

Birding FROM THE Deer Blind

Introducing Texas Hunters
to Common Birds



Introduction

Despite traditional misconceptions, hunting and bird-watching are not mutually exclusive pastimes. Many of the skills and abilities developed as a hunter also befit a competent and skilled birder. Similarly, some of the skills developed as a birder will enhance hunting skills and overall appreciation for each trip to the blind.

Hunters enjoy many opportunities most birders never have. They have access to some fantastic properties that may not be available to others, such as leases, hunting clubs, etc. This access takes them into areas where the bird populations may be essentially unknown. Large, contiguous tracts of quality habitat have potential for rare or unusual bird species that may not be present in heavily birded areas. The nature of some of these areas—thicker brush, seasonal flooding, and remote locations—often makes them inaccessible to all but the most devoted outdoor enthusiast.

Hunting blinds, because they are often unattended for extended periods, have been used by birds as roost sites and even as nest sites. Ideally, blinds should be boarded up when not in use; however, should these situations arise, they should be respected. In most cases, the bird will have finished nesting by the time hunting season starts.

Unless otherwise noted, photos courtesy of Jim DeVries.

Text by Mark Klym.

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Hunting Has Helped Birds

Hunters have led the way in wildlife habitat conservation. The Pittman-Robertson Act of 1937 is a tax imposed on hunters every time they purchase firearms or ammunition. This successful “user-pay” model has funded wildlife and habitat management in all 50 states since its inception. Organizations such as Ducks Unlimited and the National Wild Turkey Federation have also contributed enormously. While the results of some of these efforts, such as the restoration of wetlands and prairie potholes provided by Ducks Unlimited, have benefited the hunter, their impact has been much more widespread than just benefiting game species. Through the establishment of these prairie potholes, shorebirds, waders, gulls and other species that are not hunted have thrived. Even endangered species, such as the Whooping Crane, have benefited in some cases.

Hunters have recognized declines and have led the way in calling for conservation of declining species. Hunters have been known to establish habitat management practices on their hunting properties that enhance habitat for a wide range of species, including those uncommon in the area. These practices, sometimes underreported, have set the framework for wider conservation measures in some cases.

Finally, by being familiar with the wildlife normally seen in an area, and by honing wildlife identification skills, hunters have noticed rare and unique bird species and brought them to the attention of others. While the hunter may have been unable to name the bird they saw, they often described it in sufficient detail to allow experts to make an “educated guess” at what the bird might be. By documenting the bird, new state and county records can be established.

Why Would I Want to Learn About Birds?

Deer hunters often spend extended periods of time sitting quietly in the blind waiting for game to approach. This quiet time allows for the observation of many animals that are not readily noticed. Learning to identify birds and find them in a field guide or online provides additional opportunities to hone powers of observation and share experiences with family and friends. It is also a way to enhance understanding of the natural world, thus leading to a strengthened conservation ethic. As you appreciate the birds around your hunting blind, other wildlife will also catch your attention. High-powered, close-focusing optics have made it possible to look at small mammals, reptiles, and other interesting creatures from a distance.

Learning to identify birds sometimes leads to distinguishing the differences between species. Developing the patience and skills needed to find and note these unique features will help you notice differences in body condition of deer and other game species. By selecting individuals for harvest, you can become a better hunter.

Because birds are associated with certain habitat conditions, getting to know which birds are likely to indicate the presence of water, grassland vegetation, heavy brush features, etc., will help you scout new territories and locate productive hunting areas.

