

PETE'S TIPS: Look-alike species? Try NOT using your \$1,600 binoculars

You're not going to want to read this. Now that you've listened to the experts; now that you're the owner of one of the hot new budget-busting Alpha birding binoculars. But the fact is, sometimes, binoculars can show too much detail. In the case of some very similar and hard-to-distinguish species, it may be easier to pin names to birds by giving your binoculars a rest and just using your eyes (and your brain).

Take Sharp-shinned and Cooper's Hawks flapping and gliding overhead. If you use binoculars, you are compelled to note characteristics like the terminal band of the tail (broad, crisp, and white on Cooper's, narrow and less sharply defined on Sharp-shinned), or, on young birds, the amount and pattern of streaking on the breast (thick and heavy on Sharp-shinned, narrow and sparse on Cooper's).

Yep. These characteristics help distinguish the two species, all right. But try looking at the overall shape without your binoculars, first.

Sharp-shinned have small heads that disappear within the jutting wrist of the leading edge of the broad, blunt wing, making high-flying birds appear headless. In combination with the long, narrow tail, the overall shape suggests a flying wooden mallet.

Cooper's Hawks have large heads that project ahead of the straight-cut leading edge of the wings (wings that are generally longer and more evenly tapered than a Sharp-shinned's). In combination with the long, narrow tail, the net impression of a Cooper's Hawk in flight is of a flying crucifix or Roman cross.

Flying mallet, Sharp-shinned. Flying cross, Cooper's. Try it.

Here's another example. Common and Forster's Terns are similar in size and somewhat similar in shape. Common Terns' wings are uniformly gray above (with blackish tips). Forster's Terns' upperwings are two-toned: pale gray on the arm, frosty white along the hand. With binoculars, the two-toned upperwing pattern often melds or blends. Without binoculars, the contrast tightens, and the difference between gray and frosty is more apparent.

Even more fundamental and often more apparent than this is the fact that in spring and summer, in addition to having grayish upperwings, adult Common Terns are slightly grayish below (just the cheeks are white); Forster's Terns are white below. In a mixed flock, even at half a mile or more, it is easy to separate Forster's from Common. The darker birds are Common, the whitish ones are Forster's.

Arctic? Generally well offshore (beyond sight of land), but overall sligher than Common and Forster's (with a petite bill and uniform upperwings the color of a mirror). Roseate? Overall slender and pallid with a dark leading edge to the hand; quick-stroking, shortish and deeply bowed wings; and a long, streamer tail that flutters like a flagellum. If you see a slender, pallid tern whose flight reminds you of a tropicbird, think Roseate.

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Yesterday's News

ABA birders have been present at the creation of many things we now take for granted:

"[Swainson's Warbler] may respond to a 'whish' by hopping up to a low branch." (Clark Olson, in *Birding* Vol. 3, no. 3)

We call it "pishing" now, of course. Another early ABA member was even there to witness the birth of chum:

"While I don't approve of waste being thrown from ships, if this consists only of food scraps these are quickly picked up by the birds, a great many of the pelagics being to some extent scavengers. Scraps (as far as I could note not cans, etc.) were tossed from the *Erickson*. The *Carson* put all similar material in garbage bins on deck.... when the *Carson* met the *Erickson* mid-ocean, the few gulls that had been with [the *Carson*] left us to join those following the *Erickson*." (Margaret Hundley, in *Birding* Vol. 3, no. 3)

It seems that some birders thirty-five years ago were willing to take even more active measures to 'get the bird':

"It is, of course, standard practice to carry equipment

which permits one to observe birds more easily. Such equipment might include firecrackers for tossing into a marsh to disturb some birds, a rope to drag through the grass to flush a Black Rail, and flashlights to observe birds at nighttime sitting on their nests." (*Birding* Vol. 3, no. 2)

The main thing, apparently, is not to get discouraged:

"The birder should not be deceived into believing that the Yellow Rail is an automatic bird at the airport.... Walking through the fields does no good, and even a bird dog might be of no use. There is also a 'No Trespassing' sign which might discourage many of the less enthusiastic birders." (*Birding* Vol. 3, no. 1)

Fortunately, every action elicits an opposite and equal reaction:

"I think there should be a code of ethics drawn up for birders." (Mrs. Nellie A. Sulton, in *Birding* Vol. 3, no. 1)

Read it on line at www.americanbirding.org/abaethics.htm.