



IN YOUR BACK YARD

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

SWCA



BIRDS
OF THE
MIDWEST



COMMON SPECIES

MOST LIKELY FOUND IN YOUR BACKYARD AND NEIGHBORHOOD

MOURNING DOVE

The Mourning Dove is a light gray and brown bird with black spots on the wings and a black spot on its cheeks. The male's woeful "coo-oo, coo-oo" song sounds like he is lamenting some loss; otherwise the species is silent. Mourning Doves build flimsy stick nests in trees, on building ledges, and even on the ground. 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:

Found most anywhere, except deep forest.



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 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 rural towns and 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.



WILD TURKEY

Ben Franklin's choice for our nation's symbol, the Wild Turkey is a common game bird in much of the Midwest. Males have completely naked blue-and-red heads with bright red wattles that hang below the bill. Females have some feathering on the head, which is a duller blue and red, and no wattles. Although they are mostly seen walking, Wild Turkeys can fly short distances and often roost for the night in large trees.

HABITAT:

Open forests and adjacent grasslands and croplands.



TURKEY VULTURE

Named for its bald red head that resembles a Wild Turkey, 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.



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.



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

HABITAT:

Wooded areas.



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.



In fall, Broad-winged Hawks migrate en masse from eastern North America to South America. Hawkwatchers have counted over 190,000 along the west shore of Lake Erie near Detroit, Michigan, and over 100,000 at Hawk Ridge near Duluth, Minnesota, in a single day.

**DID
YOU
KNOW?**



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 wing beats, 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.



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.



HAIRY WOODPECKER

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

HABITAT:

Woodlands, river edges, and neighborhood backyards.

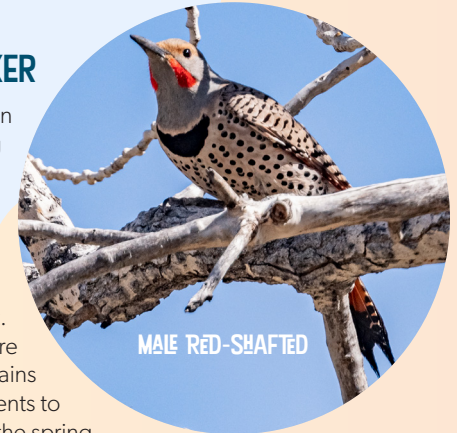


NORTHERN FLICKER

This species is the most common woodpecker in the Midwest, at least during summer; 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 occur in the U.S., but only the yellow-shafted form is found in much of the Midwest. The red-shafted form and hybrids are very rare on the border of the Midwest and Great Plains regions. Males love to use gutters and roof vents 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

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.





BLUE JAY

One of the few blue birds in the Midwest, the Blue Jay is blue above and gray below with a noticeable crest and prominent black necklace. Blue Jays make 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.



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. It is one of the most intelligent bird species which has learned to exist around people. American Crows can be a common sight around towns, agricultural settings, and fast food parking lots.

HABITAT:

Neighborhoods, parks, woodlands, and farmlands.



RUBY-THROATED HUMMINGBIRD

The default hummingbird throughout eastern North America, the Ruby-throated Hummingbird graces our backyard nectar feeders and flower gardens from late April to October. Although it subsists on nectar, the species also eats mosquitos, gnats, aphids, and spiders. Males are brilliant emerald green above with an iridescent red throat, while the females are duller green and have a white throat.

HABITAT:

Deciduous woodlands, orchards, and forest edges.

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, 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.



CAROLINA CHICKADEE

A seemingly happy bird, Carolina Chickadees are nearly identical to Black-capped Chickadees in plumage and behavior but have a different song. The species ranges meet along a very thin line from northern Ohio to central Missouri. Often in family groups and will travel with Tufted Titmice. Namesake call is a rapid "chickadee-dee-dee" but its primary song is a whistled "fee-bee, fee-bay." Will visit bird feeders and nest in birdhouses.

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 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.

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.



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, open garages, and even car bumpers looking for bugs. Will readily nest in bird houses, potted plants, and mailboxes!

