

# A Summary of the Field Identification and Natural History of the Nonbirds (Absurdiformes)

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Somewhere between the Passeriformes and the Anseriformes lies a little-known order dubbed Absurdiformes. Despite being a fairly large order, it has been overlooked by most ornithologists. However, birders of all skill levels have seen at least one or more species in the group, and there is the potential for many new discoveries to be made about this order. This paper will highlight several members of this unique and varied group.

The Great White Grocery Bag is unfortunately one of the most abundant Absurdiformes. It is an introduced and invasive species that favors marshes, fields, and barbed-wire fences, especially near human activity. At first glance it might be mistaken for a Great Egret, Snowy Egret, or other similar birds. It can be distinguished by its lack of regular stalking movements, its amorphous shape, and at close range, the distinctly plastic, crinkling call. Tan and blue morphs are seldom seen due to their duller colors. Subspecific identification to store of origin must be made in the hand with a careful examination of plumage labeling, after which the specimen should be disposed of or recycled. Other members of the Basuridae family are also universally disliked because of their unsightly plumage and persistence in the environment. These include the Bobbing-tailed Styrofoam-Cup and the Floating Soda Bottle.



Figure 1, Oak Gnarl species. Photo by Claire Curry, January 16, 2000. Wise County, Texas.

Members of the Arbolidae family are frequently sighted when birders are searching for owls. The most commonly sighted groups are Gnarlts (Figure 1), Bumps, and Notabird-Knotholes. To identify the species, identify the tree in which the arbolid is perched. For example, the Blackjack Oak Gnarl is only found in blackjack oaks, the Hackberry Bump only visits hackberries, and the Post Oak Notabird-Knothole only frequents post oaks. Their tendency to sit still for long periods of time makes them a candidate for confusion with owls. Unlike owls, the arbolids generally lack feathers and never blink.

The Decoy Ducks (Lackaquackidae) are a truly difficult identification challenge. Each species corresponds to a counterpart in the real duck family (Anatidae). Their plumage and habitats greatly resemble that of their equivalents. Unlike the real ducks, Decoy Ducks do not dive or dabble, and indeed, seem to do nothing but float and confound innocent birders.

Another aquatic group, Aquapokeupidae, is sometimes lumped with Arbolidae. Those who choose that classification feel that aquapokeupids are merely arbolids going for a swim. However, the author feels that the aquapokeupids, or fowl-humored sticks,

deserve their own family by virtue of moving occasionally. No species from this family have been officially described yet, but identification to the group is quite feasible. Fowl-humored sticks sail over the water in a variety of poses, imitating ducks and grebes. While feeding, they will sometimes dive into the water and leave only their tail ends in the air, also creating confusion with shorebirds. The fowl-humored sticks' irregular shape and generally stiff posture will usually separate them from normal birds. Their frequent movements and aquatic habitat distinguish them from the arbolids.

Two nonbird species in the Semiovidae (Egg Blobs) family go through life disguised as eggs. Fungus amongus and its close relative Ova faka often cause concerned birders and nature-lovers to stop in their tracks and wonder, "Why's this egg in the path?" The Egg Blobs use their egg-like plumage in the same way that the Zone-tailed Hawk imitates the harmless Turkey Vulture. The semiovid stakes out a spot in the grass and waits for hapless Stupid Leafbirds (see below) to fall from the trees. Since the Stupid Leafbirds rarely land on an Egg Blob, the semiovids are hungry most of the time and try to conserve energy by not moving. To differentiate between semiovids and orphaned eggs, note the Egg Blobs' habit of attaching to the grass, their sometimes asymmetrical shapes, and their overall squishiness.

While searching for warblers and other arboreal delights, birders will commonly exclaim "Stupid leaf! I thought it was a bird for a second," and then continue in their search for parulids. However, the much-overlooked Stupid Leaf family (Idiocidae) is quite interesting in its own right and deserves more study. Separation from the regular birds can be quite difficult and many times relies on fortunate bursts of wind. Squirrels' leafy nests can be misidentified as roosting flocks of Stupid Leafbirds. However, Stupid Leafbirds roost and migrate singly, hiding in treetops to evade their predators. This strategy does have a downside. Stupid Leafbirds are occasionally mistaken for leaves and attacked by ravenous grasshoppers.

The most advanced family of the nonbird order is Techatheneidae. The satellite owls are stealthy, common, and seem to be increasing in abundance. Their similarity to satellite dishes in both shape and habitat leads many birders to overlook them. Satellite owls are known for their hunger for knowledge. They often position themselves to receive the latest information on their prey's movements. Stupid Leafbirds are a favorite food, but are rarely caught. This is doubtless due to the problem of maintaining "a clear view of the southern sky" in order to keep receiving updates on the leafbirds' migratory habits. Satellite owls may consist of several species, but taxonomists have not yet gathered the nerve to peer through binoculars at other people's houses to study the satellite owls' markings. Satellite owls are most often spotted at dawn or dusk and may be distinguished from regular owls by their round shape at most angles.

In conclusion, the rather neglected Absurdiformes are an exciting and diverse order. Their fascinating habits deserve more study and consideration from birders and ornithologists alike.

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