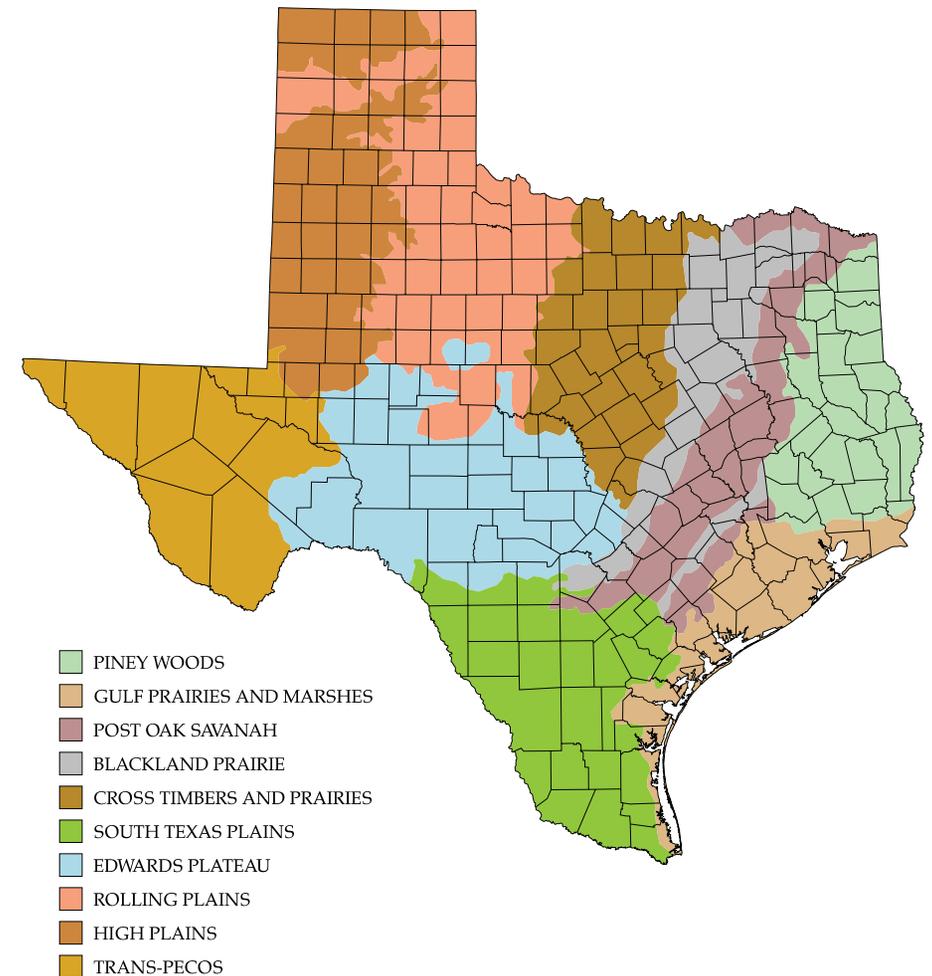
Some Birds You May Encounter From Your Blind

What you see from the blind depends on a lot of variables—the height, location or aspect of the blind; the month; time of day; weather conditions; natural and artificial food sources; and, most importantly, the

habitat surrounding the blind. These are just a few of the factors that can influence how diverse the bird life will be.

For a productive bird-watching experience, habitat edges are far more diverse than the interior of a constant vegetation type. Setting a blind to look along or toward an edge, or near a water feature, can be highly successful.

Due to its extreme geographic diversity, Texas has one of the most diverse bird populations in North America. The first step in bird identification is to know which ecological region you are hunting in. This booklet focuses on the birds likely to be seen from a deer blind during the deer hunting season in many areas of the state. Some of the birds that you might see are arranged by family group. Bird occurrences will be noted with reference to the ecoregions outlined on this map.





Neotropic Cormorant

- May plunge from as high as 1/2 meter for fish—usually dives from the surface
- Produces a grunt call that is almost pig-like
- Also known as Olivaceous Cormorant or Mexican Cormorant
- Found near wetlands
- More common in southern reaches of the state during deer season



Double-crested Cormorant

- Produces a deep, guttural grunt sound
- Found in a wide variety of aquatic habitats
- Dives only from the surface when foraging



American Coot

- White bill
- Distinctive, jerky swim behavior
- Legs trail when in flight
- Runs to take off
- Dives for aquatic plants

When in flight, egrets fold their necks back on themselves, producing a “thick-neck” appearance.

Cattle Egret

- Most likely associated with livestock, since it feeds on insects stirred up by grazing
- Produces a call that resembles “rick rack”
- Statewide but unlikely during deer season in High Plains, Rolling Plains or Pineywoods



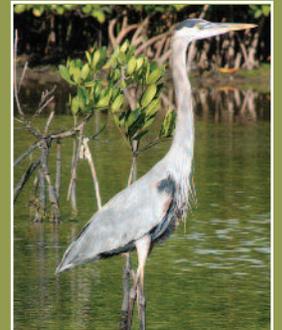
Great Egret

- Likely to be found in flooded fields, drainage ditches, stock tanks, ponds and waterways
- Call is a deep croak
- Statewide but unlikely in the Hill Country during deer season



Great Blue Heron

- Largest, most widespread heron in North America
- Call is a deep, hoarse croak, almost frog-like
- Statewide



Green Heron

- Often perched on branches, especially over water
- Tends to hold head close to body
- Will frequently drop “bait” onto the water to catch fish
- Call is a chicken-like “kuk”; will produce an explosive “skeow” in flight
- Statewide



Birds of prey may be seen perched along roadways, perched conspicuously in vegetation or soaring over fields. Often, if other birds flush unexpectedly, looking up might reveal a bird of prey.



