

# Finding Wildlife on the Trail

## Table of Contents

Finding Wildlife on the Trail.....	2
Identifying Wildlife.....	3
Trees.....	3
Birds .....	3
Wildflowers.....	3
Other Wildlife.....	4
Seasonality for Wildlife Observations.....	4
Trees.....	4
Birds .....	4
Wildflowers.....	5

## Finding Wildlife on the Trail

Most of our guides encourage you to look for wildlife as you walk the trail. They pinpoint a few locations along the trail at which individual wildlife species have been spotted in the past, and provide information about each species. Using the location, pictures, and accompanying text and links, you may be able to find examples of the species in the same or other locations. Note that this activity is targeted at beginner naturalists who want to add a challenge or two to their hike. Here are some hints for these beginners at finding and identifying wildlife:

**Open Wildlife Waypoints as You Approach Them** – As you walk the trail, our trail guide will show you a waypoint for a wildlife species, indicating that it has been seen previously at that specific location. Open the waypoint once you are near it to see a picture and descriptive information. Try to match the photo to species you discover nearby. Do not get discouraged if you do not find it – you may see it later on in the hike or on another hike. You will at least have become familiar with a common part of Virginia’s natural environment.

**Search Along the Trail** – Given the inherent inaccuracy of GPS waypoint recording, there is no guarantee that each species will be found in the exact location shown on the map. You may need to walk 30 to 100 feet forward and back from each waypoint if it is not immediately visible.

**Get More Descriptive Information** – If you are unsure whether you have found the species, you can get more information by selecting the Web links in the waypoint text. For example, waypoints for birds have links to the Cornell birding site for the species in question. The links typically have additional photos and identification tips. Note these links only work when you have an Internet connection on your smartphone.

**Don’t Obsess Over the Identification** – If you are new to wildlife identification, you may find it difficult to clearly identify a species, even with the added information from the Internet. There is no need to spend an inordinate amount of time struggling with this task while on the trail. If possible, take a photo or two of the plant (or burn the image of a bird in your brain) and research it at home. You can use the tools described elsewhere as aids in identification and a means to building your identification skills. For example, the iNaturalist app and Web site can usually give you suggestions as to the species using just your photographs. Use your time on the trail to enjoy nature and relax. You are sure to find other interesting wildlife along the way.

**Stay Alert to Wildlife as You Walk** – There is also a decent chance that the species in question is not to be found in the specified location (at least for now). The best approach is to scan the area quickly, then stay alert for it as you walk the rest of the trail. For example, you may want to play a bird call several times, so that you might recognize if you were to hear it later. Again, you should treat this as a fun exercise, not a quiz.

## Identifying Wildlife

The techniques used to find and identify species will vary by species type. Other sections of this Web site will provide detailed instructions for developing identification skills by area of interest, such as birds or wildflowers. Here are a few hints for beginner naturalists, aimed at helping you find common species.

### Trees

Finding a specific tree is simplified by its fixed location over long periods of time (although they may certainly die and topple over at some point). On some guided tours, the process is further simplified by the provision of identification plaques near the tree. Where no plaque is provided, one typically uses the leaves as the primary identifier, with occasional reference to nuts and berries. Most tree waypoints show the leaf – match it to the surrounding trees. The Web links add a photo gallery showing additional characteristics of the tree. For tall trees with no low hanging branches, you may benefit from a pair of binoculars to see into the high canopy. While tree identification can be difficult, you have the advantage of knowing that a certain species is in the vicinity. To get more information about tree identification, go here: <https://www.arborday.org/trees/whattree/whatTree.cfm?ItemID=E6A>

### Birds

Birds move around a great deal in their chosen habitats. Therefore, you are unlikely find a specific bird at precisely the location of the waypoint in a guided hike. However, there is a good chance that you will see it in that general location or elsewhere on the trail. The primary method of identification is gauging the size, shape, and color of the bird. Each waypoint has a photo to match to the birds you see. There is also a link to the Cornell birding site that has additional photos, comparisons to similar birds, and other identification aids. Here, binoculars are a must for visual identification. For Ramblr guides only, there is also a recording of the bird's call, with links to additional bird songs and descriptions. Bird identification can be daunting, so we have focused on common and/or distinctive birds. You may want to concentrate on finding the few birds included in the guide by referring to their look and calls, rather than trying to identify all the other birds you see. The basics of bird identification can be found here:

<https://www.allaboutbirds.org/building-skills-the-4-keys-to-bird-identification/>

### Wildflowers

Some wildflowers only live for a year or two, with the growth of new plants dependent on the dispersal of seeds. If the habitat is undisturbed, the same species may found in the same general area over time as long as the seeds continue to be dispersed nearby. Other plants may persist in the same location for a number of years by regenerating from underground root structures, with the same caveat regarding

habitat preservation. In either case, you may need to search around to find the current crop of wildflowers – if you do not find in the specified location, keep looking as you walk. The easiest method for identifying a wildflower is through reference to its flower. Most waypoints have a picture of the flower, with links to other sites with photos and descriptions. As described in discussion of seasonality below, most wildflowers only bloom during specific (and sometimes short) periods of the year, so try to come during the blooming times. Because there are so many wildflowers that look remarkably similar (especially in the aster and goldenrod categories), just make your “best guess” as to whether you have found the species in question. This is also a good opportunity to try out the photo identification capabilities of iNaturalist, since you are usually able to get a clear photo of a wildflower near the trail. To use a traditional “key” based identification method, go here:

<https://www.wildflower.org/plants/>

## Other Wildlife

Most guides focus on the types of wildlife described above. Occasionally, we may add sightings of other animals like frogs or butterflies. These waypoints concentrate on visual identification, and we do not expect that you will have much success finding these species. They are included just to introduce you to an interesting part of the landscape.

## Seasonality for Wildlife Observations

The occurrence of wildlife sightings can vary by season. As a general rule of thumb, your best chance of encountering the wildlife described in any given guided hike is to take the walk in the same month it originally occurred. If you are going at other times, here are a few factors that will influence the likelihood of finding the species described in the guide.

### Trees

The primary method for identifying trees is through reference to its leaf. Deciduous trees lose their leaves in fall and winter, so it is best to visit in spring and summer. Evergreen trees have leaves year-round.

### Birds

Most of the birds included in guided hikes are land birds, rather than water birds. The majority of the former birds are migratory, coming from down south in late April or May, and returning south in late August or September. So the best time to see a variety of birds is in the spring and summer. There are a few exceptions:

Year-round birds – Birds such as woodpeckers or cardinals live in Virginia year-round.

Winter migrants – A fair number of water birds and a limited number of land birds migrate to Virginia in the late fall and winter, returning in early to mid-spring. This includes pine siskins and kinglets.

If you are curious as to the seasonal prevalence of a specific bird in Virginia, view this bar chart:

<https://ebird.org/barchart?r=US-VA&yr=all&m=>

To learn how to interpret the chart, see [eBird Instructions](#)

## Wildflowers

The primary method of identifying wildflowers is through reference to their flowers. The waypoint description for each wildflower includes its blooming time. Look for it in those months.