



**IN YOUR
BACK
YARD**

A guide to spotting common (and some uncommon)
birds in your neighborhood and beyond.

SWCA





COMMON SPECIES

MOST LIKELY FOUND IN YOUR BACKYARD AND NEIGHBORHOOD

THERE'S NEVER BEEN A BETTER TIME TO GET TO KNOW THE BIRDS THAT VISIT YOUR WINDOW, BACKYARD, AND NEIGHBORHOOD.

Even when we can't venture far from home, birds come to us! Anyone at any age can become an expert backyard birder. To help you get started, SWCA's natural resource experts compiled this guide to birds in your region. We've included various species from common to not so common, so that you can build your bird detective skills over time. Grab your camera or binoculars and start watching.

Check off any species you find, and let us know how you did at BackyardBirds@swca.com!



CHECK IF SPOTTED!

BLACK-CAPPED CHICKADEE

The State Bird of both Maine and Massachusetts, Chickadees are small with a distinctive white cheek set between a pitch black cap and throat. Usually seen flitting about the mid-levels of trees, where they move from branch to branch looking for insects to eat, sometimes even hanging upside down while they inspect a leaf cluster. Often in family groups and will travel with Tufted Titmice. Namesake call is "chick-a-dee-dee-dee" and make little squeaks. Will visit bird feeders and nest in birdhouses. In some park settings they have been hand fed and look for handouts!



HABITAT:

Neighborhoods, parks, and woodlands.

TUFTED TITMOUSE



A small gray bird with a pointy crest, black forehead, and a beady black eye, Tufted Titmice usually occur in small groups and often in the company of Black-capped Chickadees. Often in the mid-levels of trees, the birds are active and call frequently. They sing "peter, peter, peter" and make a scolding "whah, whah, whah" call. Will visit bird feeders for sunflower seeds and nest in birdhouses.

HABITAT:

Neighborhoods, parks, and woodlands.

AMERICAN ROBIN

The State Bird of Connecticut and at home in a tree or on a lawn, the American Robin is known for its rusty orange breast and pleasant clear, whistling song that sounds like "cheery, cheer-up, cheer-io." They also make a chicken-like "tut, tut, tut" call. They eat worms, bugs, and fruit and so do not usually visit feeders, but will happily build a nest in a sheltered place on a house, like under an eave.



HABITAT:

Neighborhoods, gardens, parks, and woodlands.



EASTERN BLUEBIRD

The State Bird of New York, Bluebirds are often seen on fences and power lines along streets. They can also be seen in back yards, particularly if you have feeders where you provide mealworms. The male is a deep blue with a rusty throat and breast. The female is greyish above with blue wings. Bluebirds will easily nest in a box, and if you have enough open area in your yard, consider putting up a nest box.

HABITAT:

Open areas, meadows, golf courses, and parks.

BLUE JAY

A familiar bird, Blue Jays make a variety of raucous shrieks and cries, also squeaky calls and impressive imitations of hawks. May be alone or in groups, often very active. Will band together to harass an owl, snake, or cat, so if a gang of Blue Jays is persistently complaining outside your window, see if you can find the source of their displeasure!

HABITAT:

Wooded neighborhoods, parks, and woodlands.



NORTHERN CARDINAL

Needing no introduction, the bright red male Northern Cardinal is readily identified by its pointy crest and black face. The female has that same pointy crest, but is browner and tinged with red in the wings and tail. Both males and females will sing, with the song a bright "what cheer, cheer, cheer" sometimes followed by a "whoit, whoit, whoit" or "chewy, chewy, chewy." Will readily visit birdfeeders, but does not nest in birdhouses.

HABITAT:

Neighborhoods, gardens, parks, and woodlands.



MALE
CARDINAL



FEMALE
CARDINAL

GRAY CATBIRD

Gray Catbirds are a summer breeding bird in the north-east, migrating in the winter to points in the southern U.S. As their name suggests, they are gray with a black cap and rusty undertail and can often be heard making a catlike mewing call. Catbirds are common in yards and early in spring can be enticed to a feeder by providing grape jam and fruit.

HABITAT:

Backyard gardens, parks, and areas of brush dense low growth.



WHITE-BREASTED NUTHATCH

An agile bird often seen moving upside down on tree trunks and branches, looking for insects. They will also take advantage of feeding stations, looking for sunflower seeds that they often hide in tree crevices during the fall and winter. They have a black cap, white breast and black and gray wings.

HABITAT:

Mixed forests, backyards, parks and roadsides. Similar species is the Red-breasted Nuthatch.



