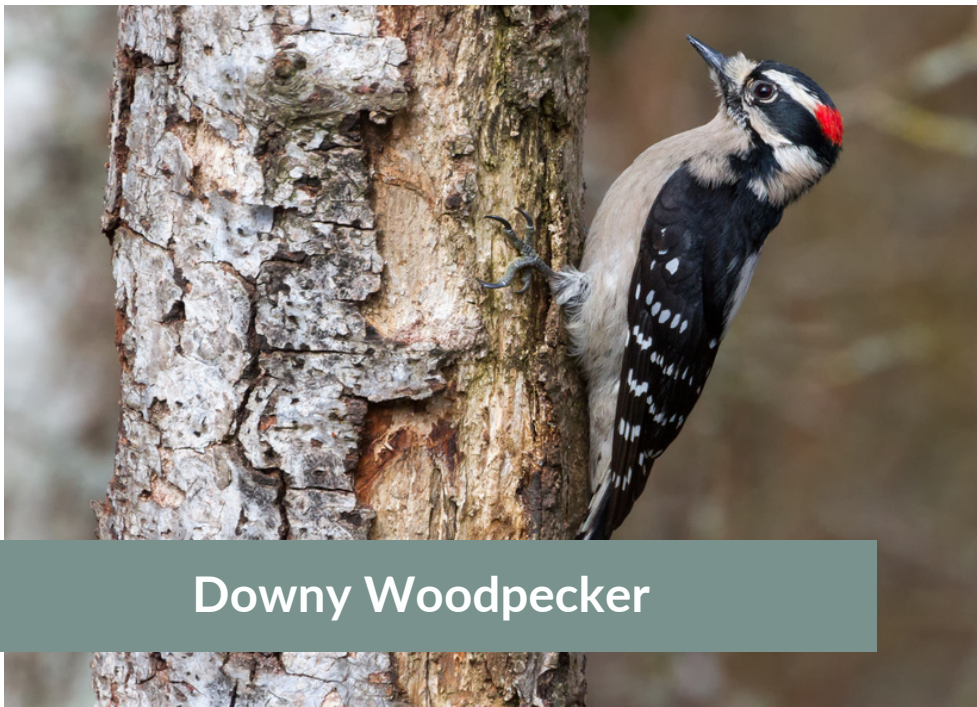
Size: 7-10 inch length, 13-16 inch wingspan 

Backyard attractions: Use suet, peanuts, or black oil sunflower seeds. Leave dead trees to provide natural habitat and food source.

 **Habitat**
Forest

 **Food**
Insects

 **Nesting**
Cavity



Downy Woodpecker

The smallest woodpecker in North America, this bird can often be found milling around birdfeeders. In fact, with their propensity to favor habitats that combine open spaces and trees, the downy is the woodpecker you're most likely to spot in your backyard. Its plumage is nearly identical to the hairy woodpecker's: a black and white pattern on its back and wings with a pale underside and white strip running down their spine. Males also have a distinctive red patch on their zebra-striped heads. The easiest way to differentiate downy and hairy woodpeckers is by size. Downy woodpeckers have a variety of vocalizations, including a sharp *pik* call.

Size: 5.5-6.7 inch length, 10-12 inch wingspan

Backyard attractions: Most likely woodpecker to visit feeders. Use suet (preferred), sunflower, millet, peanuts, or peanut butter.

Habitat

Forest

Food

Insects

Nesting

Cavity



Red-Bellied Woodpecker

Despite its name, the red-bellied woodpecker usually has only a faint wash of red on their lower belly that can be easy to miss. Their most noticeable feature is actually the vibrant red which crowns their head, extending down to the back of their necks where it meets the black and white zebra stripes of their back and wings. Coupled with their frequent backyard visits, the red-bellied woodpecker's dramatic appearance makes them a favorite among birdwatchers. They are known for their distinctive rolling *kwirr* calls, and their drumming sounds can be heard during the breeding season as a means of communication.

Size: 9.4 inch length, 13-16.5 inch wingspan

Backyard attractions: Use sunflowers, peanuts, or suet. Leave dead trees to provide natural habitat and food source.

Habitat

Forest

Food

Insect

Nesting

Cavity



European Starling

Despite their name, European starlings have become a common sight in the US since their introduction to the Americas in the 19th century. Sometimes mistaken for crows at a distance due to their black color, a closer look will reveal a purplish-green, iridescent tint and white spots across their bodies. In addition to the vast variety of their songs--from simple whistles to complex tunes and every trill and rattle in-between--starlings are also mimics, often echoing the songs of other bird species. Like crows, they are frequently found where humans are, in towns, suburbs, and busier urban areas. These fast flyers can reach speeds of up to 48 miles per hour.

Size: 8-9 inch length, 12-16 inch wingspan



Backyard attractions: Use suet, sunflowers, peanuts, cracked corn, oats, millet, or fruit.



