



IN YOUR BACK YARD

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



BIRDS OF
THE
ROCKIES

SWCA



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!

COMMON SPECIES

MOST LIKELY FOUND IN YOUR BACKYARD AND NEIGHBORHOOD

EURASIAN COLLARED-DOVE

Since its introduction to Florida in the early 1980s, the Eurasian Collared-Dove has expanded across much of the United States. Larger than its distant cousin, the Mourning Dove, this grayish-brown bird has a black half-collar on the back of the neck and a squared-off tail. Present year-round unlike the Mourning Dove.

HABITAT:

Towns, suburbs, and rural grain elevators.



MOURNING DOVE

The Mourning Dove is a light grey and brown bird with black spots on the wings, males and females look similar. The male's woeful "coo-oo, coo-oo" song sounds like the bird is in mourning; otherwise these birds are silent. Unlike the non-native Eurasian Collared-Dove, this species migrates south for the winter. During the breeding period a pair can have up to six broods per year! They are seed eaters and are commonly seen on the ground below feeders.

HABITAT:

Common and found most anywhere, except the deep woods.



GREAT HORNED OWL

The Great Horned Owl is a strong and fierce nocturnal 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 when mated pairs sing duets, the male's hoots having a deeper baritone quality. This is a large owl and easily recognized by its feathered tufts on its head.

HABITAT:

Forests, woodlots, open areas with trees, towns, and suburbs.



COMMON Nighthawk

This appropriately named bird is often seen on backcountry roads at night where they sit waiting to fly up to catch large insects and moths. Although not a feeder bird, it can be seen flying over suburban neighborhoods during the summer just before dusk. Their bold white wing patches, fluttery flight style, and nasally "peent" calls are distinctive.

HABITAT:

Open habitats.

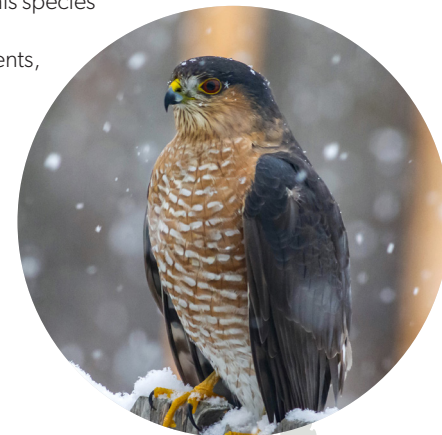


COOPER'S HAWK

Twisting the meaning of bird feeder, Cooper's Hawks are known to hunt backyard feeders for larger birds like pigeons, doves, and jays. Along with Red-tailed Hawk, this species has adapted well to suburban environments, even nesting in neighborhood trees and greenbelts. Young birds are mostly brown with streaky underparts and yellow eyes until about 3 years of age when they attain the adult's gray and rusty coloration and red eyes.

HABITAT:

Wooded areas.

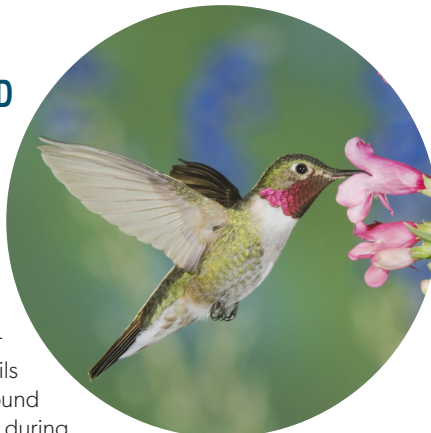


BROAD-TAILED HUMMINGBIRD

The buzzy trill of the male, caused by specialized wing feathers, is often the only indication of one flying by. The male's throat shines a rosy red in direct sunlight. The female is drabber, without throat coloration, and does not have a wing trill – all to keep her inconspicuous while she collects spider webs and moss to build a nest. Broad-tails nest in the mountains, but are often found at flower gardens and nectar feeders during spring and fall migration at lower elevations.

HABITAT:

Shrubby riparian, mountain meadows, and suburban gardens.



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 all adults have a reddish tail. Adaptable to human settlements, occasionally nesting in city parks, golf courses, and other open spaces with large trees.

HABITAT:

Open fields, farmland, and roadside open areas.



TURKEY VULTURE

Named for its bald red head. A large blackish/brown bird usually seen flying overhead, but can also be seen perched or standing on the ground. Note the long, two-toned wings that form a shallow V-shape in flight. 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.



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. Calls include a sharp "pik" and a high whinny. Can be a common feeder bird if suet is provided.

