

# APRIL ID CHALLENGE

## SMALL, THIN-BILLED SONGBIRDS



**B**ACK BY POPULAR demand is the ID Challenge. The premise is simple: all you have to do is have a look at the six photos on this page and try and name the birds in them. When you are ready, turn the page to reveal the answers and why we think the bird is what it is. Finally, for a bit of added oomph, we have a page of general ID advice and tips for the type of birds in question. This month, we are starting off with a bunch of smallish, thin-billed song birds (passerines) of 'moderate' proportions. There are no photographic tricks and the birds are all in the sort of pose and view it is readily possible to get in the UK. In fact, all are regular British birds. But those are enough clues...



 WHAT AM I?

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# ID CHALLENGE



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# SMALL, THIN-BILLED SONGBIRDS

# General ID tips & tricks

### RELATIVE SIZE AND PROPORTION

Size judgment is one of the hardest things to master in bird identification or birdwatching in general. This is especially true of birds seen in isolation, without any familiar bird or anything else of known size to compare with. Size illusions can come with position relative to the horizon (think how large the moon appears when low down compared with high in the sky), lighting and all sorts of other factors.

Even the way a bird flies can trick the unwary or even the wary. Wildlife filmmakers exploit this slightly, using the stabilising effect of slow motion to make every bird of prey look falsely larger by slowing down the wing beats. Birds can even do this themselves; many have been tricked by the slow rowing wing beats of a displaying Sparrowhawk making it appear as a much larger bird, perhaps a Goshawk.

One way round being tricked by size is to look at proportions instead of

absolute size. As is frequently alluded to in the explanations of the mystery birds in the ID Challenge on the previous pages, relative head size is one of the best guides to estimating size. That is the size of the bird's head compared to the rest of the body.

As a general rule, larger birds have relatively smaller heads. So, a small thrush, such as a Robin, has a much larger head relative to its overall size than a larger thrush such as a Blackbird. Indeed, you can even see this 'effect' within the larger thrushes, comparing say the relative head size of a Song Thrush with that of a Mistle Thrush. It is subtle, yes, but the Mistle Thrush appears to have a smaller head, so it is implied that it is a larger bird.

This feature can be used with other bird types, too, of course. Think of the relative head sizes of Great Tit (smaller head, larger bird) and Coal Tit (larger head, smaller bird), or Knot and Dunlin.

### JUVENILE ROBIN



The smaller bird has a relatively larger head

### JUVENILE BLACKBIRD



Not every bird looks like the book. For instance, all Robins look like this at some stage in the maturing and juvenile Blackbirds look quite unlike their parents.

### FIELDGUIDES PRESENT DISTORTED VIEWS

Historically, bird guides, with limited space, have illustrated birds with a hierarchy and bias. Easy to identify, brightly-coloured males in breeding colours take precedent. Females and variations from the idealised breeding male are secondary, often buried in the background or even absent. Even in standard, universally revered classics, such as the Collins Bird Guide, you won't find illustrations of, for example, Teal or Garganey in 'eclipse' plumage, the 'toned down' plumage male birds adopt for months in the summer.

So, beware, birds do not always appear just like they do in the books. Not every bird you encounter in life will be an adult breeding male or even an adult for that matter. Expect to encounter little brown jobs and try to tear your eyes away from the gawdy birds in the book and check out the duller ones hiding in the background.

Learn as much as you can from books, but there is no real substitute for field experience.

### STRUCTURE IS IMPORTANT

When dealing with dowdy, brown and, let's face it, nondescript birds like some of those presented in the preceding ID Challenge, plumage features can be crucial, but equally they can be confusing. At least as a starting place, it is a good idea to concentrate on structure. Look at relative head size, tail length and shape, bill shape and length, the length and shape of the wings, the length and thickness of the legs, the size and shape of the feet and claws and anything else you can think of. It is a lot to take in, but, there are a lot of ID clues in bird shapes and structure. Look at the non breeding waders below and see what differences you can see.

### DUNLIN



The smaller bird, the Dunlin has a relatively larger head

### KNOT



Dunlins also have longer, more curved bills than Knots