Northern Harrier

- Hunts flying low over grasslands or weedy fields
- Large white patch on rump
- Call is sharp “kek” or “ke” notes
- Statewide



Red-tailed Hawk

- Large, conspicuous hawk
- May not always display large, orange-red tail
- Call is a screaming “kreeeeear”
- Will hover on strong wind (kiting) while foraging
- Common statewide



Crested Caracara

- Found in open savannah or desert
- Feeds on carrion
- Often misidentified as a Bald Eagle
- Absent from High Plains, Rolling Plains and Pineywoods



American Kestrel

- Very colorful, small falcon
- Often found on roadside utility lines or fences
- Call is a whistled “klee klee klee”
- Less common in Oaks and Prairies, Osage Plains and Pineywoods

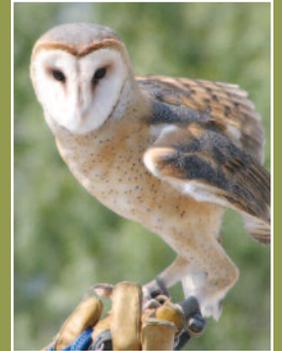
Loggerhead Shrike

- Called the “butcher bird” because it impales food on thorns and fences
- Gray bird with black, hook-tipped bill
- Call is a harsh screeching note
- Uncommon to common statewide



Barn Owl

- Becoming scarce and hard to find in much of its range
- Hunts on wing at night patrolling for rodents
- Prefers more open areas
- Most common call is a loud, hissing shriek
- Uncommon statewide; accidental to rare in Pineywoods and Edwards Plateau

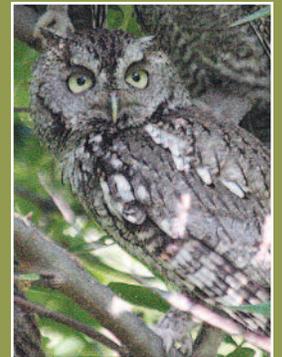


This bird may nest in deer stands that are left in place year-round. They should not be nesting during hunting season, but young may still be present. Mom can be quite protective at these times. Deer stands should be boarded up or removed during the off-season.

Eastern Screech-Owl

- Small “eared” owl; color may be gray or red
- Facial disk dissected by prominent ridge at nose and bill
- Prefers open woods
- Common call is a whistled trill
- Uncommon to common statewide

In Trans-Pecos, High Plains, Rolling Plains and Edwards Plateau, the Western Screech-Owl may be as common or more common than its eastern cousin.





Great Horned Owl

- Large bird, varying shades of gray with barred breast and belly
- Large ear tufts, from which it gets its name; can be lowered
- Facial disk dissected by bill and nose
- Prefers wooded areas
- Common statewide except for Pineywoods, where it is uncommon
- This is the “hoot owl”; its call is rhythmic hoots—“Who’s awake; me, too”



Barred Owl

- Large, stocky red-gray owl without ear tufts
- Wide vertical barring on chest and belly
- Distinct two-lobed facial disk dissected by nose and bill ridge
- Prefers mixed wooded areas
- More common to the east in South Texas Thornscrub, Oaks and Prairies and East Texas Pineywoods. Present statewide
- Call is the distinctive “Who cooks, who cooks for you all”



Killdeer

- Although in the shorebird family, this is a much more upland bird
- Generally found in grassy or gravelly areas, turf farms, muddy fields, etc.
- Listen for a long, drawn-out “deeyee” or “deeeeee” call
- Common to abundant statewide

Red-headed Woodpecker

- Strikingly colored black-and-white bird with all-red head
- Solid white patch on rump and base of wings
- Will fly out to catch insects in air, and will store food
- Frequents mature stands of forest, especially with oak
- Statewide, but is accidental in Trans-Pecos



USFWS

Northern Flicker

- Can climb trees and pound, but prefers to forage for ants and other insects on the ground
- Call is strong “peah” often accompanied with “wik wik wik” or “wika wika wika”
- More likely in open wood or edge situations
- Statewide during deer season; less common in the Pineywoods.



