A Practical Challenge for Atlasers: Identifying Juvenile Birds
Ageing sequence for birds:

After hatching, a young bird’s first plumage is called “natal down”.

**Prejuvenal (or postnatal) molt**

*Juvenile* (or *juvenal*) plumage – typically acquired while in the nest (except precocial spp).

This plumage includes body, wings and tail feathers.

Held for a **short period of time** – on natal/breeding grounds.

**Prebasic I molt**

*Basic I* (winter) plumage – typically held during first fall and winter.

Body feathers only – wing and tail feathers are retained (for about a year).

**Prealternate I molt**

First Alternate (breeding) plumage (typically held until mid/late summer).

**Complete molt**

*Basic II* or *Definitive Basic* (winter) plumage
American Robin plumages
(examples – not true colors)
“Immature” plumages

• Term is very broad/inclusive
• Basically can include every plumage from fledgling up until they become full adult
• In some cases the term “immature” might just apply for the first year (or months):

• In other birds like gulls or eagles the “immature” term might apply for several years:
First plumage - natal down

Indigo Bunting – new nestlings
Eastern Phoebe – nestlings
“nestling” (either in downy or juvenile plumage)
Juvenile plumage
“fledgling” (typically juvenile plumage)
Eastern Phoebe – nestlings
Eastern Phoebe – juvenile
Eastern Phoebe – juvenile
Eastern Phoebe – first basic (fall/winter)
Chipping Sparrow – juvenile
Chipping Sparrow – first basic (fall/winter) plumage
Song Sparrow – juvenile and adult
Song Sparrow – juvenile
Swamp Sparrow
Swamp Sparrow – juvenile
Henslow’s Sparrow juvenile
Henslow’s Sparrow juvenile
Yellow-rumped Warbler - juvenile
Yellow-rumped Warbler - juvenile
Yellow-rumped Warbler - first basic (fall/winter)
Common Yellowthroat – juvenile
Common Yellowthroat – juvenile
Common Yellowthroat – molting from juvenile to first basic
Common Yellowthroat – molting juvenile to first basic (fall/winter)
American Redstart – juvenile
American Redstart – juvenile
American Redstart – first basic (fall/winter)
Ovenbird - juvenile
Ovenbird – juvenile
Ovenbird – juvenile
Only one warbler with white tail spots across center of tail – Magnolia
Magnolia Warbler – first basic (fall/winter)
Canada Warbler – juvenile
Palm Warbler – juvenile
Palm Warbler – first basic (fall/winter)
Only one warbler has extensive yellow tail spots – Yellow Warbler
Yellow Warbler – juvenile
Yellow Warbler – juvenile
Yellow Warbler – first basic (fall/winter)
Rose-breasted Grosbeak – juvenile
Rose-breasted Grosbeak – first basic (fall/winter)
Rose-breasted Grosbeak – immature male (left) & female (right)
Pine Siskin – juvenile

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Barn Swallow – juvenile
Horned Lark – juvenile
Some juveniles are fairly straightforward – color patterns are very much like adults
House Wren – juvenile
House Wren – juvenile
Black-capped Chickadee – juvenile
Gray Catbird – juvenile
Cedar Waxwing – juvenile
Cedar Waxwing – juvenile
Eastern Kingbird – juvenile
Brown Thrasher – juvenile
Eastern Bluebird – juvenile
Wood Thrush – juvenile
Blue Jay – juvenile
American Crow – juvenile
Red-winged Blackbird – juvenile
Northern Cardinal – juvenile
Great Crested Flycatcher – juvenile
Baltimore Oriole – juvenile
Downy Woodpecker – juvenile male
Downy Woodpecker – juvenile female
Great Horned Owl – juvenile
Precocial birds – attain downy plumage while in egg

Killdeer hatchling – downy young, attains juvenile plumage by about 17 days
Wild Turkey – hatchlings
Wild Turkey – fledgling  (young roost in trees by 2 weeks)
Wood Duck brood with female
Sandhill Crane baby with parents
Chipping Sparrow – juvenile
Nashville Warbler

Ryan Brady
Ryan Brady

American Redstart
Brown-headed Cowbird – juvenile
Brown-headed Cowbird with foster parent Yellow Warbler
Brown-headed Cowbird with foster parent Chipping Sparrow
Black-billed Cuckoo – juvenile with adult
Black-billed Cuckoo – juvenile
Black-billed Cuckoo – immature
Yellow-billed Cuckoo - juvenile
Yellow-billed Cuckoo – immature
So, the bottom line is...
if you see a juvenile bird that you don’t recognize, be very **patient** and wait and watch it for a while. **One of its parents will likely come to feed it before long!**
Applicable codes from the WBBA II handbook:

**FL**  **Recently Fledged Young:** Recently fledged young or downy young. This includes dependent young only. Be cautious of species that range widely soon after fledgling. One of the best features to look for is the length of the tail feathers – if shorter than the adults, the young probably originated locally. Young cowbirds begging for food confirm both the cowbird and the host species.

**FY**  **Feeding Young:** Adult bird feeding recently fledged young that are not yet independent. This code should not be used for species that may move many miles from the nest site, such as raptors and terns.

Obviously, the use of these codes is a judgment call.

**Look for clues of immaturity such as:**
- Tufts of down anywhere on the body.
- Short tail feathers – not yet fully grown.
- Not yet capable of strong flight.
- Appearance of loose or fluffy plumage.
- Streaks on underparts that may not be present later = juvenile.
Questions or comments?