



15 Common Boise River Birds

The city of Boise, Idaho and its natural hallmark, the Boise River, is home to over 150 bird species and many other kinds of wildlife. The river is accessible to the public for nearly its entire length within city limits as well as along many up- and downstream reaches. Use this guide to help identify some of the more common birds you may see as you enjoy Boise's little slice of nature.



	Seasonal Abundance			
	Spring	Summer	Autumn	Winter
Waterfowl:				
Canada Goose	c	c	a	a
Mallard	c	c	c	c
Wood Duck	c	o	o	c
Common Merganser	c	o	c	c
Water Birds:				
Great Blue Heron	c	c	c	c
Ring-billed Gull	a	c	a	a
Belted Kingfisher	o	o	o	o
Raptors:				
Bald Eagle	o	r	o	o
Perching Birds:				
Northern Flicker	o	c	o	o
Black-billed Magpie	c	c	c	c
American Robin	c	c	c	o
Yellow Warbler	o	c	o	r
Song Sparrow	c	c	c	o
Red-winged Blackbird	c	c	c	r
House Finch	c	c	c	c

Key: a = abundant, c = common, u = uncommon, o = occasionally seen, r = rare

To learn more about local birds, volunteer to help conserve them, or make a donation visit us at:

<http://www.goldeneagleaudubon.org>

Photographs by: Mike Morrison, Bob Fairey

Text by: Sean Finn

Editing by: Sue Norton



Canada Goose (*Branta canadensis*): One of the more common birds encountered on the Boise River, the Canada Goose can be identified by its long straight, black neck and large white cheek patches. Look for them swimming nearly anywhere in the river, foraging for succulent young grass shoots in adjacent parks and fields, or slinking around ponds looking for bread handouts. Canada Geese may exhibit defensive behaviors when cornered or when young are present. Their erect posture and hissing vocalization can be quite imposing.



Mallard (*Anas platyrhynchos*): This familiar duck can be found on the River just about any day of the year. The male's familiar green head and white neck ring are generally recognized by even the most novice

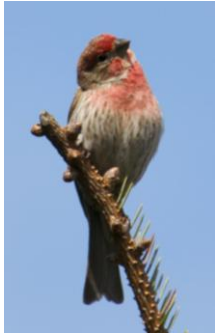


birdwatcher. Female Mallards, like most ducks, are comparatively drab – an adaptation to camouflage her when she's sitting on the nest. Mallards are called 'puddle ducks' or 'dabbling ducks' because when they forage in water they generally don't dive completely under the water.

Wood Duck (*Aix sponsa*): This somewhat secretive duck can be found where still or slow-moving water is in close proximity to large trees, like the area around Barber Pool. Males can be identified by their distinctive 'tuxedo' markings; the browner females have a diagnostic white teardrop mark around the eye. Wood Ducks nest in tree cavities or nest boxes and typically lay large clutches of eggs.



House Finch (*Carpodacus mexicanus*): A common Boise backyard bird, the House Finch's reddish hue and bubbly song make it easily identifiable. Because House Finches are common visitors to bird feeders and often nest in and on buildings they are one of the birds you're likely to see out your window. Male finches (pictured) sport a reddish forehead, throat, and upper breast with streaked sides and tend to sing their songs from the highest perch available. Females, who have blurry streaks from their throat all the way down to their legs, are otherwise drab like most cup-nesting female songbirds. This is, of course, an adaptation for females to hide while sitting on the nest. Both genders have stubby, thick bills indicating their preference for eating seeds.



NOTES

Belted Kingfisher (*Ceryle alcyon*): This fish-eating bird is most easily identified by hearing its long, clattering rattle call usually given in flight. The kingfisher may be seen perched on a prominent branch, coursing over the river with its unique ‘rowing’ wingbeat, or hovering over the water looking for prey. The hover is often followed by a headlong dive into the water where the bird uses its stout beak to catch a fingerling-sized fish. The kingfisher’s large blue head and mostly white belly make it one of the more distinctive birds on the river.



Bald Eagle (*Haliaeetus leucocephalus*): Generally only present in winter, members of our Nation’s symbol are regularly seen perched on exposed branches or slowing flying over the river in search of food – which typically takes the form of carrion or incapacitated fish and ducks. Adult Bald Eagles are easily identifiable, but juveniles tend to be dark all over or have a head and tail that are just making the transition to white. Look for Bald Eagles from December through February below Lucky Peak dam, in the Barber Pools, and west of the Fairview Bridge. Bald Eagle populations continue to increase across the continent, so don’t be surprised if a few nesting pairs begin to crop up on less-disturbed reaches of the river.



Northern Flicker (*Colaptes auratus*): This large, distinctive woodpecker is a common sight along most of the Boise River year-around. Flickers are often seen perched on the ground, revealing their specialization as ant-eaters. In flight, the flicker shows a distinctive white rump patch and orange-reddish underwings. They also have distinctive vocalizations: a high piercing *keew* usually



repeated every 15-20 seconds, and a long, strong series *kwikwikwikwikwi* which someone once thought sounded like *flik-a-flik-a-flik-a*, giving the bird its common name.

