

Northern Mockingbird *Mimus polyglottos*



Folk Name: Mockbird, Southern Nightingale

Status: Resident

Abundance: Very Common

Habitat: Urban areas, open residential areas, open farm land

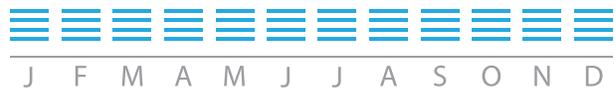
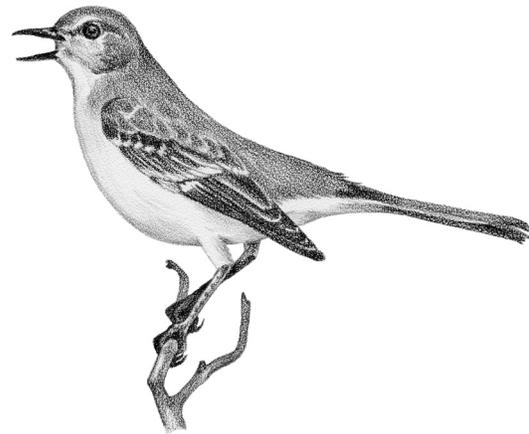
The Northern Mockingbird is one of our most abundant, ubiquitous, conspicuous, and most easily recognizable birds. Most people have heard its often incessant singing—mimicking various other birds’ songs, usually three times each, over and over again. This 10-inch-long bird is pale gray above and white below, and it has a long gray-black tail with white on the outer tail feathers. It has a yellow eye with a dark eye line. Its wings are almost black with large white patches near the tips.

The mockingbird is an icon of the Old South and everyone that grew up in the South was familiar with this “masterful songster.” In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, mockingbirds were often sold as caged birds and taught a variety of songs. Thomas Jefferson kept several “singing mockingbirds” as pets at Monticello and at least one had been taught American, French, and Scottish tunes. At that time, the breeding range of the Northern Mockingbird had not yet reached northern Virginia.

In 1855, the song “Listen to the Mockingbird” was written, and it quickly became one of the most popular tunes in America before, during, and after the Civil War. Millions of copies of sheet music of this song for the piano were sold, and people everywhere knew the tune and the lyrics. By 1874, laws were passed prohibiting the caging of mockingbirds. The fine in the South Carolina Piedmont was \$10 per bird, \$5 of which was to be paid to the informer.



Northern Mockingbird. (Gary P. Carter)



The mockingbird was officially designated the State Bird of South Carolina in 1939. The bill was sponsored by Rep. H.C. Gresham of Greenwood, a “bird-lover in his own right,” who included a \$10 fine in the bill, for anyone shooting the state bird. Gresham noted: “The song of the mockingbird is characteristic of the state, more so than the song of any other bird I know.” The bill was passed by both houses unanimously and was signed by the governor.

News of the selection of the mockingbird came as a very big surprise to many South Carolinians who had already voted for and selected the Carolina Wren as the State Bird of South Carolina in 1930. That effort had been led by the South Carolina Federation of Women’s Clubs and several nature organizations. A battle between the two sides soon erupted which led one editor with *The Chester Reporter* to quip:

Newspapers and others who are charging the legislature with loitering around Columbia for months and doing nothing overlooked the fact that the house recently passed a bill and sent it to the senate making the mockingbird the State bird of South Carolina. True we already had one—the wren—Mr. Alexander Sprunt, Jr., supervisor of Bird Sanctuaries for the National Association of Audubon Societies, says—but it at least manifests a desire and a disposition to do something.

It took almost a decade and the passage of World War II before the debate was finally settled. It was reported on March 24, 1948:

Amid much fervent oratory and changing of minds, the legislature today had officially agreed to change

the state bird of South Carolina from the mockingbird to the Carolina wren...the move to make a change had proved a source of much clowning and hilarity in both the senate and the house for weeks...The Senate had its innings of farce when it sought to substitute the night owl or the Old Crow (a bourbon whiskey) in honor of various members of the upper chamber.

Governor Strom Thurmond subsequently signed the final bill into law and the Carolina Wren officially replaced the mockingbird as the State Bird of South Carolina.

The Northern Mockingbird is a permanent resident of the Carolina Piedmont, but it becomes less abundant along the western edge of the Piedmont as one moves into the mountains. On a trip to Caesars Head, SC, in 1889, Leverett Loomis noted that mockingbirds were “abundant along the wayside, constantly darting down at my bird dog as he trotted ahead of the wagon” while he was in Chester and Union counties, but the mockingbirds became scarce as he approached Greenville. He did not find them at higher elevations while he was collecting in the mountains. A few years later, Loomis published a report of hearing a mockingbird near Chester imitate a total of 32 different types of birds in a space of 10 minutes.

