



Familiar Migratory Songbirds

Migratory birds nest in one place and winter in another and may travel from a few hundred to thousands of miles in between. Most of our more familiar

migratory songbirds nest in the U.S. and winter in the tropics. However, some, such as the dark-eyed junco and white-throated sparrow, nest in northern Alaska and

Canada and winter in the contiguous U.S. Following are some interesting facts about a few of our most familiar migratory songbirds:

American robin (*Turdus migratorius*)

Perhaps one of the most familiar migratory birds, the American robin is widely considered a harbinger of spring. It is found throughout North America and was chosen as the state bird of Connecticut (1943), Michigan (1931), and Wisconsin (1926). This woodland species that has adapted readily to the urban environment got its name from homesick colonists who thought it resembled their beloved little robins of England. The American robin, however, is not closely related to the European robin. Rather, it is a member of the thrush family, which includes such species as the hermit thrush, wood thrush, and Eastern bluebird. The American robin winters from the far southern U.S. to Guatemala. It migrates

following the “37° line,” moving farther north as average daily temperatures reach 37 degrees Fahrenheit, until they arrive at their breeding grounds. They leave those areas for the winter when average daily temperatures fall below 37 degrees. The sight of robins hopping around urban and suburban yards and parks with their heads cocked to one side led many to believe that they were listening for worms. However, researchers have found that they are actually looking for their prey, which includes worms, grubs, beetles, grasshoppers, ants, and termites. They also eat fruit such as junberries, grapes, mistletoe berries, chinaberries, and pokeberries.



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American goldfinch (*Carduelis tristis*)

The diminutive American goldfinch is a common sight at backyard bird feeders, particularly when thistle and sunflower seed are offered. Sometimes called wild canaries or yellowbirds, American goldfinches are found throughout North America. The bright yellow males and olive females spend most of the year in large mixed flocks. They nest later than most songbirds, usually waiting until July or August (although in California, they may nest as early as April) when there is an abundance of thistle and other wildflower seeds to feed their young. These gregarious little birds were chosen the state bird for Iowa (1933), New Jersey (1935), and Washington (1951). The nest, which is made entirely of plant fibers and is

so thick-walled it will hold water, is built anywhere from within a foot of the ground in brushy areas to 60 feet up. Goldfinches are members of the large and varied finch family, which includes such species as buntings, towhees, cardinals, native sparrows, and grosbeaks.

Ruby-throated hummingbird

(*Archilocus colubris*)

The most widespread of all the North American hummingbirds, the ruby-throat is the only one found east of the Mississippi River. With its emerald-green head, back, wings, and tail; pearl-white underparts; and ruby-red (white – female) throat patch, it is one of our most beautiful hummingbirds. These tiny jewels can be attracted to suburban homes by planting their favorite flowers (salvia, bee balm, nasturtiums, phlox, lilies, petunias, and columbines) and by offering clear sugar water in specially designed feeders. They also eat insects and tree sap. In fact, while wintering in Mexico and Costa Rica, they may depend entirely on insects in the absence of blooming flowers. Ruby-throated hummingbirds are strong fliers capable of crossing hundreds of miles of open water, notably the Gulf of Mexico, without stopping. They have been clocked at speeds as high as 60 mph, although 27-30 is more common. Their wings beat an incredible 75 strokes per second. Ruby-throats are quite fearless and, although they sometimes lose, they will attack kingbirds, crows, and even eagles encountered crossing their territory. They will also tangle with bumblebees over feeding rights at certain flowers.



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Eastern bluebird

(*Sialia sialis*)

An old tradition says that those having bluebirds nesting on their property will be blessed with good fortune. In song, story, and proverb, bluebirds are celebrated as bringers of happiness. These small members of the thrush family prefer open country such as farms, cut-over woods, parks, and orchards. Eastern bluebirds like to sit on the ends of tree branches, fence posts, utility wires, and even flagpoles watching for insects such as grasshoppers, crickets, and katydids to jump in the grass below. They will then flutter down to catch them. Bluebirds also eat earthworms, spiders, sow bugs, millipedes, occasionally small frogs and lizards, and fruits such as red cedar berries, blackberries, grapes, and pokeberries. They nest in natural tree cavities, old woodpecker holes, or holes in stumps and rail fences. Bluebirds are listed as threatened in some states primarily because of nest-site competition from starlings and house sparrows. However their numbers are improving thanks to the development of “bluebird trails” consisting of nest boxes spaced about 100 yards apart and monitored against use by undesirable species. Eastern bluebirds nest from southern Saskatchewan to Nova Scotia and south to Florida, Texas, Nicaragua, and Bermuda. They winter from the middle



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section of their breeding range into Mexico. Some segments of the population may occasionally fall victim to heavy snowfall and freezing temperatures. The Eastern

bluebird is the state bird of Missouri (1927) and New York (1970); a western relative, the all-blue mountain bluebird, was chosen state bird of Idaho (1931) and Nevada (1967).