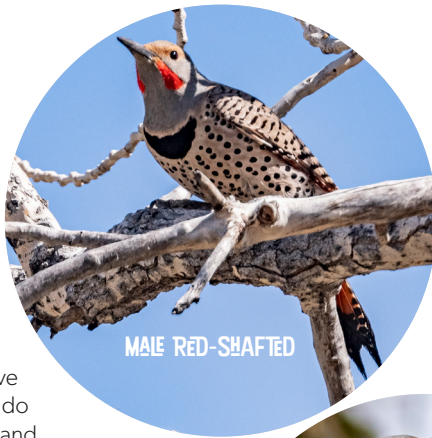
HABITAT:

Wooded neighborhoods, parks, and woodlands.



NORTHERN FLICKER

The most common woodpecker in the Rocky Mountain region found in urban and rural areas alike easily identified by its black crescent breast plate and spotted underparts. Two color types are found in the Rocky Mountain region, the red-shafted and the yellow-shafted, best distinguished in flight by the respective color of their wing and tail feathers. Male yellow-shafteds have a black mustache whereas male red-shafteds have a red mustache. As you might expect, females do not have mustaches! Males love to use gutters and chimney flashing to amplify their territorial "drumming" during the spring mating season. Unlike other woodpeckers, Northern Flickers are often seen foraging for insects on the ground. This species is an important ecological linchpin in that the cavities it excavates for nesting (and no longer occupying) are used by other bird species that cannot excavate their own nest cavities, like bluebirds, wrens, and small owls.



MALE RED-SHAFTED



MALE
YELLOW-
SHAFTED

HABITAT:

Open forests, wooded riparian, towns, and homesteads with shade trees.

AMERICAN CROW

A large, intelligent black bird known for its "caw," American Crows usually are seen in pairs or small flocks and can occur anywhere where there are at least a few trees. They are omnivorous and are known to consume human garbage and baby birds taken from nests. Crows are good "watchdogs" for other birds, alerting them to hawks and owls, which they chase vigorously.

HABITAT:

Neighborhoods, parks, woodlands, and farmlands.

SAY'S PHOEBE

This species is often observed sitting on a prominent perch, dipping its tail or softly giving its "peer" calls before taking flight to catch a flying insect, only to return to the exact same perch. Say's Phoebe is identified by its rusty belly and under tail that stands out against its otherwise drab brownish plumage.

HABITAT:

Suburban parks, ranch land, and other open habitats with perches.



BLACK-CAPPED CHICKADEE

Chickadees are small with a distinctive white cheek set between a pitch black cap and throat. Usually seen flitting about in shrubs and up to the mid-level of trees in the Rocky Mountain foothills and plains, 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 other small birds, especially in winter. Namesake call is "chick-a-dee-dee-dee". 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.

BLUE JAY

A familiar bird in the eastern U.S., Blue Jays are found up to the eastern flank of the Rocky Mountains and a few other scattered areas in the West. Makes 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.



STELLER'S JAY

Steller's Jay replaces the more widely known Blue Jay where foothill shrub lands converge with coniferous forests of the lower mountain zone. Similar in size, Steller's Jay has a black head with large pointed crest and iridescent blue wings and tail. Often seen in pairs or small groups. Steller's Jays will eat anything including seeds, lizards, insects, berries, and unguarded peanut butter and jelly sandwiches and potato chips. Can become tame enough to accept food from your hand.

HABITAT:

Coniferous forest, and mountain towns.



MOUNTAIN CHICKADEE

Replacing the Black-capped Chickadee at higher elevations, the Mountain Chickadee is similar in size and color, except for its bold white eyebrow.

Its namesake call is a similar but hoarser "chick-adee-adee-adee". Will also form flocks with other small birds in winter. Frequently visits feeders where it will take seeds to store elsewhere for a snack later.

HABITAT:

Montane coniferous woodlands, and towns.



BROWN CREEPER

Like a small piece of bark come to life, this brown, long-billed bird creeps its way UP tree trunks and major branches, bracing itself with its stiff tail feathers. Reaching the top of one tree, it flies down to the base of the next tree. It uses its thin, curved bill to probe for insects hidden in crevices and under the bark. Brown Creepers eat mostly insects, but in winter will eat suet and peanut butter, and occasionally sunflower seeds, pine seeds, and grass seeds. Brown Creepers build their hammock-shaped nests behind peeling sections of bark that provide a lean-to shelter from rain.

HABITAT:

Large, old conifer or deciduous trees.



RED-BREASTED NUTHATCH

This snazzy-looking bird is all business as it works its way up and down tree trunks looking for insects.

Red-breasted Nuthatches are sparrow-sized, with a crisp black crown and eye stripe contrasting with a white eyebrow and cheek. The rusty wash to its underparts gives the bird its name. This species likes suet, but will just as happily snatch seeds from a feeder as well.

HABITAT:

Woodlands, suburbs, and parks.



HOUSE WREN

A plain brown bird with faint barring on the wings and tail, like many wren species it can be seen cocking its short tail upright when perched.

