



IN YOUR BACK YARD

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

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 gray and brown bird with black spots on the wings, males and females look similar. The male's woeeful "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 mostly vacates the northern Great Plains for the winter. During the summer breeding season, a pair can have up to six broods! They are seed eaters and are commonly seen on the ground below feeders.

HABITAT:

Common and found most anywhere, except deep forest.

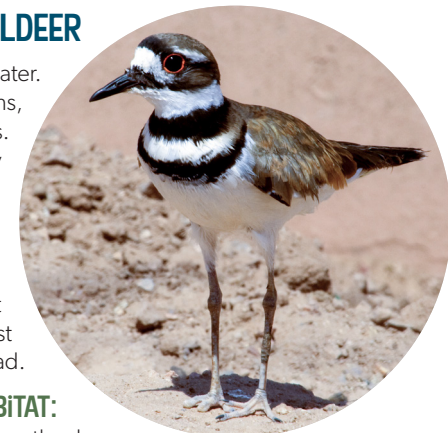


KILLDEER

This species of shorebird often nests away from water. Killdeer is highly tolerant of humans and their environs, often found on athletic fields, airports, and golf courses. 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.



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 nasal "peent" calls are distinctive.

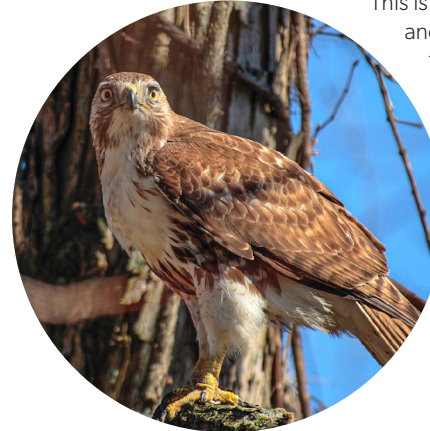
HABITAT:
Open habitats.



RED-TAILED HAWK

This is a common raptor and can often be seen along roadsides and fields, often perched on utility poles. You can also see them soaring over fields and road edges hunting for mice and other small rodents, snakes, and other prey. 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.



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, even on tall weed stalks. They drum on dead limbs, which serves some of the same purposes as song in other bird species. 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.



TURKEY VULTURE

Named for its bald red head, Turkey Vulture is 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 side to side a bit.

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



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 the 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 1 year of age when they attain the adult's gray and rusty coloration and orange to red eyes.

HABITAT:
Wooded areas.



NORTHERN FLICKER

This species is the most common woodpecker on the Great Plains, at least during migration and the breeding season; many migrate south for the winter. It occurs in urban and rural areas alike and is easily identified by its black crescent breast plate and spotted underparts. Two color types are found in our 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 moustache whereas male red-shafteds have a red moustache.

As you might expect, females do not have moustaches!

Males love to use gutters, vents, and chimney flashing to amplify their territorial "drumming" during the spring mating season. Unlike other woodpeckers, Northern Flickers are often seen foraging for insects, particularly ants, 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.

HABITAT:

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



MALE RED-SHAFTED



MALE YELLOW-SHAFTED

EASTERN BLUEBIRD

This species is often seen on fences and power lines along streets. It may come to backyard feeders, particularly if you provide mealworms. The male is a deep blue with rusty throat and breast. The female is grayish above with blue wings. Bluebirds readily use a nest box, so if you have enough open area in your yard, consider putting one up.

HABITAT:

Open areas, meadows, golf courses, 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 where there are at least a few trees, but on the Great Plains are usually found along wooded stream courses and in heavily vegetated towns.

HABITAT:

Neighborhoods, parks, woodlands, and farmlands.



BLUE JAY

A familiar bird in the Great Plains, Blue Jays are found up to the eastern flank of the Rocky Mountains. The species makes a variety of raucous shrieks and cries and 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.