One unique behavior of the Northern Mockingbird is that it may sing throughout the night. Many observers have remarked that before the age of air conditioning, people slept with their windows open, and were often forced to hear the continuous repetition of mockingbird songs all through the summer nights. Some ornithologists have speculated that these are unmated males. Occasionally, mockingbirds have been heard to do this during other seasons as well. In 1930, Charlotte’s William McIlwaine reported:

A gentleman from the neighborhood of old Philadelphia Church out in the county told me last Sunday (Dec. 23) that very recently a mockingbird

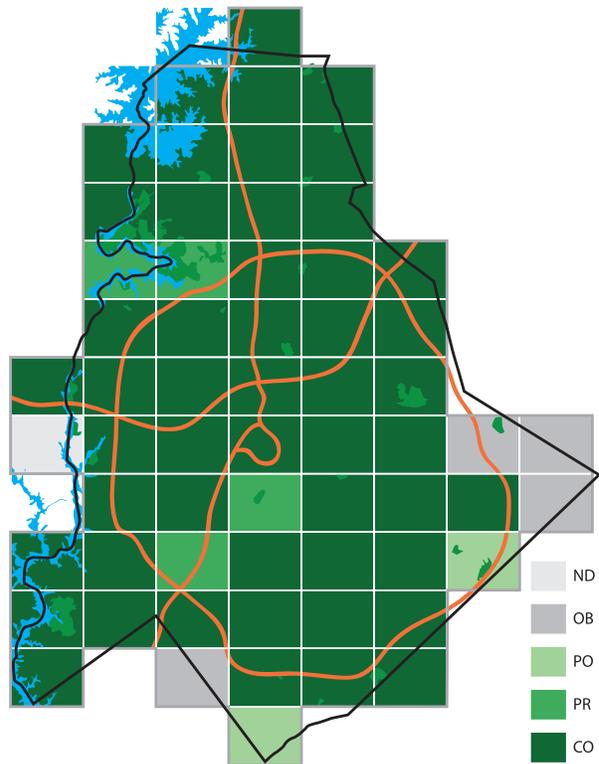
has been singing in the moonlight right by his porch. And he was very positive in his statement. This is most interesting. I have heard mockingbirds sing on pretty days in winter; but I have never before heard of their singing on winter nights.

Mockingbirds nest in most open habitats throughout the region. All they need is the cover of a bush or a tree with worms, bugs, and some berries nearby. They are extremely well adapted to urban life, and their nests are often built in somewhat conspicuous locations in very busy areas. They are one of our most easily observed nesting songbirds. In the Central Carolinas, mockingbirds generally begin breeding in February or early March, and they can continue into July. Three broods are not unusual. Joe Norwood watched an apparent “courtship display” in Charlotte on the very early date of January 27, 1961. Both William McIlwaine and David Wray reported active nesting in mid-late July.

McIlwaine found a mockingbird nest on July 13, 1926, with three eggs in it. He described the eggs as “blue with brown spots on them” and “oval shaped,” and he remarked that this bird was sitting quite late for a mockingbird. While shopping at Hackney Brothers nursery near Charlotte on July 14, 1943, Wray was confronted by a mockingbird employing various “antics” as it tried to distract him from its nest site. The bird flew madly about and made a great deal of noise. Wray soon located the



Northern Mockingbird at nest. (William G. Cobey)



Mecklenburg County Breeding Bird Atlas:

Nearly Ubiquitous (PR/4, CO/51)

bird's nest of sticks. It was built in a thorny *Pyracantha* bush about 5 feet off the ground and had a single large fledgling still in it.

Wing-flashing is a well-known mockingbird behavior. The bird runs around on the ground, flashes its wings, and briefly displays its white wing patches. Some birders think this is done to scare up insects to eat, but no one is quite sure why they do this. On July 27, 1948, Rhett Chamberlain observed a behavior he had never seen before. A baby mockingbird, just out of the nest, "hopped clumsily across the grass toward me, at my call, and stopped to raise his wings high over its back after the well-known manner of its parents—who were not present. The act was so deliberate that applause seemed expected. I had never before seen this performance by a fledgling."

Apparently, size matters for Northern Mockingbirds in the Carolina Piedmont. In the 1990s, researchers Michael and Teresa Justice studied these birds on the campus of UNC Greensboro and determined that male mockingbirds have larger white wing patches than females. They also concluded that the size of the wing patch was probably a critical factor for females when selecting a mate.

Northern Mockingbirds are well known for aggressively defending their nest territory. Even casual observers have noticed this fierce gray bird attacking and chasing larger birds like hawks and crows in the sky over their neighborhoods or city streets. Errant dogs and cats wandering too close often run quickly away as they are vigorously assaulted. The author has also experienced their aggressive nest defense:

Once, I was walking to the entrance of the student center at UNC Charlotte and was surprised when I noticed a large number of students just inside the glass doors—all looking intently out at me. I became a bit apprehensive as I approached the doorway wondering why I had become the subject of all of this attention. Within ten feet of the entrance, I heard a loud squawk and a mockingbird dived from overhead and repeatedly pecked me on the top of my head until I was able to rush inside. The entire group of students—all previous victims of this dramatic nest defense—erupted in laughter. I soon composed myself and joined the crowd to watch for the next person's arrival.