

Learning the main topographical features on a Chaffinch...



FIELD CRAFT

Basic bird topography

Bird topography can seem a little daunting at first but mastering the main feather tracts is a key building block to making a positive identification, as Training Officer Jenny Donelan explains.

Learning bird topography will not only allow you to effectively communicate a description of a bird you have seen, but also enable you to better understand written or verbal descriptions of birds by other people. Think back to the first time you ever saw a male Chaffinch. In the summer the males can be particularly striking with their plumage palette consisting of rich rusty orange, blush pink, slate grey, mossy green, black and white. Now imagine trying to describe this bird to someone. It can be tempting to go all in and list every colour you have seen, describing the bird along the lines of “it had an orange head with a grey patch, and a pinkish body with black and white wings”. Although this description isn’t wrong, it doesn’t pay attention to the placement of colours. Taking such a general approach can make it difficult to remember plumage features which are species-specific. Learning bird topography can help you to remember exactly where a particular colour or pattern is situated, allowing you to recall a male Chaffinch as having a “double white wing-bar, green rump, pink breast, a rusty orange side of the head with a grey crown and nape”. This way of describing birds is more accurate and will help you and others when trying to put a name to them. For beginner birdwatchers, building this understanding will help you to become more familiar with common species and further improve your knowledge, while a basic understanding of a bird’s feather tracts and anatomical features can also help identify rare or problematic species for birdwatchers of all levels.

MAIN FEATHER TRACTS

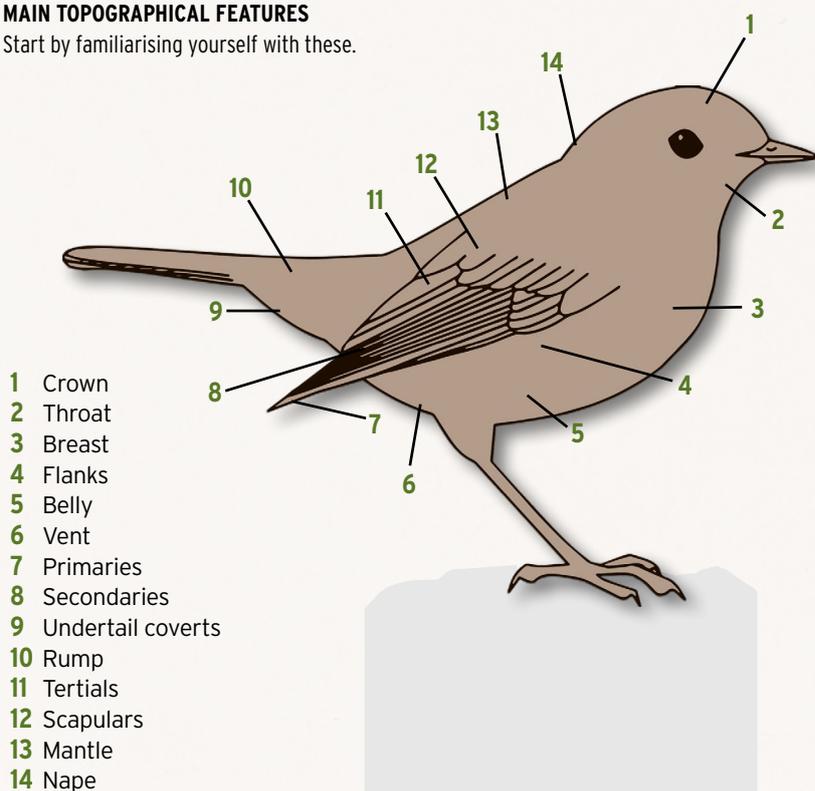
Before diving into the plumage markings of a bird, it is important to pay attention to the basic anatomy and layout of the main feather tracts. The arrangement of feathers on a bird’s body is similar across all species, whereas colour and physical structure can vary considerably.