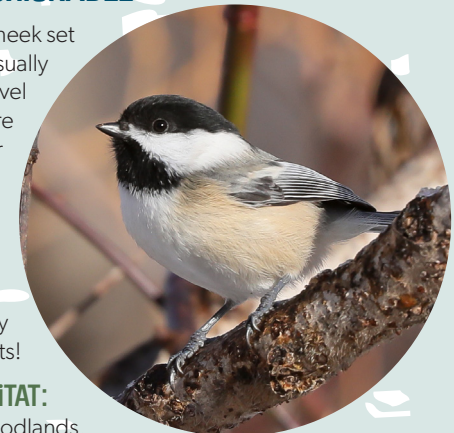


BLACK-CAPPED CHICKADEE

Chickadees are small with a distinctive white cheek set between a pitch black cap and throat. They are usually seen flitting about in shrubs and up to the mid-level of trees in wooded areas on the Great Plains, where they move from branch to branch looking for insects to eat, sometimes even hanging upside down while they inspect a leaf cluster. The species often occurs 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.





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 or dark gray cap, white breast, and gray wings.

HABITAT:

Woodlands, suburbs, and parks.

HOUSE WREN

A plain brown bird with faint barring on the wings and tail. Like many wren species, House Wren 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.



BARN SWALLOW

This is one of the few bird species that is found on six continents. Though the species originally placed their mud nests on rock faces and ledges, it now nests almost solely on man made structures, placing their nest on eaves and attached to walls under overhangs or in culverts or under small bridges. In rural parts of the Great Plains, most abandoned houses and outbuildings host at least a few pairs. Barn Swallows, like all swallows, forage for flying insects while on the wing. Males are a steely blue above, with a reddish-maroon throat and a long, forked tail with a white band on it. Females are similar, though with duller plumage and shorter tails.

HABITAT:

Open country, particularly around man made structures.



CLIFF SWALLOW

Like Barn Swallow, Cliff Swallow is well known for nesting on man made structures, often in large colonies, especially under bridges. However, the species has not abandoned its original nest sites: rocky cliffs. They can be seen gathering mud for their nests at wet spots, their fluttering wings held above their bodies ready to bolt should danger come. While the white forehead and dark throat are good field marks, the best is the brick-colored rump patch above a square-tipped tail. Unlike Barn

Swallow's open mud cup of a nest, Cliff Swallow creates globular nests with a downward-facing entrance.

HABITAT:

Open country, particularly near cliffs and man made structures.



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 Starling was introduced into the New World from Europe and can be seen hunting on lawns or perched on a power line or 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.



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 are very similar, 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, and other open areas with abundant berry-producing shrubs and trees.



HOUSE FINCH

Originally a native of the southwestern U.S., this species has naturally expanded northward, and populations introduced to the eastern U.S. have moved westward, into the Great Plains region 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 or yellow, and a pale belly streaked with brown. The female is brownish and streaked, with a plain face. You may find them perched on a power line, 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.



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 bird feeders and love Nyjer (black thistle) seed.

HABITAT:

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



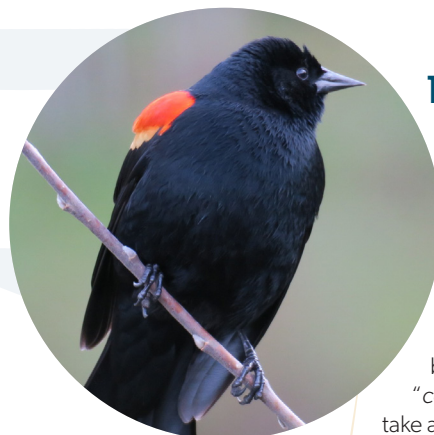


DARK-EYED JUNCO

These birds are commonly seen in flocks during migration and the winter months, often visiting feeders. On the Great Plains, the Slate-colored form is common, but on the western edge of the region, other forms, particularly Oregon and Pink-sided, may be found. The White-winged form breeds only in the Black Hills region, but can be found on the plains in October through April. 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.



RED-WINGED BLACKBIRD

Red-winged Blackbirds are bold birds that will attack hawks and crows that enter their nesting areas, which, historically, were wet fields and marshes, though they now utilize many sorts of vegetated open habitats, including wheat fields. The male is black with a red and yellow wing patch, while the female is streaked brown; both have sharply pointed bills. You will often hear the distinct song of "conk-a-ree" during spring and summer. 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.



