



IN YOUR BACK YARD

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

SWCA



BIRDS OF
THE
SOUTH
WEST



COMMON SPECIES

MOST LIKELY FOUND IN YOUR BACKYARD AND NEIGHBORHOOD

GAMBEL'S QUAIL

Gambel's Quail are a bird commonly associated with the deserts of the southwest. 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:

Found in shrubby deserts and open areas. Typically found on the outskirts of town but can be present in suburbs where there is appropriate habitat.



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!

EURASIAN COLLARED-DOVE

A recently established species throughout the country, the Eurasian Collared-Dove can now be commonly found near areas of human habitation. This dove can be identified by its pale appearance and the presence of a black collar on the back of its neck. Listen for the dove's peculiar "hwaah" call given when alarmed and before landing.

HABITAT:

Found in urban, suburban, and rural areas.



ROCK PIGEON (FERAL PIGEON)

The Rock Pigeon has many different plumages, but all individuals have pink legs and a white base to the bill. The most common plumage has a dark-gray neck with green or purple iridescence and gray wings with two black wingbars.

HABITAT:

Found near areas of human habitation, avoids areas of tall and dense vegetation. Rock pigeons commonly use buildings and highway overpasses or bridges for nesting.





WHITE-WINGED DOVE

The White-winged Dove can be found in urban areas and deserts of the southwest. They are typically only seen in the summer but can stay year-round in some areas.

This large dove can be identified by its white wing coverts that can be seen both while perched and in flight. The bird also has bright red feet and blue skin that surrounds the eye.

HABITAT:

Cactus-palo verde deserts, riparian woodlands, and urban areas near deserts or riparian woodlands.

BLACK-CHINNED HUMMINGBIRD

Black-chinned Hummingbirds can be found throughout much of the southwest during migration and summer.

The male Black-chinned Hummingbird can be identified by its dark head with black chin that shows iridescent purple only in certain light. Females can be identified by their bronze-green back and cream-colored throat and sides. This species will readily come to hummingbird feeders.



HABITAT:

Riparian areas, as well as suburban areas with tall trees and flowering shrubs.

MOURNING DOVE

Mourning Doves are common visitors to yards and bird feeders in urban and rural habitats. These doves typically forage on the ground for seeds in small groups. Mourning Doves are identified by their long tail and wings and their overall brown-gray coloration with black spots on wings. The species' sad-sounding "coo" gave way to this species' common name.



HABITAT:

Habitats vary widely and can occur in both urban and rural areas.

RED-TAILED HAWK

The Red-tailed Hawk 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, the 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 a bit from side to side.

HABITAT:

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

ANNA'S HUMMINGBIRD

Anna's Hummingbirds are the most common hummingbird in urban and suburban areas of the southwest. Male Anna's Hummingbirds can be identified by their iridescent rose-colored head and gorget. The females can be identified by their small rose-colored feathers on their throat and overall grayish coloration. This species will readily come to hummingbird feeders.

HABITAT:

Preferred habitat includes chaparral, riparian woodlands, as well as less-natural urban and suburban environments.





AMERICAN KESTREL

The American Kestrel is the smallest and most widespread falcon in the United States. It hunts insects and small rodents. Both males and females have rusty backs and tails, but the male's slaty-blue wings make it unmistakable if provided with good views. Similar to other falcons, these tiny predators have a distinctly helmeted look with black lines that extend down the face behind and in front of the eye.

HABITAT:

Open habitats and city edges.



VERDIN

Verdins are small, gray birds with yellow heads, sharply-pointed bills, and red patches on their shoulders that are only occasionally seen. They are commonly found moving through brush and small trees in deserts and suburban areas throughout the southwest. Verdins feed on nectar and can sometimes be seen frequenting hummingbird feeders. Fruits and insects make up the rest of the Verdin's diet. Listen for their high pitched calls, given often during the morning and evening.

HABITAT:

Deserts and suburban areas.

GILA WOODPECKER

Gila Woodpeckers can regularly be heard hammering away at just about any hard surface in the Tucson and Phoenix metropolitan areas. This species is distinctly two-toned, with a creamy brown head and belly and an extensively black-and-white barred back, wings, and rump.

HABITAT:

Can nest in just about any southwestern desert habitat where there are trees or saguaros that provide large-enough nest cavities.



