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**GRAB N' GO ACTIVITY:**

**Get To Know Birds**

## BACKGROUND

Humans have always been fascinated by birds. Our early ancestors who had to walk from place to place would look up and see birds soaring effortlessly over forests, rivers, and mountains. To them, a creature that could leave the earth and rise into the sky must have seemed truly magical. No wonder so many ancient cultures thought birds were divine beings. Birds may not be divine beings, but they do have some pretty extraordinary abilities. Flying is just one of them. Any animal that flies (and not just glides) has to be extremely lightweight, must have an aerodynamically shaped body, and powerful wings. Most birds have all these features. To reduce their weight, birds' feathers, bones, and bodies have hollow spaces in them. Birds' bones are hollow and spongy in the middle, which makes them astonishingly light, but also very strong

## BIRD BIOLOGY

Birds' feathers separate them from all other creatures on earth. Different kinds of feathers on the body of the bird have different jobs. The long, stiff flight feathers on their wings and tail provide the lift and control needed to fly. The short, rounded feathers on the body, called contour feathers, help give the bird its smooth, aerodynamic shape. Fluffy down feathers found all over the body next to the skin act as insulation, keeping the bird warm on cold days. Birds replace all their feathers every year, or when any are broken or lost. Many birds' plumage changes through the year, switching from brightly coloured breeding plumage in the spring and summer, to plain-coloured fall plumage from August to March.

Birds have fascinating mating habits. In the spring, many species set up territories which they defend aggressively. The songs of birds in spring are largely announcements to others of the same species that "this spot is taken!" The males (and occasionally females) may perform curious dances or display flashy colours to attract a mate. Birds' nests can be beautiful works of

weaving skill, or for some species, a simple depression in the soil. After hatching, baby birds usually require constant care and feeding from parents. This is a time when birds are most vulnerable, and when predators, habitat destruction, or bad weather can have devastating effects on bird populations.

Many Canadian birds live here only in the spring and summer when they come here to feed, and raise their chicks. They migrate to warmer locations south of Canada for the winter. Other birds, called residents, live here year-round. Resident birds need to be well-adapted for winter, a time when food is scarce and temperatures can make life for any small animal difficult. Many resident birds switch from insects during the summer to seeds in the winter. This is typical of Chickadees and Nuthatches.

Birds are wonderfully adapted to their habitats. Not surprisingly, many kinds of plants and animals are adapted to birds, and depend on them for food, reproduction, and other things. For example, chokecherries are sought after by birds like Bohemian Waxwings, and form an essential part of their winter diet. Chokecherry pits are designed to go through the birds' intestines undigested, to be scattered across the landscape with birds' droppings.

Owls are another marvel of adaptation. They have some of the most sophisticated stealth technology in nature. Owls can catch prey in total blackness, using their extremely sensitive hearing and night vision to find it. Once they spot their prey, owls swoop in on wings silenced by soft-edged feathers.





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## STUDYING BIRDS

The best way to get to know birds is to spend time with them. Birds are usually not hard to find: you can see and hear them in every Canadian city, farm, park, or natural area, usually year round. Because they are always around us, they are one of the easiest ways to stay in touch with your wild neighbours.

You don't need special equipment to watch birds, but it sometimes helps. Binoculars are practical because not only do they magnify distant things, but they let you see them with both eyes, in normal 3D. They are also far easier to carry around than telescopes.

The easiest way to identify birds is to have someone who knows birds point them out for you. Another way is to use a field guide to birds. There are many excellent field guides to Canadian birds available, any of which help you identify any bird you see. Probably the simplest way to use a field guide is after you've taken a good look at a bird, flip through the pages of the guide until you see something that looks like the bird you sighted. There may be several species that look very much alike, so you may need to check the descriptions and details closely to pick out which species you spotted. The key identifying characteristics that set one bird apart from others are called field marks, and they are usually highlighted in most good field guides.

Another way to get to know birds is to put out a bird feeder. Feeders are especially attractive to birds in winter, a time when food is often scarce. When birds come to your feeder, you can often watch them from quite close by. This is an excellent chance to take great photos, or make memorable drawings of some of your favourite wild neighbours.

