

Gray Catbird *Dumetella carolinensis*



Folk Name: Catbird

Status: Breeder and Winter Visitor

Abundance: Fairly Common

Habitat: Thickets (often moist), shrubs, residential areas

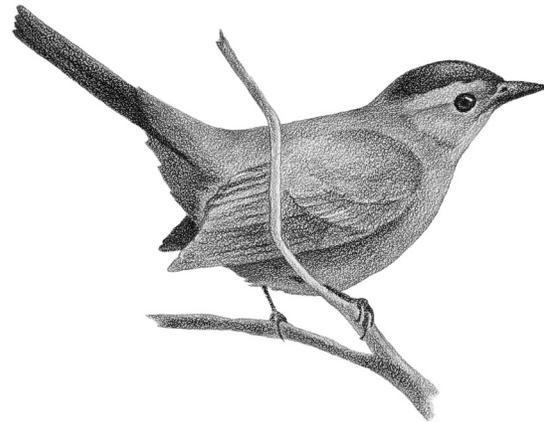
The Gray Catbird is the smallest and generally least common of our three Mimic Thrushes. It averages 8 ½ inches long. It is slate gray in color, it has a black cap and black on its tail, and it has a distinctive patch of rusty chestnut underneath its back end. It gets its common name from its *mew* call, which sounds a bit like a cat.

Like its relatives, the catbird has long been known as a mimic of other birds' songs, but recent research suggests that the male's song actually "results mostly from improvisation and invention, not via imitation." However, males do incorporate mimicry of songs and calls of other birds found in the area into their song repertoire. In fact, this species has been documented mimicking 44 other species of birds. In June of 1962, Joe Norwood reported a Gray Catbird mimicking the call of a Chuck-will's-widow in Charlotte. The bird couldn't quite get the complete call repeated, doing either the first part *chuck-will's* or the second part *will's widow*, but Norwood said it performed "an excellent imitation." It is interesting to note that the female Gray Catbird has been observed to quietly sing a matching duet with the male bird while she is hidden on the nest incubating her eggs.

Gray Catbirds eat a variety of insects and fruits throughout the year. Fruits make up the bulk of their diet in all seasons but spring. Before the era of the modern supermarket, people grew fruit in their yards to supplement their family's diet. Grapevines, raspberry vines, blackberries, strawberries, figs, cherry and apple trees, and many other fruits were popular in yards and on farms in this part of the South. Gray Catbirds were more common during this period, and they often lived in close proximity to people and their fruit groves.

At times, this close relationship became problematic. In 1904, North Carolina's T.G. Pearson reported "it is not an unheard of occurrence for men to order that all the robins, catbirds, and mockingbirds on their places should be shot, because these birds were seen eating cultivated fruit." As early as 1906, cherry growers had adopted the practice of using mosquito netting to protect their crop from hungry catbirds. *The Gastonia Gazette* reported one woman had trained her cats to climb her cherry trees each morning to scare away the catbirds. "The plan has proved very successful. Not a bird comes near the tree as long as the cats are around."

In May of 1912, Charlotte's *Evening Chronicle* reported that a "record breaking crop of fruit is promised" by



farmers in the region with the largest crop the area "has known for a generation," and "every May cherry tree in every orchard was laden down with fruits and the children and the catbirds seemed to be vying with each other in gathering them." That same month, the town of Lincolnton issued a special hunting license to fruit owners to shoot Gray Catbirds to prevent them from devouring the local fruit crop. Annie Farwell Brown published a poem in protest of this license and noted her poem was written "[i]n memory of those catbirds which may have been shot during the 30 days license recently granted by our city fathers to those fruit owners who grudge a few of their abundant crops to our friend, the catbird."

On January 20, 1915, one gardener shared an account in the *Salisbury Post* of what was described as the catbird's "greedy addiction" to her raspberries:

I don't know that I have ever seen it computed how many raspberries a catbird can eat, but I know it is more than I care to spare from the vines in my own garden, where a pair of catbirds who nest each year in a red osier dogwood beneath my study window love to feed. Out in our abandoned clearing, however, I do not begrudge them the berries, which grow in a corner where the vanished farmer made his last cutting of timber. Many a time I have lain on the ground up the slope in fruiting season and watched a catbird darting back and forth to these vines, as if their appetite were insatiable, his trim gun-metal body taking the hun on head or wing tip. Presently I would get up and stroll over to gather some berries for myself. You would have thought a band of human pickers had been there, to see all the whitish, thimble-shaped hulls hanging denuded from their stems. Even as I would put out my hand

for a red fruit there would come from the thicket close by a mew of protest and an angry flutter of wings.

Gray Catbirds usually build their open cup nests between 3 and 30 feet off the ground, often in dense thickets of vegetation. Webb's *Our Bird Book* for North Carolina's elementary science classrooms, provided students this description of a catbird's nest:

Have you ever examined the nest of a catbird after it has held its brimful share of wriggling bodies, naked necks, and gaping beaks? Few birds build a more substantial nest. Outside it is composed of sticks and leaves. Next comes layer upon layer of strips of bark gathered from grapevines and last year's weeds. These are laid round and round and packed so closely that neither rain nor cold can penetrate. Next to these are placed some blades of grass and the cup-shaped nest is then lined inside with the tiny roots of plants. The nests are built in low bushes, well concealed from prowling cats and skulking Jays, and in it four or five blue-green eggs are laid.