NORTHERN ROUGH-WINGED SWALLOW

The Northern Rough-winged Swallow can often be seen flying low over open areas, feeding on aerial insects. This bird can be identified as a swallow based on its behavior and from there can be identified as a Northern Rough-winged Swallow by its overall drab brown and white coloration. These swallows most often nest in burrows in banks of clay, sand, or gravel, but can also nest in almost any cavity or crevice such as buildings and bridges.

HABITAT:

Open areas, typically near water.

WESTERN KINGBIRD

The conspicuous Western Kingbird is a staple of open habitats during the summertime in the western United States. These flycatchers can be identified by their gray head and chest, bright yellow belly, and black tail with white edges.

HABITAT:

Open habitat, riparian areas, shrublands, agricultural lands, deserts, and urban areas.



RUBY-CROWNED KINGLET

The always-moving Ruby-crowned Kinglet is one of the United States' smallest songbirds (along with the Verdin!). It is overall olive-green colored, with a prominent white wingbar (stripe on wing) and a white eyering. The ruby crown, for which the bird is named, can only rarely be seen on the male birds. The kinglet spends its summers high in spruce-fir forests, but comes down in elevation during migration and winter.

HABITAT:

Variety of habitats from forests to suburban yards.



EUROPEAN STARLING

The European Starling is a nonnative species to the United States and can be identified by its overall glossy black plumage, short tail, and long, pointed bill. The starling's bill turns bright yellow during the breeding season, then fades to black during the non-breeding season. The European Starling is very adaptable. It can nest in almost any kind of cavity and can eat almost anything, helping it become one of the most abundant birds in the country.



HABITAT:

Agricultural areas and places with human activity.

CURVE-BILLED THRASHER

The loud, two-syllable whistle of the Curve-billed Thrasher is a commonly heard sound in the deserts of Arizona, New Mexico, and Texas. These robin-sized birds are identified by their overall brown color with a light-gray throat, chest, and belly, which is covered with small, circular brown spots. These thrashers also have long, curved bills and bright orange eyes. They can be found tossing debris with their long bills while on the ground looking for insects, fruits, and seeds.

HABITAT:

Can be seen in low-elevation deserts and in suburban-urban areas within those deserts.

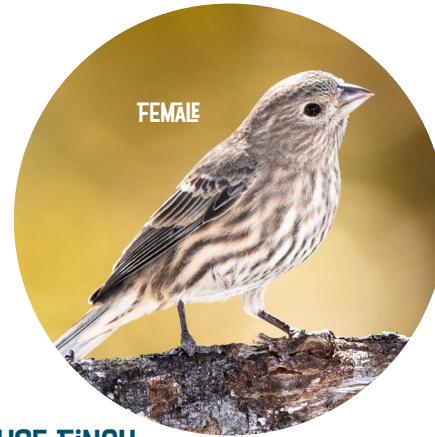


NORTHERN MOCKINGBIRD

The Northern Mockingbird is a common year-round resident in most of the country. Mockingbirds are known for their complex songs, for their ability to mimic sounds, and for singing in the middle of the night. They can be identified visually by their overall gray coloration, medium size, long legs and tail, and the presence of two white wingbars.

HABITAT:

Open habitats with shrubs and dispersed trees, as well as suburban and urban areas.



HOUSE FINCH

House Finches are one of the most common and numerous birds present in the desert southwest. Male House Finches can be identified by their bright red head and chest, brown back, and brown-and-white streaked belly. Females are similar but lack the red coloration of males. Both males and females have the large finch bill used for cracking open seeds. House Finches will readily come to almost any kind of seed feeder.

HABITAT:

Variety of habitats including dry deserts, grasslands, woodlands, coniferous forests, and near areas of human habitation.



LESSER GOLDFINCH

Lesser Goldfinches are small, yellow, seed-eating birds that occur in the desert southwest year-round. Male Lesser Goldfinches have black on the crown and black wings with a white patch in the middle, otherwise they are bright yellow and have a dull, green back. Females lack the black highlights seen in males but are also an olive-green color overall. Goldfinches often feed in flocks and will readily come to thistle seed feeders.

HABITAT:

Variety of habitats from oak woodlands to riparian areas to residential neighborhoods.



