

American Robin *Turdus migratorius*



Folk Name: Robin Redbreast

Status: Resident

Abundance: Very Common to Abundant

Habitat: Trees and shrubs, open lawns, farmland, residential areas, parks, and more

The American Robin is one of our most common and most recognized songbirds. It has been called “the best known bird in the United States,” and it has adapted well to our country’s expanding urban and suburban landscapes. Most people know the robin by sight as it is a common bird on residential lawns in rural areas, towns, and major cities. Many are also familiar with its *cheerily-cherrup-cheerio* song that it sings throughout the spring.

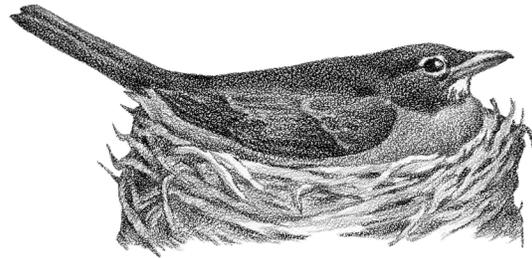
In 1915, the *Wadesboro Messenger and Intelligencer* and other newspapers reported the results of a national bird census conducted by federal biologists and their volunteers. It concluded the American Robin was the most numerous bird in all of America, with the House Sparrow “a close second.” Today, the robin is still one of our most abundant birds, while the population of the non-native House Sparrow has declined steeply.

The American Robin is a permanent resident in the Carolinas. It nests throughout both states, and in spring, adults are often observed on lawns feeding worms to their spotted young. Large flocks are found in the Carolinas during the fall and winter months as local birds flock together, and large numbers of northern robins move into this part of the South to spend the winter. Flocks numbering in the thousands are often seen in February and March.

In 1942, Maurice Stimson described the annual life cycle of the robin in Iredell County this way:

A great many people say “Spring is here; the robins have come back,” but strictly speaking, the robins did not come back, because they had never gone away. In the fall of the year when the fruit in your yard and garden is exhausted and the earth worms have dug deeper into the earth, the robin leaves lawns and gardens in town and goes into the surrounding woods, where wild fruit is abundant and where he can find insects among the leaves. He does not go [far] away. He and his companions have their roosting places in cane brakes beside creeks and streams, or in pine thickets. In late winter and early spring they pair off and go back to lawns and gardens to live through summer and fall.

Nesting in the Central Carolinas generally occurs from March through July. The nest is a bowl-shaped mud-lined



cup filled with fine grasses. Two broods of four eggs are common. Nesting can occur earlier and later, but this is not common. Nesting has been confirmed for American Robin as early as 21 January in the Carolina Piedmont. One very early nest attempt was documented in Charlotte in 1999. A pair of robins built a nest during the last week of January and had laid three eggs by the first week of February, but the nest ultimately failed.

On February 22, 1927, William McIlwaine wrote: “The robins of course are with us in numbers. The first song I heard was on February 12. It has been keeping up ever since.” Most nest building in this region starts in March when robins are seen busily collecting nesting material along streets and in yards. McIlwaine had “two eggs in a Robins nest” on March 31, 1929.

Frank Washam reported a nest of an American Robin on April 19, 1941. It was built about 10 feet up in a shrub growing at the corner of a building on the campus of Davidson College. There were three sky blue eggs. Charlie Sellers reported a nest in Charlotte on April 28, 1941. It



American Robin. (Gary P Carter)

was built 8 feet off the ground in a clematis vine and only a few feet from the front door of his home. It had four eggs actively being incubated. Elizabeth Clarkson confirmed six robin nests in her yard at Wing Haven in the spring of 1943, and in 1944, she recorded the first nest being built on 17 March.

During the late nineteenth and early twentieth century the American Robin was considered a game bird. Large numbers of American Robins were routinely killed in eastern states during the winter months while they foraged or roosted in massive flocks. Many states had year-round open season on these birds. After 1900, some states enacted specific hunting seasons and limits for robins, but enforcement was lax.

In 1907, this report was shared from South Carolina:

About February 21 the first Robins made their appearance in this vicinity, and almost immediately a wholesale slaughter began. Boys just large enough to hold a gun (many with sling shots), men and even women, all joined in the "sport." You can hardly look out on the streets that you do not see some one passing with a string of a dozen or more birds. They seem to vie with each other to see who can kill the most. Only last evening, the gentleman with whose family we board came in after only a few hours' gunning with a bag full of Robins. You think, when every one, almost, that you meet is bent upon the self-same errand, that it is a wonder there are any Robins left to continue the journey northward.

In 1913, the North Carolina Audubon Society sponsored a bill designed to protect robins from this indiscriminate slaughter. Immediate resistance was mounted against passage of this bill, and it successfully passed in only 11 of North Carolina's 100 counties. Mecklenburg County was one of these. A few years later, more counties passed laws protecting these birds. Finally, after the establishment of the state game commission, the robin was designated a protected species at the state level.

In March 1928, American Robins in Gastonia made state headlines. Massive flocks were "a sight to behold" roosting nightly just 200 yards off New Hope Road. *The Charlotte News* reported:

For two weeks, untold thousands and millions of this red-breasted and handsome bird have made their temporary home in a big patch of pine woods and their antics in the air and on their perches have been observed by many local people. According to old-timers, nothing like the swarms of birds, which fill the air like buzzing bees, has been seen since the days of the old carrier [Passenger] pigeons which used to come in such immense flocks...They came in small numbers the first days evidently being of a reconnoitering party to ascertain the

lay of the land. Whether they knew of the new bird laws that protects migratory birds by rigid statutes or not, the rest of their companions came on in untold numbers and many of them are still here. Boll weevils, scourge of cotton farmers, have been on the run due to the depredations of the hungry robins, for whom there has not been near enough long and juicy red worms to satisfy their appetites. Farmers are rejoicing for this reason, if nothing else...Several men from the Belmont section were arrested for killing the birds and sacking them for disposal at dinner tables but they were arrested and made to pay small fines.