Golden-fronted Woodpecker

- Brownish body with barred, black and white back and wings
- Gold nape and nasal bridge
- Prefer wooded areas
- Ranges from uncommon to common statewide, but absent from Pineywoods.



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In the Oaks and Prairies the Red-bellied Woodpecker would be much more common, while in the Pineywoods the Red-bellied Woodpecker replaces the golden-fronted.



Ladder-backed Woodpecker

- Small black-and-white striped woodpecker with a distinctly patterned face
- Male has red crown extending to the eye
- Prefers scrub
- Common statewide, but absent in Pineywoods



Eastern Phoebe

- Most likely in woodlands and along edges near water
- May occasionally be seen eating small fruit
- Call is two rough, whistled notes resembling “phee-bee”
- Statewide



Vermilion Flycatcher

- Fond of open bushes and trees near water
- Call is a whistled “peent.” Song is a series of trills and whistles
- Accidental in Pineywoods; very rare on Edwards Plateau in December. Common to uncommon statewide



Blue Jay

- Bright blue back, gray face and breast, white belly, black highlights
- Large, loud, aggressive bird
- Edge bird often associated with mixed or coniferous woodlands
- Call resembles “jeer”
- Statewide but scarce to absent in Trans-Pecos and South Texas

Western Scrub-Jay

- Blue back with gray patch across shoulders
- Pale gray streaking on breast
- Found in dense brushy areas. Associated with oak or juniper
- Harsh, scratchy call
- Absent from Pineywoods; accidental in South Texas



American Crow

- Large, overall black bird with short tail and moderately heavy bill
- Often found in groups foraging on ground
- Distinctive “caw, caw” call
- Present statewide, but scarce in Edwards Plateau, South Texas and Trans-Pecos



Chihuahuan Raven

- Longer-winged and heavier-billed than crows
- Somewhat shaggy throat feathers
- Slightly rising “graak” call
- Absent from Pineywoods; accidental in Oaks and Prairies



Carolina Chickadee

- Small gray bird with black cap and bib, white cheeks
- Raucous “chick-a-dee-dee-dee” call
- Absent to rare in Trans-Pecos, where it is replaced by Mountain Chickadee





Black-crested Titmouse

- Gray back, buffy side, black crest, pale forehead
- Call a very angry “ti ti ti sii sii zhee zhee zhhe”
- Absent from Pineywoods; uncommon in Oaks and Prairies, where it is replaced by the Tufted Titmouse
- Feeds on seeds and insects gleaned from leaves and branches

Tufted Titmouse

- Gray crest and black forehead distinguish it from Black-crested Titmouse
- Song a loud “peter peter peter”; call a scratchy “tsee-day, day, day,” almost chickadee-like
- Deciduous forests, swamps and orchards are preferred habitat types
- Replaces Black-crested Titmouse in High Plains and Rolling Plains, Oaks and Prairies, and East Texas Pineywoods

Verdin

- Gray bird with yellow head
- Gleans insects from twigs and flowers.
- Call a high-pitched “tsewf”
- Absent from Pineywoods; rare in Oaks and Prairies

Carolina Wren

- Feisty little red bird with abundant striping on wings and tail—tail often held vertically
- Prominent white eye stripe bordered by black
- Long, pointed black bill
- Song is loud “teakettle, teakettle, teakettle, tea”
- Common to abundant statewide



Bewick's Wren

- Small, gray to red-gray bird with long, striped tail often held high to near vertically
- Prominent white eye stripe
- Gray on side of neck
- Fond of dense, brushy habitats
- Song is an elaborate series of whistled phrases and trills; call is raspy and scolding
- Scarce in Pineywoods; common to abundant otherwise

House Wren

- Small brown bird with short, striped tail
- Eye stripe very pale to nearly absent
- Gardens, hedgerows and brushy woods are favored
- Very bubbly song. Call is a sharp “chek”
- Very rare to common statewide

Ruby-crowned Kinglet

- Very tiny bird—about the same size as the common species of hummingbirds in Texas
- Male crown is seldom seen
- Call a quick “di-dit.” Song a jumble of notes usually starting with “tsees” followed by “tur” and ending with “tee-dah-let”
- Usually gleans from the end of branches
- Statewide