ABERT'S TOWHEE

You'll likely only see Abert's Towhees in your yard if you have a nice, unsightly scrub pile in the corner of your lot, where this bird can be seen scratching on the ground for seeds. Abert's Towhees are a drab brown overall with a black loreal patch in front of the eye and a rusty undertail.

HABITAT:

Dense brush, often near water.



GREAT-TAILED GRACKLE

The bane of many an outdoor diner, the Great-tailed Grackle is larger than most other urban and suburban birds and likes to throw its weight around. This species is, accordingly, one of the most common birds of the developed areas of the southwest. The male is glossy black with an exceedingly long, creased tail and a yellow eye. The female is slightly smaller and brownish, but also has a long, oversized tail. This species produces a vast repertoire of loud rattles, whistles, and screeches. If you've ever wondered what's giving that obnoxious call in your backyard, there's a good chance it's this bird.

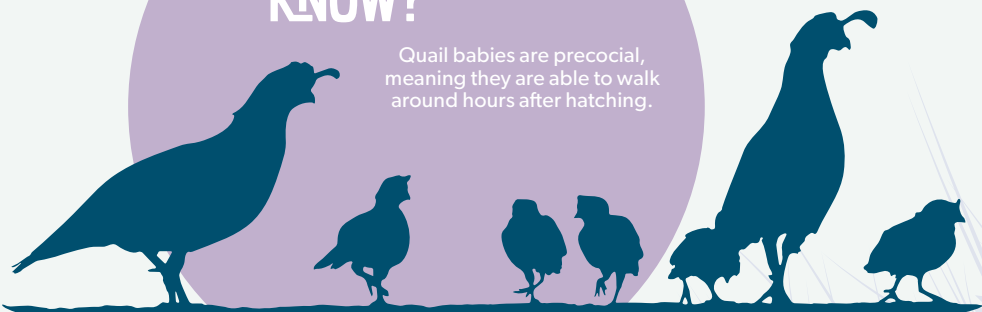
HABITAT:

Ubiquitous across all urban and suburban habitats of the desert southwest.



DID YOU KNOW?

Quail babies are precocial, meaning they are able to walk around hours after hatching.



YELLOW-RUMPED WARBLER

Although Yellow-rumped Warblers breed in colder climates, these beautiful migrants can be found in just about any habitat in the desert southwest in the winter and on migration. This species gets its name from the prominent yellow patch on its rump that shows itself when this bird takes flight. In the west, both sexes show a yellow throat. Females are generally a drab brownish gray overall, whereas males show bright yellow throats and sides. These birds feed on insects and berries, so can be found in any vegetation that provides either of these food sources.

HABITAT:

Found in just about any habitat during the winter months and during migration but is particularly abundant in any area that provides trees, like neighborhoods and city parks.





BEYOND YOUR BACKYARD

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

INCA DOVE

A small, scaly-looking dove, the Inca Dove can be found feeding beneath bird feeders or on lawns in suburban habitats across the southwest. This species can be identified by its small size, scaly appearance, and rusty-colored wings (visible only during flight). Inca Doves will commonly feed on the ground beneath bird feeders.



HABITAT:
Suburban habitats.

COSTA'S HUMMINGBIRD

Costa's Hummingbirds are uncommon to common depending on where you are in the southwest. This small hummingbird can be found in desert scrub during the winter and chaparral during the hotter months. This species can be identified by its small size, short tail, and on the male, an extensive purple gorget that droops down on the sides. Costa's Hummingbirds can show up at suburban hummingbird feeders in the right areas.



HABITAT:
Riparian areas and desert scrub and chaparral.

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 Phoebes are best known for their rusty belly and undertail that stands out against their otherwise drab brownish plumage.

HABITAT:
Urban areas and open deserts throughout the southwest.



VERMILION FLYCATCHER

The male Vermilion Flycatcher is arguably the most striking bird of the desert southwest. This bright scarlet and black bird is unlike anything else you'll encounter in the region. This species can be seen perched on a conspicuous branch and regularly sallying out to snag passing insects.

HABITAT:
Often found near water and in any habitat that resembles a wet meadow, like golf courses, parks, and agricultural areas.



ASH-THROATED FLYCATCHER

The Ash-throated Flycatcher is a migrant species that spends its summers in a variety of low- to mid-elevation habitats across the western United States (you can find them year-round in Tucson). They are identified by their pale yellow bellies, short brown crest, and rufous coloring on the wings and tail. These flycatchers can be somewhat noisy, so listen for their distinctive two-syllable calls.

