North American Backyard Birds

Use this key to check answers and read the explanations.

1. An adult male at a feeder is bright red with a pointed crest and black feathers around the bill. Which bird fits?

A. Northern Cardinal
B. American Robin
C. House Finch
D. Scarlet Tanager

Correct answer: A. Northern Cardinal
A male Northern Cardinal combines nearly all-red plumage with a tall crest and a dark mask around the bill.

2. A familiar lawn bird stands upright, then runs and pauses. It has a reddish orange breast and a dark head. Which species fits?

A. Baltimore Oriole
B. Eastern Bluebird
C. American Robin
D. Red-breasted Nuthatch

Correct answer: C. American Robin
American Robins often run and stop while searching on lawns. The orange breast and generally gray-brown upperparts help separate one from the other listed species.

3. A large feeder bird has a blue crest, a white face, and a dark collar. Its wings and tail are patterned blue, black, and white. Which species is it?

A. Steller’s Jay
B. Blue Jay
C. California Scrub-Jay
D. Eastern Bluebird

Correct answer: B. Blue Jay
The Blue Jay combines a blue crest with a pale face and a dark collar. Steller’s Jay has a much darker head and crest.

4. A small bird visiting an eastern North American garden hovers at flowers. In good light, the adult male’s throat shines ruby red. Which bird fits?

A. Tree Swallow
B. Chimney Swift
C. American Goldfinch
D. Ruby-throated Hummingbird

Correct answer: D. Ruby-throated Hummingbird
The Ruby-throated Hummingbird can hover at flowers. In favorable light the adult male shows the red throat for which it is named.

5. A slender gray-brown dove has black spots on its wings and a long pointed tail. Which bird is it?

A. Rock Pigeon
B. Mourning Dove
C. Eurasian Collared-Dove
D. Common Ground Dove

Correct answer: B. Mourning Dove
Mourning Doves have a slim profile, dark wing spots, and a long tapered tail. The Eurasian Collared-Dove has a squarer tail and a dark collar.

6. In summer a small adult male has a bright yellow body, a black forehead, and black wings with white markings. It feeds on seeds in a North American yard. Which species fits?

A. American Goldfinch
B. Pine Siskin
C. Yellow Warbler
D. Evening Grosbeak

Correct answer: A. American Goldfinch
The breeding male American Goldfinch has a yellow body and a small black cap, along with dark wings marked with white.

7. At a Canadian feeder, a tiny bird has a black cap and bib separated by round white cheeks. It lacks the white eyebrow stripe of a Mountain Chickadee. Which bird fits?

A. White-breasted Nuthatch
B. Tufted Titmouse
C. Mountain Chickadee
D. Black-capped Chickadee

Correct answer: D. Black-capped Chickadee
The Black-capped Chickadee has a dark cap and bib and conspicuous white cheeks. A Mountain Chickadee has an additional white stripe above the eye.

8. A compact bird with a white face and breast and a bluish-gray back works headfirst down a tree trunk. Which feeder visitor best matches?

A. Downy Woodpecker
B. Brown Creeper
C. White-breasted Nuthatch
D. Black-capped Chickadee

Correct answer: C. White-breasted Nuthatch
White-breasted Nuthatches often move down trunks headfirst. A Brown Creeper is mottled brown above and usually climbs upward while feeding.

9. A small gray bird with a soft gray crest, a dark patch just above its bill, and rusty color on its flanks comes to an eastern U.S. feeder. Which bird fits?

A. Tufted Titmouse
B. Black-capped Chickadee
C. Cedar Waxwing
D. Blue-headed Vireo

Correct answer: A. Tufted Titmouse
The pointed gray crest, black forehead, and rusty flanks distinguish a Tufted Titmouse.

10. A reddish brown wren has a long white eyebrow and a warm buff underside. It often holds its tail cocked in brush near an eastern U.S. porch. Which species fits?

A. Brown Creeper
B. House Wren
C. Winter Wren
D. Carolina Wren

Correct answer: D. Carolina Wren
Carolina Wrens show a bold pale eyebrow and warm brown upperparts. House Wrens have a much less conspicuous eyebrow.

11. You are choosing between Downy and Hairy Woodpeckers based on a photograph. Which note about the bill supports a Downy Woodpecker identification?

A. A long, strongly downcurved bill
B. A bill about as long as the head
C. A bill markedly shorter than the head is long
D. A bill that widens toward the tip

Correct answer: C. A bill markedly shorter than the head is long
Both species can show similar black-and-white patterns. A Downy Woodpecker’s bill is stubby compared with the proportionally longer bill of a Hairy Woodpecker.

12. A small ground-feeding bird has a pale pink bill, a slate-gray back, and a sharply contrasting white belly. It flashes white outer tail feathers as it flies. Which bird fits?

A. Chipping Sparrow
B. Dark-eyed Junco
C. White-throated Sparrow
D. Song Sparrow

Correct answer: B. Dark-eyed Junco
The slate-colored form of the Dark-eyed Junco has that dark-over-white contrast and a pink bill. The outer tail feathers can flash white in flight.

13. A woodpecker has black spots across a pale underside and a dark crescent on its chest. It often feeds on the ground and flashes a white rump when it takes off. Which identification fits these clues together?

A. Yellow-bellied Sapsucker
B. Red-bellied Woodpecker
C. Hairy Woodpecker
D. Northern Flicker

Correct answer: D. Northern Flicker
Northern Flickers often look for ants on the ground. The spotted belly, dark chest crescent, and white rump distinguish them from the other choices.

14. An adult male finch shows reddish color concentrated on the face and upper breast, with gray-brown streaks down the sides of its pale belly. The observers are comparing House Finch and Purple Finch. What best supports House Finch?

A. The face and upper breast carry the red, while the flanks remain strongly streaked.
B. Raspberry red extends over the back and wings as a broad wash.
C. The sides show a smooth, unmarked wash of color.
D. A white rump flashes during every flight.

Correct answer: A. The face and upper breast carry the red, while the flanks remain strongly streaked.
House Finch males usually concentrate color on the head and upper breast and retain noticeable flank streaks. Purple Finch males often have a more extensive reddish wash.

15. A group of slender brown birds feeds on berries in a shrub. One has a pointed crest, a black mask edged in white, and a yellow band at the tail tip. Which bird matches all three field marks?

A. Northern Cardinal
B. Tufted Titmouse
C. Cedar Waxwing
D. European Starling

Correct answer: C. Cedar Waxwing

Cedar Waxwings are crest-headed fruit eaters with a face mask and a yellow tail tip. The combination of crest, mask, and tail pattern is useful even when the red wing tips are hard to see.