

Bird Doppelgangers

By Cindy Murray

I've been seeking out, identifying, and photographing wild birds for over fifteen years, but I'm not particularly adept at any one of these endeavors. That's part of what makes "birding" fun as well as adventurous. Distinguishing one lookalike, or doppelganger, bird from another is, decidedly, an adventure. Here, I will examine some distinctive traits between several bird doppelgangers residing in Northern Arizona.

I'll start with an easy one, although at first, it wasn't easy for me—doppelgangers lesser goldfinches and American goldfinches. At 5" in length American goldfinches are a tad larger than lesser goldfinches, which are 4.5". During breeding season male American goldfinches sport a bright yellow back and belly with highly contrasting black wings and a black cap on the forehead only. Females lack the cap and are duller overall. Both sexes bear white feathers beneath the tail (under tail coverts). On the other hand, lesser goldfinch males typically sport an olive green back and a complete black cap. Female lesser goldfinches lack the cap. Both males and females have yellow under tail coverts.



Male and female pine siskins feature yellow colorations on the wings and tail, which may not be consistently apparent.

Doppelgangers house finches and pine siskins are gregarious and swathed in streaks of black, brown, and gray. The former are stocky and about 5.7" long, while the latter are slender and 5" long. Both may reside here year-round, but siskins are nomadic and sporadic. Male house finches feature reddish breasts, rumps, and heads, while the females lack red accents. In contrast, male and female siskins feature yellow colorations on the wings and tail, which may not be consistently apparent.

Like other members of the Icterid family, brown-headed cowbirds and Brewer's blackbirds bear long, heavy bills and long tails. In poor lighting, male cowbirds and blackbirds may appear identically black, but in

reality, male cowbirds have brown heads, while male blackbirds flaunt a purple sheen on their head and green on the body. Female cowbirds are dull brown, with a beige throat and finely streaked belly, whereas female blackbirds are grayish brown overall.



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My two favorite doppelgangers are male western bluebirds (the Thrush family), and lazuli buntings (the Cardinal family), and I am spellbound when I spy small flocks of either one. Males of both species showcase a brilliant blue head set off with a rufous breast, but the bluebird has a deep blue head, while the lazuli bunting has an aqua blue one. The bunting also displays white wing bars.

Perhaps because I'm not skillful in judging birds' sizes from a distance, it took me quite some time to learn to discern crows from ravens, both members of the Corvid family. Ravens reach a whopping length of 24", while crows top out at 17.5." One tell-tale factor for me is their beaks—raven bills are long, heavy, and encircled with wispy feathers above a shaggy throat, and crows sport a less-heavy bill with smooth feathers. In flight, ravens exhibit a wedge-shaped tail, and crows a fan-shaped one.



Pinyon jays, other than a grayish-streaked throat, are blue overall.

The best way to single-out scrub jays from pinyon jays is through their markedly unique behaviors. Scrub jays tend to stay in pairs or with their immediate families and are not nomadic—the same pair of scrub jays has remained on our property for years. In comparison, pinyon jays travel far and wide in large flocks in a riotous clamor of various calls and shrieks in search of pinyon nuts or other food sources. Male and female scrub jays display streaked white throats and grayish white bellies, whereas pinyon jays, other than a grayish-streaked throat, are blue overall. Both species will readily partake of sunflower seeds and peanuts offered in a feeder.

Even though sharp-shinned hawks are 11” long, and Cooper’s hawks are 16.5” long, I have difficulty discerning one of these doppelgangers from the other. The most reliable distinguishing feature for me is their tails, and the birds must be perched for me to identify them. Both hawk tails exhibit wide grayish-beige and deep brown bands, but Coopers’ tails are longer and rounded at the end, while sharp-shinned tails are squared off.

There are plenty of bird doppelgangers in Northern Arizona, which can at times, be exasperating. But upon reflection, I regard birding as a life-long expedition, where there will always be a new bird to be identified just around the corner and often, in my own backyard.