



**Black-capped chickadee.**

**Summer flower blossoms hold seeds that birds love in fall.**

be prepared for them to be gone as quickly as they arrived. Most birds of prey start flying about 9 a.m., but fly-overs peak between 10 a.m. and 4 p.m. on good flight days. Ducks often arrive early or late in the day. Loons can be overhead at any time, but they prefer the early hours. Whimbrel are early flyers as well, but most other shorebirds can be seen at any time of day or night.

And finally, don't forget the night sky—myriad birds fly over at night. Listen for thrushes, rails, sparrows, shorebirds, ducks, and of course warblers. Most of these are hard to identify by ear, but some have distinctive calls and can be reliably identified by their night calls. Thrushes, indigo buntings, dickcissels, long-tailed ducks, killdeer, solitary and spotted sandpipers, yellowlegs, and rose-breasted grosbeaks, to name a few, can be identified with confidence. Some

bird watchers like to record nighttime flight calls and use computer programs to identify them, but that's a bit much for me.

**10. Know What You're Looking At**

Sometimes identifying a bird reliably enough to add it to your yard list is the hardest part. You have to be pretty good at identifying birds both up close and far away, and in both good light and bad. You have to know each bird's look and feel—how it flies, its postures, general characteristics. Don't rely only on *seeing* the birds. Often your first clue to a bird's presence will be hearing its song or call. Learning these clues will be very effective in augmenting your list and enhancing your skills. Having a good idea of what species are expected will help, but never overlook the unexpected. Some pretty amazing birds have been found in unexpected places!

There you have it—my tips for a great yard list!

So, how has it worked for me? So far I have recorded 167 species for my urban yard. No, wait; as I was proofreading this article out on my deck, two sandhill cranes soared overhead—honest!—so 168. Among these, a few stand out as unexpected, including a short-eared owl that wandered miles from suitable habitat one November, and a sora that decided to rest overnight on my deck. A woodcock fed on earthworms one cool April day, a red-throated loon and long-tailed ducks flew overhead one May day, and a whimbrel journeyed south in late July. Bonaparte's, Iceland, and glaucous gulls have appeared as they flew to the fields to forage, and 24 species of warblers and 6 species of vireos have enjoyed my woodlot.

The most rewarding outcome, however, is that I've contributed thousands of bits of information to scientific databases as a result of my observations—all the while honing my identification skills and having fun at the same time! 🐦

*Geoff Carpentier is a professional expedition guide and author. His most recent book is Antarctica—First Journey, a guide to the flora and fauna, history and sites to visit in Antarctica and the sub-antarctic regions. Visit his website, [avocetnatureservices.com](http://avocetnatureservices.com), for more information.*



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