DOWNY WOODPECKER

A small black-and-white woodpecker, males have a small red patch on the back of the head. Usually seen on the trunks and branches of trees and likes dead snags to do their drumming. More conspicuous than their larger cousin the Hairy Woodpecker. Call goes down the scale, unlike the Hairy Woodpecker which remains level throughout. Calls also include a sharp "pik" and a high whinny. Can be fairly common feeder bird if Beef Suet is provided.

HABITAT:

Wooded neighborhoods, parks, and woodlands.





HAIRY WOODPECKER

The Hairy and Downy woodpeckers are very similar in pattern, but differ in size (Hairy much larger) and bill shape. The Hairy Woodpecker is the larger of the two and its bill will look about the same length as its head. The Hairy Woodpecker (like the Downy Woodpecker) will often visit feeders especially if suet is provided. They both are common and both can be found in the northeast during the winter months.

HABITAT:

Woodlands, river edges, and neighborhood backyards. Other woodpeckers you may see are the red-bellied woodpecker and the much larger Pileated Woodpecker. All will come feed at suet.

SONG SPARROW



This sparrow is russet brown and grey with bold streaks down its breast. It will look very streaky, with the streaks on the breast often coming together to make a central spot. It has a rounded head and a short bill. This bird will show a great deal of variation in its plumage from one region to another. This bird can often be found at your feeder on the ground looking for seeds and in brushy fields and grasslands. It can be very skulky, but will sing from a prominent perch.

HABITAT:

Thickets, brush and marshes, gardens, and parks.

AMERICAN CROW

A large black bird known for its "caw," American Crows usually occur in pairs or small flocks and can occur anywhere there are at least a few trees.

HABITAT:

Neighborhoods, parks, woodlands, and farmlands.



MOURNING DOVE

The Mourning dove is a light grey and brown bird with black spots on the wings; males and females look similar. They make a "coo-oo, coo-oo" call and can often be seen in large flocks during the winter. During the breeding period they mate and can have up to six broods per year! They are seed eaters, and can easily be seen at feeding stations on the ground.

HABITAT:

Common and found most anywhere, except the deep woods.



CHIPPING SPARROW

A common summer sparrow in the northeast, the Chipping Sparrow has a bright rufous cap and a black eye line. They are grayish on the belly and have brownish back and wings. They will visit feeding stations, and will almost appear tame as you approach. These birds feed on the ground looking for seeds.

HABITAT:

Open woods, parks, neighborhoods, and feeding stations.



RED-WINGED BLACKBIRD

Red-winged Blackbirds are bold birds that will attack hawks and crows that enter their nesting areas, which are wet fields and marshes. The male is black with a red and yellow wing patch, while the female is streaked-brown, both have a sharply pointed bill. You will often hear the distinct call of "conk-a-ree." They nest in marshes and wet areas and can be seen perching on cattails. They will take advantage of a feeding station, especially if you provide cracked corn.

HABITAT:

Marshes, wet areas, pond edges, and roadside ditches.



GOLDFINCH

Breeding males are a beautiful brilliant yellow bird with mostly black wings and a black forehead. The breeding females are duller and have an overall brownish-olive green on their backs. When not breeding the male and females will both look drab and brown. They are often found in flocks and fly in an up and downward pattern. They are common at your bird feeder and love Nyjer (black thistle) seed.

HABITAT:

Found in open woods, roadsides, and fields with thistle and weeds.



MALE SPARROW



FEMALE SPARROW

HOUSE SPARROW

Introduced to the U.S. from Europe, House Sparrows are closely tied to the presence of humans. The male is a snappy-looking brown bird with a gray cap, black face and bib, and a white cheek. The bill is usually dark, but may show some yellow during the winter. The female is rather plain, but has a light line behind the eye. The birds often occur in small groups on or near the ground, and can often be heard calling while hidden inside a shrub or hedgerow. The birds do not sing, but make a one- or two-note chirp, often repeated.

HABITAT:

Cities, towns, and suburbs.

FEMALE FINCH



MALE FINCH



HOUSE FINCH

Originally a native of the western U.S., this bird was introduced to New York, where it then spread across the eastern states. Often occurring together or in small groups, the male House Finch is brownish above, with a face, breast, and rump that are usually red but sometimes orange, and a pale belly streaked with brown. The female is brownish and streaked, with a plain face. You may find them perched on a telephone wire, roof top, or top of a tree, where the male sings a warbling song composed of short phrases and some buzzy notes. When feeding, they may be in bushes or on the ground.

HABITAT:

Cities, towns, and suburbs.

