



▲ Exchanging knowledge in the field is a great way of improving and cementing your skills.

## FIELD CRAFT

# Building skills between birdwatchers

**BTO's Ben Darvill and Nick Moran consider how we can make the most of the learning opportunities afforded by our interactions with other birders.**

However you got into birdwatching, what experiences and influences have helped to build your skills to where they are today?

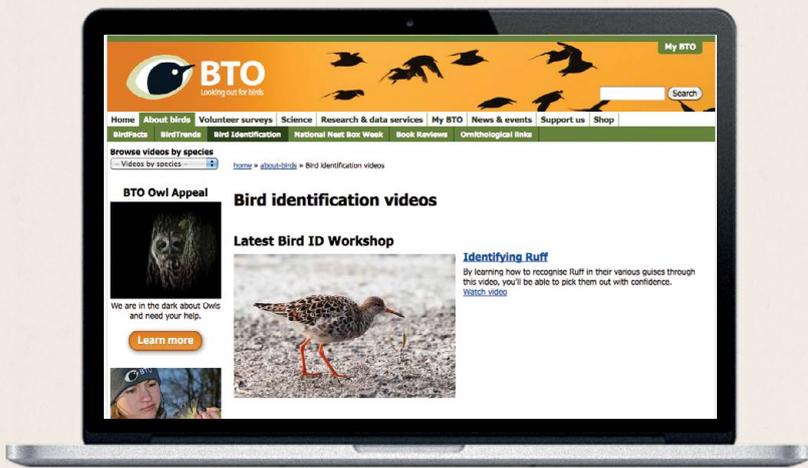
For many of us, other people will have been important influences. Some will have benefited from a mentor who passed on knowledge and inspiration. Others may have learned things here and there, attending group walks, glancing through other people's telescopes, or perhaps via conversations in hides.

We've probably all overheard things while out birding. Sometimes the observer confidently states what the bird is, and why – useful information for the listener. But what about when someone is obviously struggling? Or, more awkwardly, when a loud and confident voice seems to be proclaiming the wrong ID?

Helping others to learn by sharing your skills is certainly a worthwhile thing to do, but what is the best way of going about it? Here's our step-by-step guide:

## Sharing step-by-step

- 1** Firstly, decide whether to interject. There are no fixed rules – you need to gauge the situation and remember that not everyone wants help!
- 2** Next, consider the environment. Can you stand or sit next to the other birder and talk quietly to avoid embarrassing them or annoying other people?
- 3** Start in a neutral way: "I was looking at that bird too. What features caught your attention?" You can then discuss visible characteristics, rather than arguing about the ID. This also gives you more time to gauge whether your help is welcome and even to change your opinion about the bird's ID. Perhaps they've noticed a key feature you didn't see!
- 4** Make sure you are both looking at the same bird! Use unmistakable landmarks or other birds that you can both confidently identify.
- 5** If sharing optics, make sure they know how to adjust the dioptre, change the distance between eyepieces, raise/lower eyecups, and where the focus and zoom controls are.
- 6** Keep the tone positive. Some well-chosen words of encouragement can go a long way. Be honest about your own ability too – it can be very reassuring to hear that other people struggle sometimes as well.
- 7** Don't immediately give the 'answer'. Suggest features to look at; structure, size, habitat, behaviour, plumage etc. Avoid jargon. Ask leading questions: "Can you see what colour legs it has? What shape is the beak?"
- 8** If possible, help them to identify it for themselves. Show them pictures in a bird book or on your smartphone and ask them which share the characteristics of their bird.



Of course, for people to learn they also need to remember. What could you say or do to help with this? Could you ask them to scan around and try to find another individual of the same species? Or could you point out a confusion species and ask them to describe the differences? Both of these active approaches to identifying birds will encourage learning through practice, and will help them to focus on useful features. If you have any helpful memory aids, now would be a good time to share these.

Imagine what a difference it would make if all of BTO's supporters passed on their skills. Will you play your part in helping others to learn and grow, and in developing the BTO supporters and volunteers of the future? It would be great if you could, and you will probably learn something yourself in the process!



## Imagine what a difference it would make if all of BTO's supporters passed on their skills

### RESOURCES TO HELP LEARNING

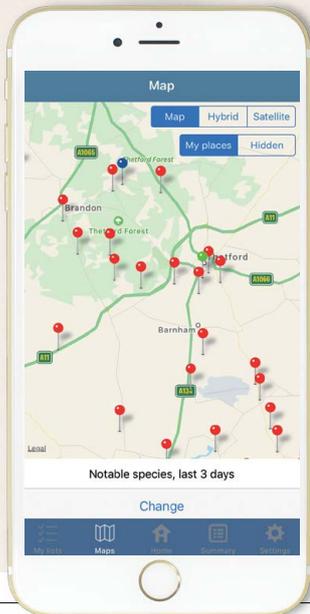
- ▶ Visit [www.youtube.com/BTOvideo](http://www.youtube.com/BTOvideo) to find BTO ID videos featuring easily-confused species.
- ▶ Read the regular Field Craft articles in *BTO News*.
- ▶ Record 'everyday' birds via BirdTrack to build familiarity with more common species while helping conservation science.
- ▶ Participating regularly in BTO surveys is a great way of learning too – a simple WeBS count or single-species survey might be a good starting point.
- ▶ Join a local Bird Club that runs group walks.

### TELL US YOUR FAVOURITE MEMORY AIDS

It's easy enough to read something in a field guide, but how do you actually remember it? We'd love to hear your favourite memory aids for visual ID features, songs or calls. Please share them with us by emailing [btonews@bto.org](mailto:btonews@bto.org). We hope to feature some of these in a future edition of *BTO News*.

▶ BTO produces a number of online and print resources, which can help people to learn more about birds and other wildlife.

**Some well-chosen words of encouragement can go a long way**



### Find out more

Would you consider taking one or two people along with you when you do a survey, or leading a small group walk at a local birding site? If so, please email [training@bto.org](mailto:training@bto.org).