House Wrens are common, found in most areas including landscaped backyards. Will nest in thickets and even nest boxes, often building several mock nests within the boxes or other crevices.

HABITAT:

Neighborhoods, parks, and farmlands.



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:

Woodlands, suburbs, and parks.



AMERICAN ROBIN

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 eat worms, bugs, and small 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.



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.



FEMALE FINCH



MALE FINCH



HOUSE FINCH

Originally a native of the southwestern U.S., this bird has naturally expanded northward in the Rocky Mountain region in the past 60 years where it is now common in many cities and towns. Often occurring in pairs or 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. Within their range, may be one of the most common birds at feeders.

HABITAT:

Cities, towns, and suburbs.

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. Often occurs in small groups on or near the ground, and can often be heard calling while hidden inside a shrub or hedgerow. Does not sing, but makes a one- or two-note chirp, often repeated.

HABITAT:

Cities, towns, and suburbs.



FEMALE SPARROW



CEDAR WAXWING

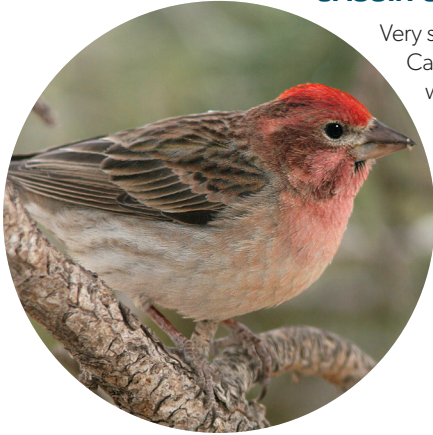
Named for the wax-like red tips on some of its wing feathers, this gregarious species will flock in the dozens to feast on small-fruited trees and shrubs. Males and females look the same, with a prominent crest, peachy brown head that fades to gray on the back and pale yellow on the belly. Most noticeable may be the black mask and the bright yellow tail tip. Its call is a very soft, high-pitched trilled whistle.

HABITAT:

Juniper woodlands, suburban parks, other open areas with abundant berry-producing shrubs and trees.



CASSIN'S FINCH



Very similar to the more ubiquitous House Finch, male Cassin's are more pinkish than red and females have a white eyebrow and spotted chest and belly. Common at feeders in its montane haunts, but occasionally moves to lower foothills and adjacent plains in winter. Will occur in flocks of dozens to hundreds during winter storms.

HABITAT:

Conifer forest and town parks with evergreens.

PINE SISKIN

Pine Siskins are tiny brown streaky finches that show a flash of yellow in their wings and tails in flight. Slightly smaller than goldfinches, Pine Siskins also give a distinctive rising "zreeeeeet" call that is different from the clear whistles of goldfinches. Often found in small flocks although can number in the hundreds in montane settings.

Occasionally found on the plains in colder months, but most numerous in the mountains. Like goldfinches, you will need feeders with Nyjer (black thistle) seeds to attract them to your yard.



HABITAT:

Mountainous coniferous forest, suburbs, and parks.

AMERICAN GOLDFINCH



Breeding males are a beautiful brilliant yellow bird with mostly black wings and a black forehead. Females are duller and have an overall brownish-olive green on their backs. During winter, the male and females will both look drab and brown. Often found in flocks and fly in a roller coaster pattern. They can be common at your bird feeder and love Nyjer (black thistle) seed.

HABITAT:

Suburbs, parks, fields with thistle and wildflowers in the daisy family.

DARK-EYED JUNCO



These birds are commonly seen in flocks at your feeder during the winter months. The Rocky Mountain region has all five subspecies (Slate-colored Junco shown) in winter, and three of the five during the nesting season – Gray-headed (CO, NM, WY), Pink-sided (MT, WY), and White-winged (Black Hills region). All juncos have white outer tail feathers that flare when they fly. These are ground-feeding birds often scratching for seeds under feeders.

HABITAT:

Mixed woods, backyards, and shrubby areas.

BULLOCK'S ORIOLE



Perhaps the brightest colored bird in your yard, unless you have Western Tanagers. The male's fiery orange plumage and bold white wing patch are unmistakable. Females are less showy with dull yellow head and chest and subdued white bars on her wings. Mostly a nectar eater, this species loves sliced oranges, bananas, and especially grape jelly.

HABITAT:

Wooded streams, parks, and farmstead shade trees.

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 will take advantage of a feeding station, especially if you provide cracked corn.

HABITAT:

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



DID YOU KNOW?

Many jays, including the Blue Jay, store food for sustenance in harsher seasons. Over a few months, an individual bird may cache nuts, insects, even worms, in several thousand spots. And relocate nearly all of them as needed.

Source: <https://www.audubon.org/news/test-smarts-your-backyard-jays-fun-memory-game>



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.