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.



EASTERN BLUEBIRD

Bluebirds are often seen on fences and power lines along rural roads. The male is a deep blue with a rusty throat and breast. The female is grayish above with blue wings. Bluebirds will easily nest in a box; so if you have enough open area in your yard, consider putting up a nest box.

HABITAT:

Open areas, meadows, golf courses, 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.



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.





BROWN THRASHER

Usually arrives in early April and departs mid-fall, but some 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 are around! Its musical song is repeated in two's and three's. The Brown Thrasher is rufous on the upper parts, with a long tail, long decurved bill with dark streaking on buff underparts. It is the only thrasher we get in the eastern U.S.

HABITAT:

Forest edges, thickets, and shelterbelts.



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.

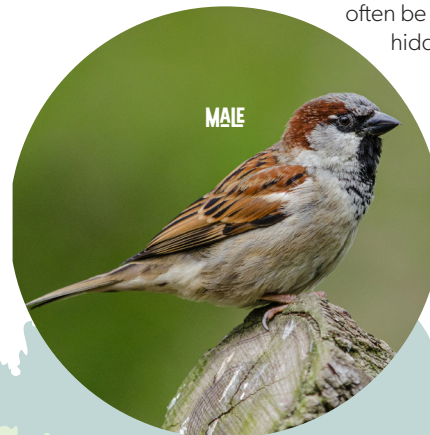


EUROPEAN STARLING

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. During the breeding season, look for the blue base to the bill of males and the pink base of females. They nest in cavities, whether in a tree, streetlight, or birdhouse.

HABITAT:

Cities, towns, and suburbs.



MALE

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 above 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 incessantly.

HABITAT:

Cities, towns, and suburbs.



FEMALE



GRAY CATBIRD

Gray Catbird is a summer breeding bird, migrating for the winter to points in the southern United States. As its name suggests, it is a gray bird with black cap and rusty undertail and can often be heard making a cat-like mewing call. Catbirds can be enticed to a feeder by providing grape jam and sliced fruit.

HABITAT:

Areas of dense brush and thickets of young trees.

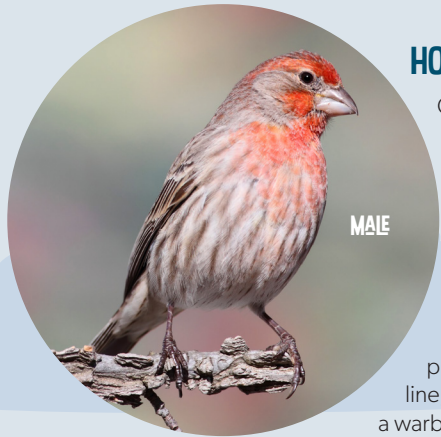


DARK-EYED JUNCO

These birds are commonly seen in flocks during migration and the winter months, often visiting feeders. Several subspecies occur in the U.S., but only the Slate-colored form is common in the Midwest. 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.



HOUSE FINCH

Originally a native of the southwestern U.S., this bird was introduced to the Eastern U.S. in the 1940s where it has slowly expanded westward throughout the Midwest. 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.



PURPLE FINCH

A resident of the northern Midwest, some Purple Finches move south during late fall and winter where they may be found visiting bird feeders with sunflower seeds. Male Purple Finches are distinguished from the abundant House Finches by their raspberry red coloration, especially on the face and back. Females have a white eyebrow and more contrasting facial markings than House Finches.

HABITAT:

Woodlands, old fields, and backyards.



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 males 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.

CHIPPING SPARROW

This a common summer sparrow in the Midwest. It has a bright rufous cap and a black eye line.

The species' song is a long trill of evenly spaced notes. Chipping Sparrow 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.



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 bird feeders.

HABITAT:

Neighborhoods, gardens, parks, and 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 Midwest from a long migration they will eat oranges and grape jam if provided at your feeders.

HABITAT:

Deciduous forest treetops, parks, forest edges and back yards.



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.



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 bright yellow eyes. 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.