CHIMNEY SWIFT

Almost always seen flying overhead, either alone or in small flocks, sometimes like squadrons in fighter 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, and rural lands wherever suitable nesting sites are available.



COMMON GRACKLE

A large and noisy black bird with an iridescent blue 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 be very noisy and raucous when found in these flocks.

HABITAT:

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



INDIGO BUNTING

One of the few 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 and two-toned in color. The female is light brown with a plain face and fine streaking on the breast and faint wingbars (females can be confused with sparrows). Indigo Buntings arrive in May and depart in October.

HABITAT:

Open, brush areas, weedy fields, and hedgerows.



WHITE-THROATED SPARROW

This bird will likely be most common around your yard during migration in the spring and fall, but can be seen over winter, particularly in the south of this region, readily visiting feeders. As a boreal species it will migrate north to higher latitudes for the summer months. Its song says, "Oh Sam Peabody", or "Oh, Canada, Canada, Canada". The white-form 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 seasons.

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" song that is different from the clear whistles of goldfinches. Often found in small flocks, although flocks can number in the hundreds in some settings. Found during migration and winter on the Great Plains in highly variable numbers from year to year. Like goldfinches, you will need feeders with Nyjer (black thistle) seeds to attract them to your yard.



HABITAT:

Montane coniferous forest, suburbs, and parks.

CHIPPING SPARROW

A common summer sparrow, the Chipping Sparrow has a bright rufous cap, a black eyeline, and a black bill that turns pink in the fall and winter. They are grayish on the belly and have a brownish back and wings. This species migrates south for the winter, so similar-looking birds on the Great Plains from November to March are probably American Tree Sparrows.



HABITAT:

Open woods, parks, and neighborhoods.

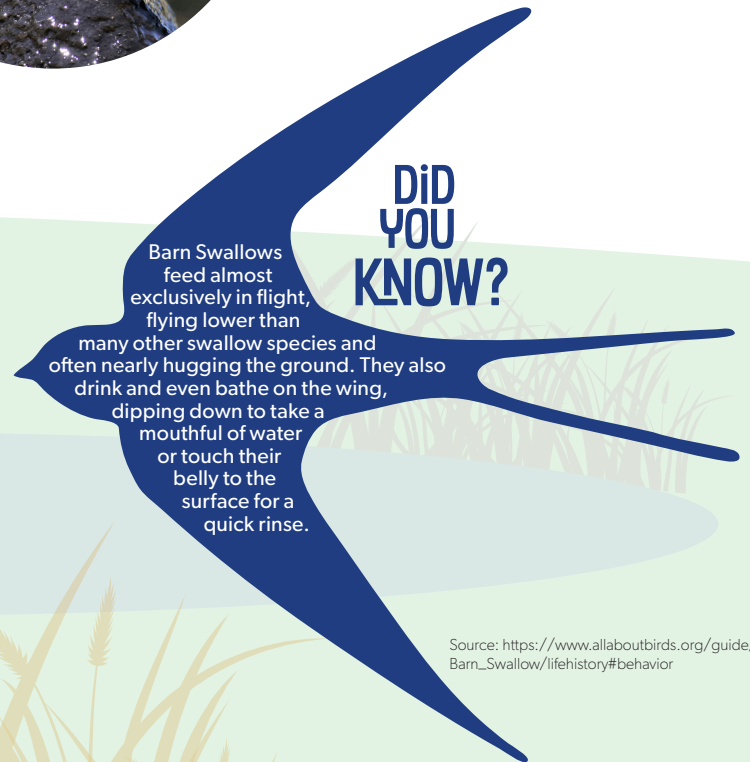


AMERICAN TREE SPARROW

Very similar to the Chipping Sparrow, the American Tree Sparrow is different in having a brown eyeline, bi-colored black and yellow bill, and a black central chest spot. These species overlap for very short periods of time at the beginning of spring and end of fall. This species will visit seed feeders, usually in small flocks.

HABITAT:

Weedy fields with hedgerows or shrubs, along forest edges, and near marshes.



DID YOU KNOW?

Barn Swallows feed almost exclusively in flight, flying lower than many other swallow species and often nearly hugging the ground. They also drink and even bathe on the wing, dipping down to take a mouthful of water or touch their belly to the surface for a quick rinse.

