

# Life-sized Bird Silhouettes

A Search Image Tool from *The NatureMapping Program*

**Life-sized Bird Silhouettes** were ‘designed’ as a tool for anyone teaching, mentoring, and/or learning the process of bird identification.

**Bird identification** can be a tricky and difficult thing to feel comfortable about. Field guides can often seem to have endless pages of birds that can look very similar.

In order to fit on the pages, the images of birds in field guides are nearly the same size, so it is often difficult at first glance to know whether a bird is crow-sized, robin-sized, or sparrow-sized. Integrating the Life-sized Silhouettes in your learning process helps to **pattern your mind** to more quickly and effectively learn to identify birds.

To be successful in the field, you must have a confidence in identifying the things you see, and beginning with the common birds is a great way to start. Any learning is a process, and making effective use of these silhouettes is about complimenting them with the use of field guides, binoculars (optional), discussions, and outdoor experiences. Silhouettes help to develop the observational patterning, or **search image** that grows with experience.



These silhouettes represent some of the more common birds, or often birds with some distinctive shape or feature, such as the crest of a jay or the forked tail of a Barn swallow. These shapes and features can be used as key **characteristics or field marks** when learning to distinguish different species of birds that may otherwise have similar size or shape.

Placing the silhouettes across the wall can be a good exercise in understanding the relationship between the types of bird, i.e. the size differences between the Downy, Hairy, and Pileated woodpeckers, but the silhouettes are designed to be **located in your indoor world** in such a way to mimic the outdoor world.

The silhouettes are intended to be placed in the room to reflect where you would likely search for the bird in the field, hence **developing your search image**. A **Junco** would most likely be found hopping along the ground, so place the silhouette along the base of a wall, or in a location where your eyes would be drawn down.

A **swallow** is typically seen flying in hunt of insects. Note the silhouette representing the swallows is not a perching silhouette, but rather in flight.

When placing the woodpecker silhouettes, it might be most effective to locate the silhouettes on a door jam or some upright column in order to represent them on the trunk of a tree. See the **enclosed instructions** and suggestions for information on placing the variety of silhouettes that came specifically with your set.

Silhouettes can be used for **more than just identification**. You’ll note the silhouettes are designed with some posture. Just as people can be recognized in different postures, birds (and other animals) can be observed in various postures. We recognize when a person is cold (drawn tight), or angry (very tense), or even happy (a bit bouncy). The silhouette postures are meant to provide some indication of the bird behavior. A bird happily singing has a posture that is different from an alert posture. We often trigger alert postures and behavior. The alerts we trigger are also a reason that we often only get a fleeting glance of a bird. It is in their interest of survival to know when we’re approaching, and then react when we get within their comfort zone.

The silhouettes in your set can be associated with various behavioral postures. Some are in a posture that reflects comfort, and others are more representative of being in an alert posture. The best way to utilize the silhouettes is to first develop the confidence in recognizing the bird, or type of bird represented by the silhouette. Learning to recognize behavior through posture is a more advanced skill that comes after successfully identifying the bird, and then starting to ask questions about **what** the bird is doing, and even **why**.

---

### Keeping an eco-friendly footprint

The silhouettes are made of **recycled x-ray materials** that have been provided from local veterinary clinics. The x-ray images had been maintained in files and held by the clinics. There comes a point when the material is no longer needed, and must eventually be discarded.

Your **Life-sized Silhouettes** are made of a durable plastic material would otherwise be discarded to the landfill. Providing these silhouettes as educational tools keeps them in a productive cycle.

Attempts are made to use the darkest portion of the x-ray material to represent the silhouette, but you may see an x-ray image, or light area on the silhouette. This makes for the **unique nature of the silhouettes**.

The silhouette material makes them **durable and long-lasting**. They will not discolor or fade, so can be a valuable asset for any long-term display. They can also be easily removed and relocated if needed. Taping or stapling are effective ways to display the silhouettes.

The material is prone to creasing if bent sharply or folded, so it is suggested to **keep the silhouettes flat** if storing or moving.

---

### Silhouette Production

Each silhouette was **hand-drawn**. The image was then translated to a template, and the template of each silhouette is traced on a sheet of x-ray material and then hand cut. The silhouettes are hand cut by volunteer students and community members in support of a local Nature Center. The funds received from the sales of the silhouettes goes to support various youth and **community adventures** and explorations.

Your commitment to learning, and teaching, is also a commitment to supporting some part of a local landscape, which supports the larger landscape that we all share. The world works better when we work for a better world.

**Many thanks,**

**Dan Hannafious**

Wildlife Biologist

*NatureMapping* Lead Facilitator

P.S. I would appreciate any comments, suggestions, or stories that you may have associated with these Life-sized Silhouettes. Please contact me at 360-275-3575, or [dan@hcseg.org](mailto:dan@hcseg.org)

# Life-sized Silhouettes

## Notes and placement

### SET A

#### **Bufflehead**

The Bufflehead is a diving duck usually seen alone or in small groups. When diving, the birds swim underwater using only their feet while their wings are held close to their side. They seem to bob like a cork when surfacing. The males and females can be seen traveling together, so look for the appropriate field marks to tell them apart. They will feed on aquatic insects, small fish and water plants. They will be found associated with fairly shallow water. They depend almost entirely on old nest holes of flickers and Pileated woodpeckers.