HOUSE WREN

A plain brown bird with faint barring on the wings and tail, like many wren species they will be seen cocking their short tail upright when perched. They are common, found in most areas including backyards. They will nest in thickets or even nest boxes, often building several mock nests within the boxes or other crevices.

HABITAT:

Neighborhoods, parks, and farmlands.

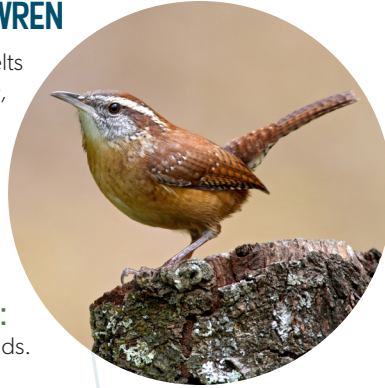


CAROLINA WREN

An often exuberant bird, the Carolina Wren frequently belts out a loud, rolling song sounding like “tea kettle, tea kettle, tea kettle” or a “cheery, cheery, cheery.” Eats insects and often stays in or under bushes, where they will flip through leaf litter, but may also visit home windows, porches, inspect open garages and even car bumpers looking for bugs. Will readily nest in bird houses, potted plants and mailboxes!

HABITAT:

Neighborhoods, parks, and woodlands.



CHIMNEY SWIFT

Almost always seen flying overhead, either alone or in small flocks, sometimes like squadrons in fighter pilot formations. Like flying cigars with very rapid wingbeats, they utter high twittering calls. Will nest inside dormant chimneys, with their twittering able to be heard inside a house.

HABITAT:

Cities, towns, rural lands, and wherever suitable nesting sites are available.



NORTHERN MOCKINGBIRD

The Northern Mockingbird occurs in a variety of habitats (neighborhoods, brushy fields) except heavy forest. A robin-sized gray bird with patches of white in the wings and tail, the Northern Mockingbird sings a loud song consisting of varying phrases, often including the calls and songs of other birds. Not afraid to divebomb a cat when defending a nest!

HABITAT:

Neighborhoods, parks, schoolyards, open woodlands, and brush.



TREE SWALLOW

Tree swallows migrate back to the northeast from southern regions in the spring and will happily nest in bird boxes in your yard. They also will nest in tree cavities. They have an iridescent blue back and white underparts. The blue extends up onto the head, with the area of the eye being black. Their tail is noticeably notched when seen in flight. These birds are insect feeders and can be seen gliding over water bodies chasing small insects.

HABITAT:

Open fields, often near water. They will nest in upland areas as well.



EUROPEAN STARLING

Almost always found near people, European Starlings can be seen hunting on lawns or perched on a telephone wire or on a bare branch. They are stocky and short-tailed, with black plumage that has an oily purple-green sheen and is speckled white for part of the year. Their bill is spiky and yellow during the nesting season, but dark during the winter. They nest in cavities, whether in a tree, streetlight, or birdhouse.

HABITAT:

Cities, towns, and suburbs.



TURKEY VULTURE

Turkey Vultures are named for the bald red head of adult birds that resemble the heads of turkeys. A large blackish/brown bird usually seen flying overhead, but can also be seen perched or standing on the ground. In flight note the long, two-toned wings. Turkey Vultures will soar without beating their wings for long periods of time, often while rocking a bit side to side.

HABITAT:

May occur in nearly all types of habitat, but less common in heavily urbanized zones.



RED-BELLIED WOODPECKER



Often first detected by its call or by its drumming on a tree, the Red-bellied Woodpecker has a black-and-white striped back and buffy-gray face and underparts, with red on the top and back of the head (females only on the back). Usually in trees or on a telephone pole. Calls are varied, but include a loud, bleating "whaaaaa" and a mildly complaining "chow, chow, chow," both often repeated. Will eat suet and peanut butter, and raid hummingbird feeders.

HABITAT:

Wooded neighborhoods, parks, and woodlands.

COMMON GRACKLE

A large and noisy black bird with a blue iridescent head.

The males will appear dark overall with a bronze body when in good light. The females are less glossy and iridescent. Both have a bright yellow eye. These birds are often seen in flocks and will forage on lawns and in fields. They will also come to feeding stations. They can often be very noisy and raucous when found in these flocks.

HABITAT:

Cities, towns, neighborhoods, marshes, and open woodlands.



BALTIMORE ORIOLE

The male has a brilliant orange plumage with an entirely black head and back. The female's color is drabber, being brownish to yellowish on the head. These birds are often perched high in the treetops, and often make a distinctive chatter. They are insect feeders, but upon return to the northeast from a long migration they will eat oranges and grape jam if provided at your feeders.