On May 15, 1928, Charlotte's William McIlwaine wrote: "The catbirds are just beginning to nest. A nest I located to-day held one egg. It was in a thick bush and close down over a little stream. The catbird builds ordinarily in thick tangles, and from five feet to ten feet from the ground. A pair is established this year just a few yards from my own back door."

Jack Dermid formally documented a nest of a Gray Catbird in Charlotte on June 10, 1941. He submitted his report to the North Carolina State Museum on a special nest record card developed by Elmer Brown and distributed to members of the North Carolina Bird Club.



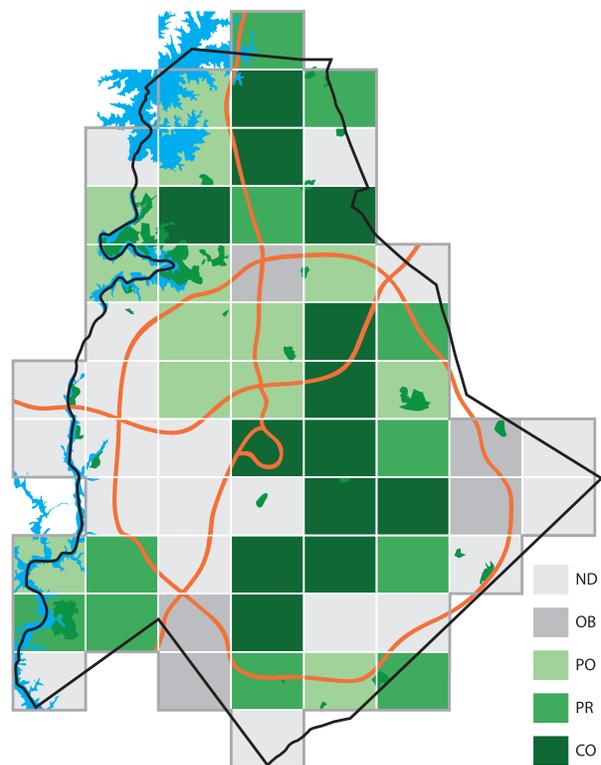
Gray Catbird visiting an American Beautyberry.
(Will Stuart)

Dermid discovered the nest "on the bank of a creek in growth of honeysuckle vines and trees." It was 4 ½ feet above the creek bank and had a total of four young. Elizabeth Clarkson found four Gray Catbird nests in Charlotte in the spring of 1943. She remarked:

The Catbirds have returned to my garden mated on the 19th of April for eight years in succession. But this year a lone male turned up on the 10th. They usually begin to build the day they arrive or the next day. This one was by himself until the 19th. He was on the window tray when I first saw him, so I ran downstairs, got the cheese and called him and he flew down on the ground beside me to pick it up.

H. Lee Jones later recalled Elizabeth Clarkson's special relationship with Gray Catbirds. On one spring in the late 1950s, he watched Clarkson "lying in her chaise lounge in the backyard with a small pile of meal worms in her lap. Within minutes, the recently arrived Gray Catbirds would appear from the bushes, hop up onto her lap, and snatch a morsel or two. Later in the season they would even feed their fledglings right there in her lap."

Gray Catbirds are most numerous here during spring and fall migration. Banding evidence from the Piedmont indicates some catbirds that move through our region nest in the northern United States. One was found dead at the base of the WSOC tower on October 11, 1959, and



Mecklenburg County Breeding Bird Atlas:
Fairly Widespread (PR/11, CO/13)

a total of 39 Gray Catbirds were collected at the tower in October 1960. Most of our breeding catbirds are believed to migrate south out of the region after breeding season.

One birdwatcher sent this letter to the editor of *The Gastonia Gazette* on May 8, 1908:

Where do cat-birds spend the winter?...I would like to know the answer to it. For four or five seasons a pair of catbirds—I feel sure it is the same pair each year— have been nesting at my house. They come in the early spring and rear their little ones in cherry-time, feeding them with my cherries. The little ones learn to fly, the summer comes on, home ties are broken, and my bird guests leave me. Which way do they journey and where do they spend their winters?

Today, we know most catbirds spend the winter along the coast of the southeastern United States, and south to Mexico and Panama. However, since at least the 1920s, a scattering of individual catbirds have been recorded wintering here in the Central Carolinas. Gray Catbirds have been recorded here during every month of the year, and over the past two decades, reports of wintering birds have been increasing. Since the turn of the twenty-first century, there have been nearly 100 reports of Gray Catbirds scattered around this region in the month of February alone.

The population of Gray Catbirds in both Carolinas is believed to have declined steadily over the past 50 years. In many areas, the early successional habitat that these birds prefer is now in short supply. They continue to do well in densely vegetated residential areas, but much of the commercial and residential fruit-growing sites they once thrived upon have now been lost.