

### How Birds Get Their Names



Teacher-led Classroom/Field Activity  
Science/Research/Reasoning

*What do birds' names mean?*

**Objective:**

Students get an overview of the factors that go into giving birds their names, then “design” and name a bird of their own creation.

**You will need:**

- Computer with capability to show/project images of birds online so the class can see them.
- Field guide (online or print) of birds in your region

**Students will need:**

- “A Bird and Its Name” reproducible, one for each student
- Colored pencils
- Blank paper for drawing

**Suggested time:**

One-two class periods; or 20 minutes for discussion and presentation, then homework for drawing and naming bird

**What to do:**

1. Ahead of time, make a list on the board or chart paper of 4-6 different kinds of birds that are native to your region. Choose birds that have descriptive names with at least two components—e.g., Great Horned Owl, Red-winged Blackbird, Black-capped Chickadee, Northern Cardinal, Ruby-throated Hummingbird, Red-breasted Nuthatch, American White Pelican.
2. With the class, review page 2 of the students’ *Audubon Adventures* magazine, *Get to Know Birds*. Discuss the different types of field marks described.
3. Ask volunteers to explain how the names of the birds you listed are related to field marks. Avoid labeling answers as right or wrong at this point, but encourage discussion among students. Ask if there are parts of some birds’ names that aren’t related to what those birds look like. If so, what do those words tell about the birds?
4. Summarize the discussion by pointing out that the common names given to birds very often have different kinds of information—what a bird looks like, where it lives, what it eats, how it behaves, and even who first saw and named it.
5. Use the links below to show the images of birds in Audubon’s online bird guide. With each image, help students notice the bird’s distinguishing features. Then invite students to offer ideas about the kind of information the bird’s name includes. In some cases the name includes physical features, where the bird is from, the bird’s behavior, what the bird eats, what the bird sounds like, and/or who first named the bird. At the end, encourage students to ask questions or offer comments.

*Tip: On the website, to go to the next bird, click on the binoculars with “Find a Bird” in the top right corner of the screen. Once you get to the main screen with the bird’s image and information, click on the binoculars in*

*the upper left to show a full-screen image of that bird.*

- Red-winged Blackbird: <https://www.audubon.org/field-guide/bird/red-winged-blackbird>
- Blue Jay: <https://www.audubon.org/field-guide/bird/blue-jay>
- Scarlet Tanager: <https://www.audubon.org/field-guide/bird/scarlet-tanager>
- Great Horned Owl: <https://www.audubon.org/field-guide/bird/great-horned-owl>
- Black-capped Chickadee: <https://www.audubon.org/field-guide/bird/black-capped-chickadee>
- Blue-gray Gnatcatcher: <https://www.audubon.org/field-guide/bird/blue-gray-gnatcatcher>
- Yellow-bellied Sapsucker: <https://www.audubon.org/field-guide/bird/yellow-bellied-sapsucker>
- American White Pelican: <https://www.audubon.org/field-guide/bird/american-white-pelican>
- Cooper's Hawk: <https://www.audubon.org/field-guide/bird/coopers-hawk>
- Little Blue Heron: <https://www.audubon.org/field-guide/bird/little-blue-heron>
- Snowy Egret: <https://www.audubon.org/field-guide/bird/snowy-egret>
- Northern Bobwhite: <https://www.audubon.org/field-guide/bird/northern-bobwhite>
- Red-headed Woodpecker: <https://www.audubon.org/field-guide/bird/red-headed-woodpecker>

6. Distribute copies of the “A Bird and Its Name” worksheet. Review the instructions to make sure everyone understands what they are supposed to do.
7. Give students time to draw and name their birds.
8. Set aside time for volunteers to show their drawings and explain how they named the birds they drew.
9. Create a classroom or hallway display of students’ bird drawings or a field guide for the class library.