Source: https://www.allaboutbirds.org/guide/Barn_Swallow/lifehistory#behavior



BEYOND YOUR BACKYARD

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

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 than those of the female. This is a large owl and easily recognized by the feathered tufts on its head.



HABITAT:

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

EASTERN KINGBIRD

A two-toned bird that is blackish above and white below, the Eastern Kingbird can be readily 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. They perch in trees and bushes, on fences and wires, but are usually in the open. 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, school yards, meadows, and golf courses.

HORNED LARK

A species of the wide-open spaces, Horned Lark occurs in grasslands and other open habitats with little or no vegetation. The species is often seen picking small seeds from dirt roads and harvested grain fields in small, loose flocks or in tight masses that can number well into the 1000s. Other species of similar habitats can be found in Horned Lark flocks in winter, particularly Lapland Longspur and Snow Bunting, both of which breed in the arctic.

The species is named for the black feathering that extends beyond the head, creating "mini-horns." The crown, back, and wings are brown, the underparts mostly white, with the throat ranging from white through pale yellow to bright yellow. Males often sing their tinkling, twittering song while hovering high in the air.

HABITAT:

Open fields and grassland, generally in rural areas.



BURROWING OWL

This small owl species is strongly tied to prairie dog towns, as they use burrows for nest sites, though they will also use holes made by badgers where there are no prairie dogs. Adults can often be seen standing on burrows or on nearby fence posts during the day. Once young are old enough, they can also be found standing together on burrows and providing some comic relief with their antics. These owls prey on large insects and small mammals and can be seen hovering over open country near dusk looking for prey. The plumage is mottled brown with a white kerchief; their eyes are piercing yellow.

HABITAT:

Open country; on the Great Plains, typically in the vicinity of prairie dogs.





LARK SPARROW

A large, long-tailed sparrow, Lark Sparrow is a flashy bird, with bright white edges to the tail and a complex pattern of pale and rufous on the head. They also sing in flight, which is what “lark” means in the species’ name. The underparts are un-streaked white but sport an obvious dark central breast spot.

HABITAT:

Open country with a mix of small shrubs, grasses, and bare ground.

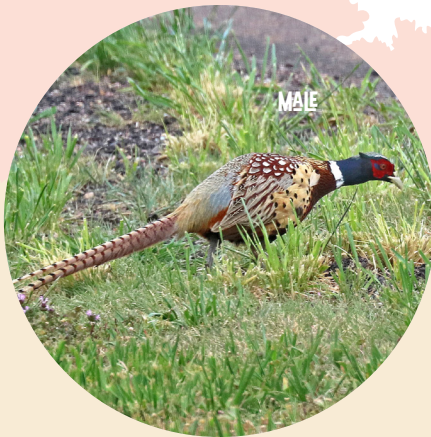
SHARP-TAILED GROUSE

From Nebraska north into Canada, Sharp-tailed Grouse males gather in spring at particular local areas called ‘leks’ in which they compete with each other by displaying for the females that visit. While generally shy and spending most of their time on the ground, they can be seen perched on tree or bush tops, even utility poles. Both sexes are brown mottled with white and sport a small crest, but the males have purplish air sacs that they inflate when displaying.



HABITAT:

Grasslands, particularly where they meet shrubby or wooded areas.



RING-NECKED PHEASANT

A large game bird introduced to southern Canada and the U.S. from the Old World, Ring-necked Pheasant is a common bird of agricultural areas, particularly in the northern Great Plains. The males have very long tails, a red face, green neck, and yellow bill, while females are overall brown, but paler below. The males’ distinctive harsh, cackling call followed by noisy wingbeats is a common sound in spring and summer.



HABITAT:

Agricultural areas and grasslands.

DID YOU KNOW?



Sharp-tailed Grouse sometimes build tunnels through snow for their night roosts. The tunnels provide protection from predators and insulation against extreme cold.

Source: https://www.allaboutbirds.org/guide/Sharp-tailed_Grouse/overview



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

- *Birds of the Great Plains* by Paul Johnsgard
- *Great Plains Birds* by Larkin Powell

CITIZEN SCIENCE APPS

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

DIY BIRD FEEDERS

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

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