

The Major Scale

A **scale** is a pattern of **whole steps** (two frets) and **half steps** (one fret)

The pattern for a major scale is **W W H W W W H**

Guitar

C Whole D Whole E Half F Whole G Whole A Whole B Half C

Guitar

T A B 3 0 2 3 0 2 0 1 Whole Whole Half Whole Whole Whole Half

This pattern remains the same in any key. When you begin this same pattern on G instead of C, the F must be made into an F# in order to keep the pattern of whole steps and half steps the same.

G Whole A Whole B Half C Whole D Whole E Whole F# Half G

T A B 0 2 0 1 3 0 2 3

Each major scale has a different number of sharps or flats: The C major scale has no sharps or flats, and G major has one sharp. G is a fifth (an interval equal to the distance of seven half steps) above C.

Intervals like fifths are figured out from the chromatic scale (A A# B C C# D D# E F F# G G# A)

C 1 C# 2 D 3 D# 4 E 5 F 6 F# 7 G

T A B 1 2 3 4 0 1 2 3

Remember that a **fifth** is equal to **7 half steps**.

If we continue to go another fifth above G (G#, A, A#, B, C, C#, D equals 7 half steps) we arrive at the key of D, which will now have an F# (just like G) and a C# in the scale.

D whole E whole F# half G whole A whole B whole C# half D

T
A
B 0 2 4 0 2 0 2 3

As we continue to go up in fifths, we add one more sharp each time to our scale or **key signature**. A fifth up from D will take us to A, which now will have three sharps being F#, C#, and G#. Remember that the pattern of whole steps and half steps is the same for all of these scales (W W H W W W H)

T
A
B 0 2 4 0 2 4 1 2

There are several important things to notice as you learn scales. Eventually you will probably memorize the sharps that belong in each key signature and won't have to think about it. For now, notice that as we continue around the **Circle of Fifths**, we keep the sharps that were in the previous key signature, and add another sharp that is a half step lower than whatever scale we are constructing. For example, a fifth up from A takes us to the key of E major, which will have four sharps (F#, C#, G#, D#)

T
A
B 2 4 1 2 0 2 4 0

Just like the A major scale, the E major scale has a F#, C#, and G#, but it also has one more sharp, 3 D#, which is a half step lower than the tonic, in this case E. It is also worth noting that not only are the keys related by fifths (C to G to D to A to E are all a fifth apart), but so are all of the sharps we're adding as we go along (F to C to G to D are a fifth apart as well).

B major, our next key, will have five sharps, which will be all of the previous sharps plus a sharp a half step lower than B, which will be an A#, giving the scale the five sharps F#, C#, G#, D# and A#. It is worth noting at this point that a capo makes most of this dramatically easier. Bluegrass guitarists like to play mostly the keys of G, C, D or E, and in order to play in A or Bb or B generally just move their capo to the proper fret. It is good to understand the concept of how to construct scales, though.

This is about as far as bluegrassers really need to go in the Circle of Fifths. B is a challenging enough key to play in for most instrumentalists (with five sharps to keep track of), and the other two sharp keys are very hard to play in and are extremely uncommon in bluegrass. However, if you are interested, the next key a fifth above B is F#, with six sharps in the scale.

The end of the road in the sharps side of the Circle of Fifths is C sharp. Now every note of our original sea of C D E F G A B C, which had no sharps, has been made into a sharp. Without a capo, this is awkward on most instruments and for that reason is generally avoided in the world of bluegrass.