HABITAT:
Brushy, wooded areas, as well as along desert streams.



CACTUS WREN

The call of the Cactus Wren is an iconic sound of the desert southwest. This large, bold wren can be identified by its long and slightly curved bill, white supercilium (or eyebrow), brown back with white stripes, and its spotted chest and belly. They are found in the deserts of the United States, typically near cholla cacti. Cactus Wrens love to build their globular-shaped nests in chollas, saguaros, and other spiny plants that help protect them against predators.

HABITAT:
Deserts with cacti and yucca, particularly areas with large cholla.





PHAINOPEPLA (BLACK CARDINAL)

The Phainopepla, sometimes known as the Black Cardinal, are medium-sized birds with large crests and long tails. The male is overall glossy black except for white patches on its wings seen during flight. Females are similar but only gray instead of glossy black. During the fall, winter, and spring seasons, Phainopeplas can be found at low elevations along desert washes and on the edges of town feeding on desert mistletoe berries. In summer, Phainopeplas move upslope to chaparral and oak habitats.

HABITAT:

Found in dry woodlands and deserts in the southwest.



BROWN-HEADED COWBIRD

The Brown-headed Cowbird owes much of its best-known trait to the great bison herds of the central Great Plains, which kept this species always on the move. To stick with the food associated with these huge herds, the Brown-headed Cowbird needed to also always be on the move. So, it became what is known as a "brood parasite," a species that lays its eggs in another bird's nest. Although the bison herds have largely vanished, deforestation and the human-induced watering of the southwest have allowed historically low numbers of the cowbird to flourish in the desert. Females are plain, drab brown with a large bill, whereas males are a glossy dark color with a namesake brown head. Listen for this species' diagnostic call that sounds like a drop of water.

HABITAT:

A variety of habitats but prefers to feed in grassy fields or areas with livestock.

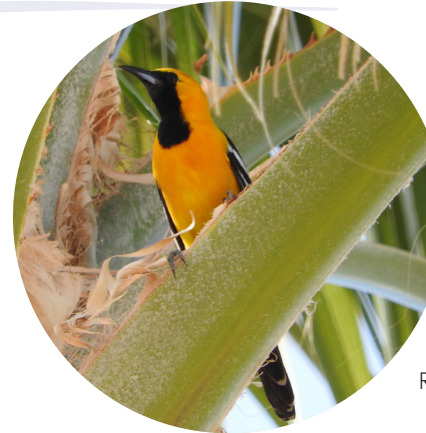


HERMIT THRUSH

Hermit Thrushes are shy birds that spend lots of time low in the brush or on the ground. They can be identified by their reddish-brown back and tail, combined with a white chest and belly that is covered in bold, black spots. Hermit Thrush like to feed on fruit and insects.

HABITAT:

In the desert southwest, this species can only be found in winter and during migration. During those times of year, the Hermit Thrush can be found in a variety of habitats from pine forests to chaparral to suburban yards.



HOODED ORIOLE

This flashy bird builds its hanging nest from the underside of a palm frond. Although the female is generally characterized as a drab yellow overall, male Hooded Orioles are a striking orange or bright yellow offset by a pitch black throat.

HABITAT:

Regularly seen in any neighborhood dotted with fan palms.

WHITE-CROWNED SPARROW

White-crowned Sparrows are winter residents of the desert southwest. This sparrow can be identified by its black-and-white striped crown, gray underparts, brown wings and tail, long pink legs, and a small bill that can be pink, brown, orange, or yellow. These sparrows are regular visitors to backyard bird feeders.

HABITAT:

Weedy or brushy areas and backyards.



ORANGE-CROWNED WARBLER

The Orange-crowned Warbler breeds in the mountains of the western United States and in the forests of Canada and Alaska. In the winter, this is one of the most common species of warblers in the desert. Unlike the name implies, you'll be hard-pressed to ever see an orange crown on this bird. Instead, look for a small, completely olive-green bird (though one subspecies shows a gray head and body) with just a hint of an eyeline and a needle-thin bill.

HABITAT:

Just about any brushy or deciduous habitat will do for this species while on its wintering grounds.