In January 1928 in Randolph County, an attempt was made to stop the "wholesale killing of Robins which was quite common in former days." Several raids were being made on local robin flocks roosting in pines and cedar thickets, with hundreds of birds killed at a time. Some flocks were so large they covered both sides of a stream for a distance of 3-4 miles long. One observer reported: "Those who witnessed this interesting spectacle described the flight-cloud as being more than 15 square miles in extent, about a mile wide and moving for half an hour at 30 miles an hour. ...Local sportsmen and other friends of the birds notified a County Warden and a member of the State Game Commission." The practice was soon "gotten well in hand."

Three large roosts of American Robins were reported in North Carolina in 1938 by T.M. Carter, a Game Protector with the NC Department of Conservation and Development. "Careful estimates of the number of birds were made by men trained in this work, and the total number of birds using the roosts this year was estimated at more than six millions." The largest roost of 3-4 million birds was found 10 miles north of Troy in Montgomery County. The second largest roost was found in Gaston County and contained about 1.5 million birds. Mr. Carter noted: "This roost was first observed about March 3, and was used for only two weeks longer. J.D. Finley, Game Protector, and I apprehended five men killing Robins in this roost, and they were subsequently tried and fined." The Game Protectors would patrol the roosts at night



American Robin on its nest. (Phil Fowler)

because the birds dispersed to feed during the day. The third roost was found in Randolph County.

Today, large flocks of American Robins are still found in the Carolinas each winter. They are usually found in mixed flocks with blackbirds, starlings, and grackles. Single species flocks of millions may be a thing of the past as today's robins breed throughout a wider range and their wintering flocks are more dispersed as well.

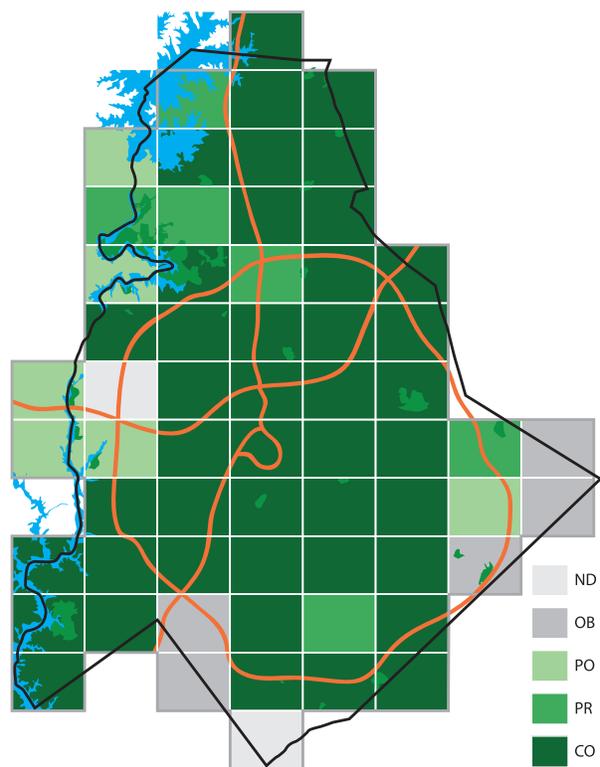
Leucistic American Robins have excited people's interest in the Central Carolinas many times over the years. Leucism (sometimes called leukism or incorrectly albinism) is a rare but regular phenomenon in birds. It is a condition whereby genetic mutation results in a lack of the pigment melanin in a bird's feathers, and therefore, many of its feathers are white or partially white. Birds that are "all white," "partially white," or "piebald" are quickly noticed by most people and often generate lots of interest. The degree of white present can alter the observer's perspective on the bird and in many instances can make the bird a bit tricky to identify.

Jack Dermid photographed a white American Robin from just a few feet away at Latta Park in Charlotte during the week of April 1-7, 1942. He was able to record various profiles and shots that clearly showed the birds "prominent white markings." Dermid later published his photographs.

Becky Norwood submitted this report:

One Sunday March 29, 1959, it was our privilege to observe an albino Robin in Salisbury, North Carolina. The local newspaper had carried an account, with photograph, of this bird, giving name and address of the man in whose yard it was seen. Always hopeful, we drove to this place and to our utter surprise the bird was there. Although to the naked eye it appeared white all over, it was not complete albino, there being some dark feathers in the right side of the tail and in the wing primaries. Also there was a suggestion of a rust color on the flanks. Feet and bill were yellow, and eyes dark. In behavior the bird was typically robin-like, remaining largely on the ground, running fast a short distance, then stopping to ferret out a worm or other food.

In 1966, Mrs. John S. Davis published a detailed account of the activities of a leucistic robin which visited her Charlotte yard from 17 to 23 January. In May 1968, newspaper photographer Joe Tyner photographed an "albino" robin in Charlotte after a 2-hour chase. In March 2012, Christy Hill sighted an almost all-white robin with a "faded brown eyebrow and pinkish breast" in east Charlotte. A quick look at the Carolina Bird Club's online Bird Photo Gallery will demonstrate the dramatic variation in the coloring of many of leucistic American Robins found in the Carolinas.



Mecklenburg County Breeding Bird Atlas:
Nearly Ubiquitous (PR/6, CO/43)