

## Using Field Guides

- Field guides are arranged in a variety of formats. Become familiar with the guide you are using. Read the section on how to use the guide.
- Learn the vocabulary used to describe specimens. Field guides often have a glossary.
- Learn to use the range maps. You can often narrow the list of possible species when trying to identify a specimen by using the maps. Use caution as the maps may be accurate only on a large scale or you may be looking at a specimen that has not been recorded in your area before. Also consider that an animal might have been released in an area it would not normally inhabit.
- Observe the habitat an animal is found in. This is often a clue to its identity.
- Many individual animals will differ in appearance from the example in the guide. Concentrate on identifying features.
- Which guide to use? The popular guides on the market all have their strong points. Choose the guide you are most comfortable with. Naturalists often have lively discussions over “brand” loyalty.
- Photos or drawings? Many biologists feel that drawings better depict identifying characteristics.
- It is often helpful to compare the entries in more than one guide.
- Different skills and observations are used to identify different groups of animals. For example:

**Birds** – size, body shape, wing design, bills, tails, behavior, flight pattern, songs or calls

**Mammals** – tracks, skulls, dental formula, antlers or horns

**Turtles** – arrangement of scutes that make up the shell

**Snakes** – arrangement of scales, anal plate, shape of the head, taper of the tail, shape of the eye pupil