Barn swallow

(*Hirundo rustica*)

The barn swallow is our most abundant and most easily recognized swallow. These small blue-black birds with tan bellies, chestnut throats and foreheads, and deeply forked tails do everything in groups: migrating, feeding, nesting, resting. They are frequently seen swooping over and under bridges or across a field. Barn swallows get their name from their habit of locating their nesting colonies in barns, but they can also be found nesting under bridges and boat docks, in the eaves of old houses, and in rock caves or crevices. They've even been known to nest on slow-moving trains or boats. Their diet consists entirely of insects caught "on the fly" and includes grasshoppers, dragonflies, beetles, and codling moths. They can often be seen following farmers plowing fields, catching the insects that are stirred up. They drink and bathe by skimming the surface of a pond, stream, or lake. Barn swallows are found throughout the western hemisphere, nesting from Alaska east to Newfoundland and south to central Mexico and wintering from Panama to Argentina.



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Gray catbird

(*Dumetella carolinensis*)

The plaintive cry coming from the bushes sounds like a kitten lost or hurt. Investigation, however, reveals nothing.

The call comes again but from a different location, maybe higher up or farther away. Patience and sharp eyes finally reveal



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not a kitten but a bird about the size of a mockingbird, darker gray with a black cap and lacking the white wing and tail patches. This is the gray catbird, a member of the mockingbird family. It is most often found in thickets, tangled vines, and small bushy trees near streams, roadsides, and marshy areas, but is increasingly common in garden shrubs and hedges. Catbirds feed mainly on insects, including grasshoppers, crickets, ants, and aphids. Special favorites include Japanese beetles and June bugs. They also like many kinds of wild and cultivated grapes and berries. They will come to birdfeeders for peanuts, cheese, raisins, bread, crackers, and cornflakes. Catbirds nest throughout southern Canada and the continental U.S. They winter from southeastern Virginia to Florida, the U.S. Gulf Coast, through eastern Mexico to Panama and the West Indies. As befits mockingbird relatives, the gray catbird is a capable mimic. They have been known to imitate a chicken's squawk, many songbirds, the peep of a tree frog and that of a young chick, and a kingfisher's rattle, as well as the calls of hawks, quail, jays, and whip-poor-wills.

Dark-eyed junco (*Junco hyemalis*)

One of our most numerous winter visitors, the dark-eyed junco is the “snowbird” of song and story. It spends its whole life in

North America, nesting and breeding from the far northern tree lines of Alaska and Canada south to Wisconsin,

Connecticut, and Massachusetts and wintering throughout the U.S. to northern Florida, southeastern Texas, Baja California, and northern Mexico. Females tend to winter farther south than males, reducing competition for food. Breeding populations are also found in the Appalachian Mountains as far south as northeastern Georgia. They build their nests close to or on the ground, well-hidden in brush, under stumps, in tree-root cavities, or under an overhanging stream bank. The male helps gather materials but most of the actual nest-building is done by the female. Their summer diet consists mainly of insects, including beetles, grasshoppers, ants, and wasps, as well as some berries. In winter, they eat mainly seeds that have fallen to the ground. They come readily to suburban bird feeders to scratch up the seeds that other birds drop.



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White-throated sparrow (*Zonotrichia albicollis*)

With its white throat, black-and-white or brown-and-tan striped crown, and yellow spots between eye and bill, this secretive little sparrow is an easily recognized, though not abundant, winter visitor. It is usually found in brush piles; hedgerows; cattail marshes; and the shrubbery of the yards, gardens, and parks of residential areas. It will come to residential bird feeders for seed scattered on the ground either accidentally by other birds or intentionally by the homeowner. Other favored foods include “weed” seeds; dogwood, cedar, and juniper berries; ants, beetles, flies, and other insects; and maple, oak, and apple tree buds. Like the dark-eyed junco, the white-throated sparrow spends its whole life in North America. It nests mainly from the northern

states to northern Ontario, Manitoba, and Newfoundland and winters throughout the eastern and central U.S. from Maine south to Florida and west to central Texas and Oklahoma. The white-throated sparrow is a sweet singer that has sometimes been called a nightingale. One of its songs is sometimes translated “Old Sam Peabody, Peabody, Peabody,” giving rise to another of its nicknames: the Peabody bird.



FWS art: Louis Agassiz Fuertes