HABITAT:

Deciduous forest treetops, parks, forest edges and backyards.



ROSE-BREASTED GROSBEAK

This is a seed-eating bird, but will also eat fruit and insects. The males are striking having a black back, white underbelly, and a distinctive red breast. The female is brown and heavily streaked with a prominent white eyebrow. These birds are common to your backyard and will come to a feeder.

HABITAT:

Deciduous and conifer eastern forests, and wooded areas along parks and backyards.



SCARLET TANAGER

Breeding males are beautiful red birds with black wings and tails. They have a thick black bill. They will be unmistakable! The female will be olive-yellow with a darker tail and wings. These birds feed on insects but will also eat fruit during their migration.

HABITAT:

In migration they can be found in your backyard, woodland borders and shrubs. During breeding they are found in deciduous mixed forests and like to be high in the canopy.



EASTERN KINGBIRD

A two-toned bird that is blackish above and white below, the Eastern Kingbird can readily be identified by the broad white band at the end of its tail. Seemingly quick to get riled up, these birds often chatter and twitter noisily. These birds perch in trees, bushes, on fences, or on wires, but are usually in the open and stay fairly close to the ground. They eat insects that they fly after to catch on the wing after having spotted them from their perch. Fearless, Eastern Kingbirds will noisily chase after crows and hawks to drive them from their nesting territory.

HABITAT:

Open woodlands, parks, schoolyards, meadows, and golf courses.

INDIGO BUNTING

One of the few all blue birds a homeowner can encounter in their yard. The breeding male is completely bright blue with darker areas around the face, wings and tail. The bill is short, thick and two tone in color. The female is light brown with a plain face and fine streaking on the breast and faint wingbars (female can be confused with sparrows). Indigo Buntings arrive in May and depart in October. Upon arrival, homeowners may see them at their feeders. They like to nest in open brushy areas, weedy fields and hedgerows. Will sing from a tall tree repeating its call every seven to eight seconds, but better seen in low vegetation.



Did YOU KNOW?

The Indigo Bunting has no blue pigment and they are actually black. The diffraction of light through their feathers gives them the blue coloration.

BLACK AND WHITE WARBLER

This warbler breeds in eastern and northern North America. It is often seen creeping and climbing on tree limbs and tree trunks looking for insects. As its name states, it is a distinctively black and white striped bird, with the female being similar to the male but slightly paler.

HABITAT:

Woodlots, forests, and forest edges.



The mournful cooing of the Mourning Dove is one of our most familiar bird sounds.

Did YOU KNOW?

The Mourning Dove is one of our most common birds, often abundant in open country and along roadsides. In warm climates, Mourning Doves may raise up to six broods per year, more than any other native bird.



BEYOND YOUR BACKYARD

YOU'LL FIND THESE BIRDS BOTH HIGH AND LOW!

KILLDEER

One of the few shorebirds that will occur away from water, the Killdeer is highly tolerant of humans and their environs. Will nest on the ground or even on flat rooftops, Killdeer usually occur singly or in pairs, although they will form flocks outside of the nesting season. Their eggs are well camouflaged and if a person gets too close, the female Killdeer will feign having a broken wing and attempt to draw the person and their attention away from the nest. Named for their call, the Killdeer cries out "kill-deer! kill-deer!" when disturbed, or sometimes just when flying past overhead.

HABITAT:

Large open lawns, ball fields, golf courses, ponds, wetlands, and fields.



DARK-EYED JUNCO

These birds are commonly seen in flocks at your feeder during the winter months in the northeast. In the spring these birds move further north and northeast breeding here and in Canada. These birds will have a round looking head, they are gray with a white belly, and when flying you will notice white along their tails. These are ground feeding birds often scratching for seeds.

HABITAT:

Mixed woods, open areas, backyards, and fields.



BROWN THRASHER

Usually arrives in mid-April and departs mid fall, but some can linger into the winter. An uncommon bird of dense brush and hedgerows. Most often seen when singing from a conspicuous perch in spring and then goes silent and all but disappears, but they're around! One of the three mimic thrushes in our area, (others Gray Catbird & Northern Mockingbird) its musical song is repeated in two's and three's. A little larger than a Mockingbird, the Brown Thrasher is rufous on the upper parts, with a long tail, long decurved bill with dark streaking on buff underparts. It's the only Thrasher we get in the eastern U.S.



GREAT-HORNED OWL

The Great Horned owl is a strong and fierce predator. It is known to take rabbits, snakes, other owls and even skunks as prey. It is adapted to many habitats and will start nesting in late winter. This is a large owl and easily recognized by its feathered tufts on its head.