Black-billed Magpie (*Pica hudsonia*): This relative of jays, crows, and ravens does well in the city or the country. Probably the easiest bird to identify, due to its bold black-and-white plumage and conspicuous behaviors, the Black-billed Magpie prefers a few scattered trees interspersed with open parks, prairies, or farm fields. Magpies build a unique nest with a twig ‘roof,’ that looks like a football made of sticks and shoved into a tree. Magpies can be seen foraging on the ground in open areas. Their variable calls include a rising, nasal *jeeek*. Let’s just say they’re no Song Sparrow.



American Robin (*Turdus migratorius*): Often thought of a sure sign of spring, robins can be seen in Boise any time of year. But whether they’ll nest near your part of the river is anyone’s guess. American Robins can be quite nomadic – following food sources as they shift around. In spring and summer, the red-breasted robin feeds on earthworms. They can be seen hopping across lawns or sifting through leaf piles. In winter, birds congregate in flocks and search out berries or other patchy food sources. At times it’ll seem as if they’ve left the neighborhood only to show up a few days later in a travelling, hungry mob.



Yellow Warbler (*Dendronica petechia*): Common in brushy habitat near any kind of water, the secretive Yellow Warbler can be identified by its bright colors and clear, melodious vocalizations. Their secretive behavior makes them hard to see, so it may



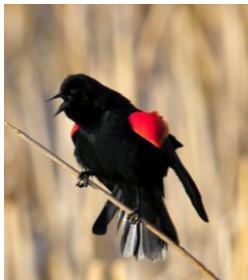
be better to learn this species' distinctive song as well as its field marks. Both genders are bright yellow overall, and the male has distinctive reddish streaks on the breast. The Yellow Warbler song is a high, clear *sweet, sweet, you're-so-sweet* with some variation. Yellow Warblers prefer denser vegetation so look – and listen – for them in willow thickets and other stream-side shrubbery.

Song Sparrow (*Melospiza melodia*): A larger streaky sparrow, the Song Sparrow can be quite conspicuous singing its lilting song from a prominent perch. Like the Yellow Warbler, Song Sparrows are



particularly abundant near water, but they are also comfortable in most suburban settings. Note this sparrow's streaky sides converging into a darker central breast spot. Don't confuse the Song Sparrow with the common, non-native House Sparrow that has drab, solid sides and more extensive black markings on its upper chest and throat. If you're listening for the Song Sparrow, note its characteristic *maids, maids, PLEASE get the kettle-kettle-kettle*. The first part of its song, including the long trill (*pleeeeeease*), is usually consistent whereas the second half is often quite variable.

Red-winged Blackbird (*Agelaius phoeniceus*): One of the more conspicuous birds on the Boise River, and around water in general, is the Red-winged Blackbird. Significantly dimorphic (genders look different),



male Red-wings have bright, bi-colored shoulder patches with the red patch giving the bird its name. Females are streaky brown to match the color of the reeds in which they build nests. Semi-colonial by nature, Red-winged Blackbirds can be found at just about any wetland having emergent, reedy vegetation. Red-wings forage in many upland areas including shrublands, grasslands, and farm fields, sometimes in large flocks.

Common Merganser (*Mergus merganser*): Pronounced “mer-GAN-zer,” this duck belongs to a group called ‘diving ducks.’ Common Mergansers eat fish nearly exclusively, catching them by pursuit during prolonged, sometimes deep, underwater dives. For that reason you have to keep your eyes peeled: mergansers may be present but underwater. Female mergansers, like the one on the left, are generally less drab than most female duck species. Their reddish, crested head is easily identifiable. Male Common Mergansers (right) have an orange bill, black head, and white breast and sides. Mergansers sit low in the water and sometimes stick their heads underwater to scout for fish.



Great Blue Heron (*Ardea herodias*): The only long-legged wading bird you're likely to see along the Boise River, Great Blue Herons eat fish, frogs, snails, crayfish, and just about any other juicy morsel they can spear with their long bill. Male and female herons look alike, stand almost 4' tall, and are largely blue-gray all over. Herons nest and roost in large trees in loose colonies – like the well-know nesting colony at Eagle Island State Park.



Ring-billed Gull (*Larus delawarensis*): Along with the California Gull, Ring-billed Gulls are the most common gull seen on the Boise River.



Ring-billed Gulls can be seen coursing over the river, gathering on rocky sandbars, or loitering in parking lots looking to scavenge just about anything edible (and even inedibles!). Like other gulls, the Ring-billed Gull takes 2+ years to achieve mature plumage. In their early years they are brown and blotchy; by their 3rd year they acquire the familiar white front and gray back plumage. Adult Ring-billed Gulls can be

distinguished from the similar California Gulls by the distinctive dark ring near the tip of the bill, (California Gulls have red and black marks), brighter yellow legs, and a lighter gray back.