YELLOW WARBLER

The Yellow Warbler breeds in riparian habitats throughout the United States. But during migration, this vibrant species can visit almost any backyard. Although both sexes do this species' namesake yellow, females are drabber and males are bright yellow with faint red streaks across the chest and flanks.

HABITAT:

Riparian forests, particularly where young willows are present.

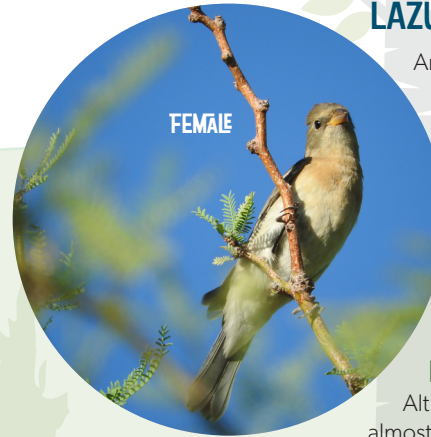


LAZULI BUNTING

Another showy bird of the desert migration, the male Lazuli Bunting is a beautiful mix of bright blue back and head with an orange chest and flanks. Females are drab brown and can be confusingly similar to many other desert species.

HABITAT:

Although this species can be found in almost any patch of green in the desert, they are most at home in scrubby or weedy areas near water.



FEMALE



MALE

WILSON'S WARBLER

This tiny yellow warbler can be common in the southwest during migration. Although the bright yellow female doesn't have any other diagnostic features, the male Wilson's Warbler is known for its prominent black cap placed neatly on the top of its head.

HABITAT:

This species can be found in a variety of scrubby or treed habitats during migration.



BLACK-HEADED GROSBEAK

This fat-beaked bird migrates through the desert in spring and fall. The males sports a prominent black head, black wings and tail, and a rusty orange body. Also look out for the bold white flashes in the wings when this bird takes flight. Young males also show the orange body of the adult counterparts but lack the black plumage characters. Females and young males show white lines above the eyes and along the mustache.

HABITAT:

Generally found in any area with large trees.



WESTERN Tanager

This medium-sized bird is one of the more stunning migrants found in the desert southwest. The male Western Tanager is a mix of black back, wings, and tail offset by an all yellow body and a bright red head or face. Females are yellow overall with black dark wings and two white or yellow wingbars.

HABITAT:

Any area with large trees.



COMMON RAVEN

The Common Raven is the beast of the desert and generally the only huge black bird near urban environments. This species is highly adaptable and easily subsidized by humans because they will eat just about anything available. Although this bird is as big or larger than a Red-tailed Hawk, it is actually considered the largest songbird in North America (and the world!).

HABITAT:

Desert and urban environments.





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
- [xeno-canto](#) - online resource for bird sounds

BOOKS

- National Geographic Field Guide to the Birds of North America, 7th Edition
- Peterson Field Guide to Birds of North America, 2nd Edition
- The Sibley Guide to Birds, 2nd Edition

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: Anna's Hummingbird, Ash-throated Flycatcher, Black-chinned Hummingbird, Cactus Wren, Costa's Hummingbird, Curve-billed Thrasher, Hooded Oriole, Lazuli Bunting female, Phainopepla in tree, Rock Pigeon, Say's Phoebe, Western Kingbird, Western Tanager, White-winged Dove - Justin Streit; Eurasian Collared-Dove - Eugene DeMayo; Gambel's Quail, Mourning Dove, Phainopepla in flight, Vermilion Flycatcher, White-crowned Sparrow - Mike Swink; American Kestrel, Lesser Goldfinch female, Common Raven, Wilson's Warbler - © Paul L. Brown; Northern Mockingbird, Turkey Vulture - © Scott Surner; Female House Finch - Richard Keller, withmephography.com; Turkey Vulture in flight, Red-tailed Hawk in flight - Brad Sutton, NPS; Red-tailed Hawk - Mark Bohn; Abert's Towhee, Northern Rough-winged Swallow, Orange-crowned Warbler, Ruby-crowned Kinglet, Verdin - Tyler Loomis; Gila Woodpecker - Pamela Gunn; Lazuli Bunting, Inca Dove, Yellow-rumped Warbler - Alan Schmierer; Hermit Thrush - Neal Lewis, NPS

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