Eastern Bluebird

- Blue back, orange-red throat and breast, white belly
- Found in groups in fields and open woods, may be seen perched on overhead lines or in trees
- During hunting season may be feeding on small fruit; also eats insects
- Song a warbling whistle “tu-wheet-tudu”; also dry chatter
- Uncommon to common statewide. In west more likely to be replaced by Western or Mountain Bluebirds





Hermit Thrush

- Brown-gray bird with heavily spotted breast; reddish tail
- Prefers somewhat open brushy habitat
- Song starts with a whistle followed by monotone warble
- This is a migrant, often arriving during hunting season in small numbers



American Robin

- This is the familiar bird with the gray back, black head and bright red breast
- Eats insects but will also take fruit
- Call a sharp “chup”; song a melodious “cheerily, cheerup, cheerup, cheerily, cheerup”
- Becomes more common late in deer season



Northern Mockingbird

- Our state bird is very common to abundant statewide
- Gray overall, darker on back, large white patches in wing
- Thin, dark line through the eye
- Song varies as this bird “mimics” sounds heard; is very repetitive
- Open ground with shrubby vegetation is preferred



Brown Thrasher

- Song variable phrases usually uttered twice. Call note a thick “tchuck”
- Thickets and brushy woodland edges are preferred habitat types
- Statewide; less common in Edwards Plateau, South Texas Brushlands and Trans-Pecos

Orange-crowned Warbler

- Song is a fast trill changing in pitch, while call is a sharp “chip”
- This bird is closely associated with shrubs and trees
- Rapid moving bird that flits among the tips of tree branches gleaning insects
- Statewide



White-crowned Sparrow

- Distinctly striped head with central, rufous stripe bordered by black stripes, and white crown immediately above eyes
- Song a clear whistle with buzzes and trills
- Likely to be found in weedy, brushy areas
- Migrant species becoming more common toward the middle or end of deer season



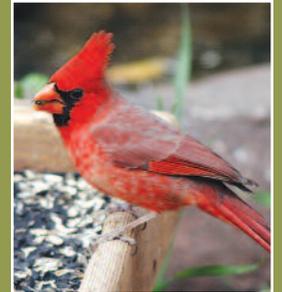
White-throated Sparrow

- Song is “Oh Sam Peabody Peabody Peabody”; call is a “tseep”
- Dense cover along woodlots, fencerows, swamps, weedy fields, etc.
- Statewide



Northern Cardinal

- Call is a sharp “chip”; song a clear “cheer, cheer, cheer, what, what, what”
- Brushy habitats in open areas
- Common statewide





Meadowlarks

- The two species of meadowlark are very difficult to distinguish except by sound
- Large, striped birds with yellow breast and belly, black bib, long pointed bill
- Grassy habitats where they prefer to perch on fences or in bushes
- Also called “field larks”
- Eastern Meadowlark song is plaintive; clear whistles slurred and usually descending at the end
- Western Meadowlark song is rich, flutey whistles ending in gurgling whistles
- Common to abundant statewide



Common Grackle

- Song is a harsh, unmusical “readle-eeek”; call a harsh “chack”
- Open woodland, swamps and marshes, and agricultural areas are likely locations for this bird
- While closely related, this is not the urban Great-tailed Grackle that people often dislike
- Rare in the Trans-Pecos but can be found statewide



Brown-headed Cowbird

- Found in woods, edges or open fields, especially if livestock is present
- Usually found in large flocks
- Male has a brown head over black body; female gray-brown overall
- Stout bill; eats seeds and arthropods
- Common to abundant statewide



Red-winged Blackbird

- Male distinctive black bird with large red patch on wing
- Female nondescript striped bird with thick bill
- Male distinctive “kon-ka-ree” call
- Seldom far from water; prefers moist, marshy areas
- Common to abundant statewide

Summary

Wildlife habitat surrounding a deer blind can host a very diverse bird community. Understanding the habitat of the birds will help you understand where and why deer are likely to occur in a particular area, and will make you a better hunter and conservationist. Understanding the behavior birds around your stand may help you to understand the deer around your stand, just as understanding the deer behavior will help you to understand the birds likely to visit. We hope this booklet will aid in understanding our natural world a little better.

For more information on birds and birding, please see the following:

Cornell Laboratory of Ornithology – All About Birds

www.birds.cornell.edu/AllAboutBirds/BirdGuide/

USGS Patuxent Lab

www.pwrc.usgs.gov



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