American Crow

Crows are unfortunately often perceived as ominous due to their harsh caws and shadowy, hovering presence. In truth, the American crow is a markedly intelligent animal with amazing skills and complex social structures. A common sight in rural and urban areas alike, these birds will eat almost anything, from earthworms to insects to seeds to scraps to garbage. They are beautiful flyers, propelling themselves forward with slow grace in between long periods of gliding. Crows have been known to make and use their own tools, recognize human faces, and hold "funerals" for their dead. In fact, scientists have compared crow intelligence to that of a seven-year-old child's!

Size: 16-21 inch length, 33-40 inch wingspan



Backyard attractions: Leave peanuts or compost in an open space. Create a habitat that combines trees and open space.





Ruffed Grouse

In the words of Aldo Leopold, “The autumn landscape in the north woods is the land, plus a red maple, plus a Ruffed Grouse.” While the ruffed grouse easily blends into the woods thanks to its mottled reddish-brown coloring, males are difficult to miss when they’re putting on their courtship display: a dance of beating wings that produces a loud drumming sound. Courting males erect the plumage around their necks, resulting in what looks like a black scarf, in addition to fanning their black-tipped tails. The ruffed grouse is most often found in young or mature aspen stands, though they will occupy mixed and deciduous forests as well.

Size: 16-20 inch length, 20-25 inch wingspan



Backyard attractions: Ideal habitat includes bushy areas with aspen stands with a variety of hardwoods mixed in.



Sharp-Tailed Grouse

The sharp-tailed grouse, a close relation of prairie chickens, is known for burrowing into snow drifts on cold winter nights for extra insulation. The males are known for their impressive mating dance which entails raising their tails upward and quickly stamping their feet as they inflate the purple air sacs on their necks and coo to watching females. Males and females are both chickenlike in shape, with pointed tails and mottled brown, black, gold, and white coloring. Don't be spooked if you look up to find you're being watched! While the sharp-tailed grouse is generally a ground-dwelling species, it's not unusual to find these birds perched in trees.

Size: 15-19 inch length, 2 foot wingspan



Backyard attractions: Create an open area by removing excessive tree cover.





Snowy Owl

The snowy owl gained stardom thanks to its portrayal in the Harry Potter series, but this species has been casting its regal gaze upon frosty fields long before that. The heaviest of American owls, snowy owls are aptly named both in terms of their appearance (a snowy white color interrupted by brown on the tips of their feathers) and territory (from the Canadian arctic to the northernmost parts of the contiguous US). Like many owls, snowy owls are fierce hunters; their food of choice is lemmings, and adults can kill over 1,600 in a year in addition to supplemental rabbits, rodents, fish, and smaller birds. Their hoots are rasping and low, usually in twice in a row.

Size: 1.5-2 foot length, 4-5 foot wingspan



Backyard attractions: Prefer open field or dune areas. As with all raptors, take proper precautions with pets.

Habitat
Tundra

Food
Mammals

Nesting
Ground



Boreal Owl

Coming in at about the size of a crow, this small owl is known for its bright, inquisitive eyes and squashed face. It comes as no surprise that boreal owls generally inhabit boreal forests, roosting in spruce and fir trees during the day and hunting throughout the night. The boreal owl is similar to the great horned owl in its coloring, with the primarily brown feathers across its body broken up by white spots. Its face is framed by a line of brown. Although this owl is largely silent, males in search of a breeding partner will sing a rapid series of low-pitched hoots that gradually grow louder. Males, females, and juveniles make short, individual chirps year-round.

Size: 8-11 inch length, 21-25 inch wingspan



Backyard attractions: Build a nestbox prior to breeding season to attract a breeding pair.

Habitat
Forest

Food
Mammals

Nesting
Cavity



Great Horned Owl

If you ask someone to draw a picture of an owl, chances are high that the resulting image will resemble a great horned. Named for the two tufts or “horns” on either side of its head, this is the archetypal owl of folklore thanks to its piercing yellow eyes; deep, soft hoots; large bodies; and nearly soundless flight. Great horned owls are usually a mottled grayish-brown color with a reddish face, though their exact coloration can vary by region, with northern owls tending to be lighter in color than their southern counterparts. They are nocturnal hunters that prefer younger woods interspersed with open areas, but their habitat range is broad. They’ve even been spotted in cities!

Size: 1.5-2 foot length, 3-5 foot wingspan



Backyard attractions: Build a nestbox prior to breeding season to attract a breeding pair. Attach a guard to deter predators.



Northern Hawk Owl

While sightings of the northern hawk owl are rare as they prefer remote areas, lucky Michiganders may be able to spot one during a hike through the woods. This owl is fairly easy to differentiate from other owl species thanks to its hawkish appearance; it has a brown back speckled with white dots, with brown and white horizontal stripes running down its underside. Its white face is lined with a distinctive black border. However, the northern hawk owl doesn't resemble a hawk in appearance alone: it also shares many hawk-like behaviors, including in its daytime hunting patterns (though it is known to also hunt at night when the opportunity arises).

Size: 14-18 inch length, 28 inch wingspan



Backyard attractions: Prefer open coniferous or mixed forests bordering open areas



For more information on these and other species, visit:

www.allaboutbirds.org

www.audubon.org

birdcast.info

www.ebird.org

