

# What's that bird? Check your smart phone

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The Cornell Lab of Ornithology has released a free iPhone app to help people identify 285 birds in North America. Created with support from the National Science Foundation, the app asks just five questions, then displays photos of birds that match your description—customized to your location and time of year.

"We named the [app](#) 'Merlin' because of its uncanny, almost magical, way of guessing which bird you saw," says the Cornell Lab of Ornithology's Jessie Barry, whose team created the app with partner Birds in the Hand.

Barry says that, far from magic, Merlin uses data from citizen-science participants and [bird watchers](#) to understand how people see and describe [birds](#)—and to narrow the list to the birds found nearby.

The app is the first to use data from the eBird citizen-science project to dynamically select the birds found within about a 30-mile radius of your location at the time when you saw the bird.

"This type of precision is only possible because bird watchers report their sightings to eBird from locations across North America every day of the year," Barry said. Merlin draws upon 70 million eBird sightings to calculate which species you're most likely to encounter.

Additionally, bird watchers "trained" Merlin to understand how people see and describe birds. By participating in online activities to describe birds based on photos, they contributed more than three million data points that Merlin uses to deduce which birds are viewed based on people's description of color, size, and behavior.

The app records your response when you confirm the bird you saw, enabling researchers to identify successful interactions and improve Merlin's performance over time. It also displays photos, ID tips, sounds, and range maps for each species.

The Merlin Bird ID [app](#) can now be downloaded

The Cornell Lab plans to release Merlin for Android and online use in the coming months, and to continue adding more species. Merlin is made possible with support from the National Science Foundation, Pennington™ Wild Bird Food, and friends and members of the Cornell Lab of Ornithology. The Cornell Lab is a nonprofit organization with the mission to improve the understanding and protection of birds.

Provided by Cornell University

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