Knowing the location of the different groups of feathers will provide you with a framework for understanding changes in structure and perspective depending on the angle of the bird. It’s very easy to look in a field guide at an image of a perfectly stationary bird in profile, memorise the colour pattern and then feel like you are

familiar with it. In reality, birds in the field will very rarely stay still enough to emulate those perfect field guide plates. The placement of the colours within each feather tract will never change, however, despite changes in the bird’s appearance due to perspective or angle. Therefore, being familiar with the main feather tracts will allow you to account for these changes in appearance when looking for species-specific colours or patterns. It can also help overcome differences in observer colour vision, for example colour blindness or partial sight, or problems that may arise with species identification due to abnormal plumage colouration such as leucism.

MAIN TOPOGRAPHICAL FEATURES

Start by familiarising yourself with these.

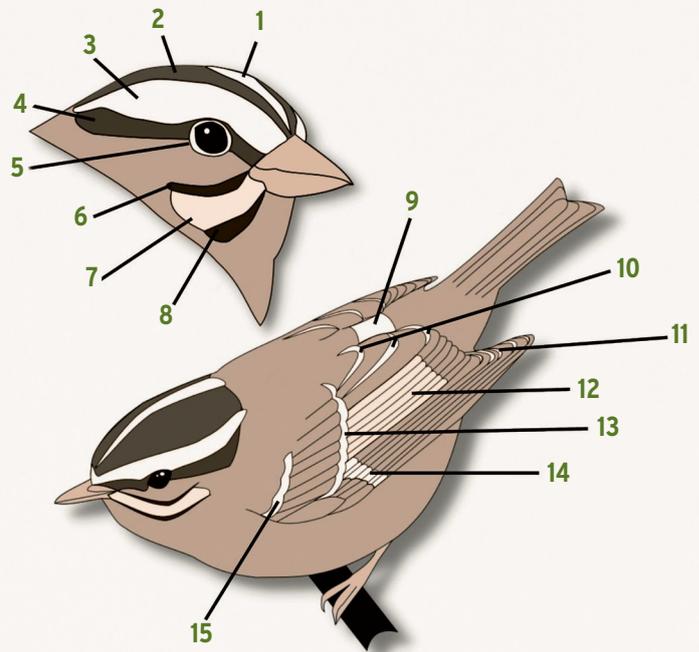


...can make it easier to describe and identify an unfamiliar species.



HEAD AND WING PLUMAGE

At different angles and distances, more features can be seen.



- | | |
|-------------------------|-----------------------|
| 1 Median crown stripe | 9 Rump patch |
| 2 Lateral crown stripe | 10 Tertial tips |
| 3 Supercilium | 11 Primary tips |
| 4 Eye stripe | 12 Secondary panel |
| 5 Eye ring | 13 Greater-covert bar |
| 6 Moustachial stripe | 14 Primary-base patch |
| 7 Submoustachial stripe | 15 Median-covert bar |
| 8 Lateral throat stripe | |

It can be hard to know where to focus your attention on a bird, especially if they are moving quickly or if you only catch a glimpse of them. For this reason, it's important to learn which parts are most useful for identification

PLUMAGE MARKINGS

Once you are familiar with the basics, you can start to examine plumage markings more closely. It can be hard to know where to focus your attention on a bird, especially if they are moving quickly or if you only catch a glimpse of them. For this reason, it's important to learn which parts are most useful for identification. This varies between different bird groups, but the wings and head are usually the most useful areas to look at for markings that will aid in identification, as they are often (but not always) the most heavily patterned part of a bird's body. Some markings will most likely always be pale or dark, for example supercilia are pale, whilst eye stripes are dark. Knowing the configuration of these markings on a bird is extremely useful and can be the key to separating similar-looking species. ■

Being prepared

All good field guides contain a section on bird topography, and it is always worth looking at this before using the book in the field. Make yourself familiar with the terminology before starting to look at specific features. Even if you don't learn every term, you will be aware of them, which may help you remember where certain features were on a bird you observed. Lastly, attending some of our BTO training courses will teach you more about birds, how to identify them and ultimately to enjoy them!

Find out more Visit www.bto.org/develop-your-skills for further information, including on how to sign up for BTO training courses.