**Placement** - on a wall or near the floor or in a position which represents water source.

#### **Grebe spp.**

Grebes are fairly small diving birds with a slender, pointed, serrated bill. The toes of each foot are 'lobed' rather than webbed like the typical duck. They feed on aquatic insects and small fish. Grebes will feed, sleep, court, and carry young while on the water. When sensing danger, they will even dive with young on their back. In flight they can be distinguished by their very short tail and a dip in their outstretched neck.

**Placement** - on a wall and near the floor, or in a position which represents water source.

#### **Mallard**

A medium-sized dabbling duck that is the most numerous and probably the most recognized duck in North America. The Mallard is an opportunistic feeder that often becomes accustomed to population centers and can be a year-round resident. The curly tail of the male is characteristic. Mallards are considered 'dabbling' ducks which means they don't dive, but rather tip up their bottom and stretch their neck to the bottom to feed on the vegetation they can reach. Feeding Mallards will be found in shallow water.

**Placement** - on a wall and near the floor, or in a position which represents water source.

#### **Northern pintail**

The Northern pintail is also considered a dabbling duck and is most often associated with marshes. The Northern pintail is one of the most numerous ducks in North America. Because it does not dive, the Northern pintail feeds in shallow water on sedges, grasses, pondweeds, and aquatic insects. The long pointed tail feathers of the male are a diagnostic characteristic.

**Placement** - on a wall and near the floor, or in a position which represents water source.

#### **Belted kingfisher**

A rather small, chunky, compact bird with a short neck and large head. It has an erect crest that seems to reflect its bold character. It is primarily a solitary bird that habitually perches on a watery overlook such as a tree limb or power wire. It feeds on small fish by diving headlong into the water. The Belted kingfisher will excavate a 3-7' horizontal nest in a riverbank.

**Placement** - on something that resembles a perch (i.e. corner of window frame or on some horizontal line structure)

#### **Jay (with crest)**

The Steller's jay and the Blue jay are the only crested jays west of the Rocky Mountains. Typically known for their bold and often vocal behavior in wooded areas and especially around campsites. Can be seen alone or in small groups. These jays are very opportunistic feeders, which will eat seeds, fruit, insects, amphibians, snakes, and even other small birds.

**Placement** - due to its inquisitive nature, can be found in a variety of locations.

#### **American robin**

The American robin is a common bird of forest edges, parks, suburbs, and open areas. They are often seen running over lawns in search of earthworms and insects. They locate their food source by sight rather than sound. Their warbling 'cheerio' song is common in early spring. Their upright posture while perched is somewhat characteristic.

**Placement** - on a perch-type structure such as a window frame, door jam, or above a thermostat.

### **Waxwing spp.**

Waxwings are mostly tree dwelling although they can be found feeding on the ground. They generally live in conifer and birch forest. They are often seen in flocks and remain close together while feeding and traveling, although Bohemian waxwings are known to be more solitary. They eat many kinds of berries and fruit although feed their young almost exclusively on insects. They show a definite crest at the top of their head, and waxwings have a remarkable and showy, wax-like feature on their wing which looks like the drip of a red candle.

**Placement** - on a perch-type structure such as a window frame, door jam, or other structure.

### **American crow**

An extremely opportunistic bird that can be found in a wide range of habitats. It is usually found alone or in small groups although they will congregate in large numbers when moving to a roost site. Crows have been shown to have a high degree of intelligence. They learn quickly, have astonishing memory, and the ability to mimic sounds. They eat a tremendous variety of foods, such as insects, amphibians, reptiles, crustaceans, clams, sea urchins, dead animals, garbage, grain, and fruit. Crows are often seen noisily mobbing hawks and owls.

Note; being a big, black bird, the American crow can often be misidentified as a Common raven, and often the raven can be confused with the crow. You need to become familiar with the Common raven and the American crow, especially if they are both found in your area.

**Placement** - due to its inquisitive nature, the crow can be found in a variety of locations.

### **Common nighthawk**

The Common nighthawk is an insect-eating bird that is most active in the dawn and dusk. It can be recognized by its quick, erratic flight that can be close to the ground or just over the tree tops. Both the male and the female have a white wing bar on the underside of the wing which can be seen if there is enough light. When not in flight, it can be seen on rail fences and posts with closed wings which extend beyond the tip of its tail. This helps to distinguish it from the other members of the Whip-poor-will family of birds.

**Placement** – the ceiling is the best location for placing the Nighthawk silhouette. When present, they can often be observed flying overhead. They can also be placed on an open wall to replicate its low flight (although the perspective relative to the silhouette would be different i.e. observing a low flying Common nighthawk would be similar to looking at the side of an airplane rather than the bottom), or the placement could be high on a higher wall to show its flight over and around the tops of trees.

### **American coot**

An all black duck that is typically found in open water areas, and with other ducks. The American coot will pump its head back and forth when swimming. It is a diving duck that feeds on the aquatic vegetation of the shallow areas.

**Placement** – on a wall and near the floor, around and near other ducks