HABITAT:

Forests, woodlots, open areas, and often can be found nesting in old Great Blue Heron nests.



WHITE-THROATED SPARROW

Depending upon where you live in the northeast, this bird will likely be most common around your yard during migration in the spring and fall, but can readily visit feeders during the winter. As a boreal species it will migrate north to higher elevations during the summer months. Its song says, "Oh Sam Peabody," or "Oh Canada Canada Canada." The breeding males are beautiful with crisp white throats and black and white head stripes. A second color form of this bird has tan and white head stripes.



HABITAT:

Low dense bushes, weedy fields and urban settings during non-breeding. Also higher elevations of New England.

YELLOW-RUMPED WARBLER

These birds are beautiful spring migrants that have bold yellow rump patch you will see when it flies. Their back is a mix of gray and black and they will have a bold white throat, with yellow also on their sides. These birds feed on insects as well as berries.



HABITAT:

Open woods, thickets, gardens, and backyards.

BROAD-WINGED HAWK

These hawks are often seen soaring overhead. They have barred underparts and a banded tail. Their wings will have a dark outline when seen from below. In the fall when they migrate, they form "kettles," which are migrating flocks that contain hundreds or even thousands of circling birds. They are a woodland species and spend much of their time in the forest. When soaring overhead you may hear their piercing two-part whistle.

HABITAT:

Forests, but easily seen during migration on hawk watch sites.



BARRED OWL

Barred owls are large owls with a round head and no ear tufts. They have large brown eyes, a yellow bill and a brown and white striped plumage. Their call is beautiful and sounds like they are saying "Who cooks for you, Who cooks for you, Who cooks for you all." They are a woodland owl and often easier to hear than see, but you can get lucky and sometimes see one roosting in a tree during the day. These owls are fairly common near mature forests and might even use a nest box.



HABITAT:

Forests and treed swamps.

RED-TAILED HAWK

This is a common raptor and can often be seen perched along roadsides, fields, and telephone poles. You can also see them soaring over fields and road edges hunting for mice and other small rodents. It can be quite varied in its plumages, but our eastern adults will have a brilliant reddish tail with pale underparts and a dark band of feathers on the belly.

HABITAT:

Open fields, farmland, and roadside open areas.





QUESTIONS ON THOSE FEATHERED FRIENDS?

Contact us at
BACKYARDBIRDS@SWCA.COM

Note: Many more species of birds can occur in your neighborhood, especially during spring and fall migration.

ADDITIONAL BIRDING RESOURCES

ONLINE FIELD GUIDES FOR BIRD IDENTIFICATION

- [Merlin Bird ID by Cornell Lab of Ornithology](#) (app)
- [Thayer Birding Software](#) (free)
- [National Audubon Society](#)
- [Song Sleuth](#) - Song Sleuth is a fun and easy way to learn birding by ear

BOOKS

- [The Sibley Field Guide to Birds of Eastern North America](#)
by David Allen Sibley

CITIZEN SCIENCE APPS

- [eBird](#) by Cornell Lab of Ornithology
- [iNaturalist](#) - Contribute to science!

DIY BIRD FEEDERS

- [Make a DIY Bird Feeder From Recycled Materials](#)

Photo credits: American Crow - Warren Bielenberg; Baltimore Oriole - Jan Gorzynik; Brown Thrasher, Common Grackle, Gray Catbird, Northern Cardinals - Neal Lewis, NPS; Carolina Wren - © Glenn Price 2010; Chimney Swift - Steven Kersting; Downy Woodpecker - C. Watts; Eastern Kingbird - Grayson Smith, USFWS; Great Horned Owl - Jim Peaco; Female House Finch - 2019 Richard Keller, withmephotography.com; Red Tailed Hawk - Mark Bohm; Red Tailed Hawk in flight, Turkey Vulture in flight - Brad Sutton, NPS; Yellow-rumped Warbler - Eve Turek, USFWS; American Goldfinch, American Robin, Barred Owl, Black & White Warbler, Black-capped Chickadee, Hairy Woodpecker, Indigo Bunting, Dark-eyed Junco, Mourning Dove, Northern Mockingbird, Red-bellied Woodpecker, Rose-breasted Grosbeak, Scarlet Tanager, Song Sparrow, Tree Swallow, Tufted Titmouse, Turkey Vulture, White-breasted Nuthatch, White-throated Sparrow - © Scott Sumner

Online Reference Sources: [The Cornell Lab-All About Birds](#), [National Audubon Bird Guide](#), [eBird species descriptions](#).