WESTERN Tanager

The male Western Tanager's red head and yellow body can bring a feeling of being in the tropics to any yard. Along with its black back and black wings with a white stripe, the male is unlike any other bird in the Rocky Mountain region. Females are a duller yellowish green and lack a red head. Western Tanager does not eat seeds, but will come to freshly cut oranges and other fruit. Usually found in deciduous montane forests, it is a common migrant at lower elevations in the Rocky Mountains.

HABITAT:

Montane forests, riparian woodlands, and suburban parks.



MALE



FEMALE

BLACK-HEADED GROSBEAK

Black-headed Grosbeaks have powerful, thick beaks that are used to crack seeds, hard-bodied insects, and even snails. One of the few birds that does not suffer from toxins found in Monarch Butterfly which makes the butterflies inedible to most bird species. Males have black heads and black wings with large white patches that contrast with an orange body. Has a sliver of yellow on the belly. Females have duller orange bodies and brown heads with a white eyebrow and mustache.

HABITAT:

Oak shrub lands, riparian woodlands, orchards, and suburbs.



BEYOND YOUR BACKYARD

LOOK FOR THESE BIRDS WHEN YOU'RE AT YOUR
LOCAL PARK, WETLANDS, OR FORESTED NATURAL AREA

SCALED QUAIL

Scaled Quail gets its name from the scalloped feather pattern on its neck and chest that looks like fish scales. Only found in the Rocky Mountain region from Colorado Springs and southward. Scaled Quail are frequently seen in coveys of 6-12 birds around brush piles and shrubby habitats with bare ground, including landscaped yards.

HABITAT:

Arid shrub lands and cholla desert.



GAMBEL'S QUAIL

This quail, commonly associated with the deserts of the southwest, occurs from Grand Junction, Colorado, to Farmington, New Mexico, in the Rocky Mountain region. Often seen scurrying between patches of brush, these birds are recognized by their distinctive black topknot, gray body, and their preference to run instead of fly. Listen for their loud calls, often heard near sunrise and sunset.

HABITAT:

Shrubby desert, riparian woodland, and outskirts of towns.



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 will feign having a broken wing and attempt to draw the person and their attention away from the nest. Named for its call, the Killdeer cries out "kill-deer! kill-deer!" when disturbed, or sometimes just when flying past overhead.

HABITAT:

Shorelines, well-manicured yards and fields, and wetlands.

CURVE-BILLED THRASHER

Similar in distribution to Scaled Quail, this species is a denizen of the arid deserts and grasslands of the southern Rocky Mountain region. A drab grayish-brown bird larger than an American Robin, often the long curved bill and bright orange eyes are the most distinctive features people notice. Adapts easily to rural and suburban settings within open landscapes. Will even build a nest in small trees and large cacti in your yard if its undisturbed.

HABITAT:

Arid shrub lands and cholla desert.



NORTHERN MOCKINGBIRD

The Northern Mockingbird occurs in a variety of habitats (neighborhoods, brushy fields) on the southern grasslands in the Rocky Mountain region. 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 dive bomb a cat when defending a nest!

HABITAT:

Neighborhoods, parks, open woodlands, and brush.





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)
- [iBird](#)
- [Birdwatching Bliss](#)
- [Thayer Birding Software](#) (free)
- [National Audubon Society](#)
- [Song Sleuth](#) – Song Sleuth is a fun and easy way to learn birding by ear

BOOKS

- Field Guide to the Birds of Colorado by Ted Floyd
- Field Guide to Birds of Western North America by David Sibley
- Field Guide to Birds of North America by Kenn Kaufman

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: Eurasian Collared-Dove, Northern Flicker, Mountain Chickadee, Cedar Waxwing - Eugene DeMayo; Mourning Dove, Gambel's Quail - Mike Swink; Common Nighthawk, Say's Phoebe, Curve-billed Thrasher - Justin Streit; young Cooper's Hawk, Pine Siskin - © Paul L. Brown; Turkey Vulture in flight, Red-tailed Hawk in flight - Brad Sutton, NPS; Turkey Vulture, Blue Jay, Black-capped Chickadee, White-breasted Nuthatch, American Robin, Dark-eyed Junco, Northern Mockingbird - © Scott Sturner; Red-tailed Hawk - Mark Bohn; Downy Woodpecker - C. Watts; Steller's Jay - Jacob W. Frank, NPS; American Crow - Warren Bielenberg; Red-breasted Nuthatch - Eugene Beckes; Brown Creeper, Red-winged Blackbird - Char Corkran; House Wren - Warren Wright; Female House Finch - Richard Keller, withmephography.com; Cassin's Finch, Bullock's Oriole - Alan Schmierer; American Goldfinch, Common Grackle - Neal Lewis, NPS; NPS; Great Horned Owl - Jim Peaco; Black-headed Grosbeak female - Scott Somershoe, USFWS

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