MALE



FEMALE

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 belly, and a distinctive red breast. The females are brown, heavily streaked, with a prominent white eyebrow. Rose-breasted Grosbeaks frequently visit feeders during migration and in summer.

HABITAT:

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



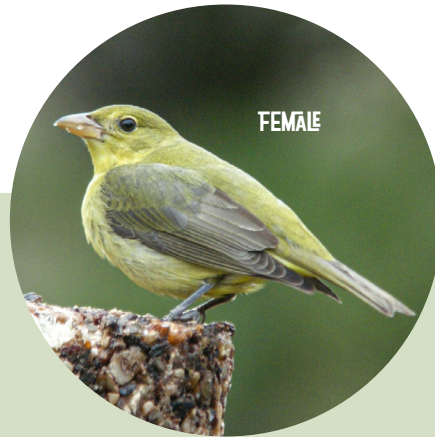
MALE

SCARLET TANAGER

Breeding males are beautiful red birds with black wings and tails – unmistakable! The female is olive-yellow with a darker tail and wings. Scarlet Tanagers feed on insects but will also eat fruit during their migration. A few orange wedges or bananas will appeal to tanagers and orioles alike.

HABITAT:

Deciduous forests and woodlots.



FEMALE

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 a light brown, with a plain face and fine streaking on the breast and faint wingbars (females can be confused with sparrows). Interestingly, the Indigo Bunting has no blue pigment and they are actually black. The diffraction of light through their feathers gives them the blue coloration.

HABITAT:

Shrubby fields, shelterbelts, and woodland edges.



WHITE-THROATED SPARROW

This bird will likely be most common around your yard during migration in the spring and fall, but can over winter, particularly in the south of this region, readily visiting feeders. As a boreal species, it will migrate north to higher latitudes during 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.

BLACK-AND-WHITE WARBLER

One of over 30 species of warbler that can be found in the Midwest, this species does not hide in the tree canopy like most of the others. Black-and-white Warblers are often seen creeping along tree limbs and climbing up trunks probing for insects hiding behind the bark. Aptly named, it is a distinctively black and white striped species. Males are blacker on the face and throat, while the females have a white throat and are paler overall.

HABITAT:

Woodlots and forest edges.



YELLOW-RUMPED WARBLER

A beautiful spring and fall migrant that has a bold yellow rump patch you will see when it flies. This species has a bold black face mask, white throat, and a large yellow patch on its sides and rump. Usually not seen at feeders, this species is common enough during migration that you are likely to see several in your backyard and neighborhood park.

HABITAT:

Open forests and wooded parks.



BEYOND YOUR BACKYARD

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



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 in mature forests and might even use a nest box.

HABITAT:

Forests and treed swamps.



RED-SHOULDERED HAWK

A beautiful hawk with robin-red underparts and barred black-and-white wings and tail, this bird often occurs near water. May be seen perched on a telephone wire, in a tree along the side of a road, or flying overhead. In flight, the barred tail is evident and light can be seen shining through "windows" out near the tips of the wings. Relatively quiet for much of the year, Red-shouldered Hawks can be noisy when setting up their territories, screaming out a loud "kee-yah, kee-yah" that is often imitated by Blue Jays.

HABITAT:

Greenbelts, parks, wooded neighborhoods, and woodlands.



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, the species 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 Midwest, most abandoned houses and outbuildings host at least a few pairs. Barn Swallows, like all swallows, forage for flying insects while on the wing, even while migrating between breeding areas and South American winter grounds. 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.



EURASIAN COLLARED-DOVE

Since its introduction to Florida in the early 1980s, the Eurasian Collared-Dove has expanded across much of the U.S. It is still rare in many areas of the northern and eastern Midwest. 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.

HABITAT:

Towns, suburbs, and rural grain elevators



KILLDEER

One of the few shorebirds that often breed away from water.

Killdeer is highly tolerant of humans and their environs and 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.





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 Midwest: Identify Backyard Birds with Ease – Stan Tekiela
- The Sibley Field Guide to Birds of Eastern North America – 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](#)

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