

# Texas Birds

Introducing Texans  
to Common Birds



Life's better outside.®



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*Text by Mark Klym.*

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## **Introduction**

*Birding, enjoying the beauty of not only the colors and shapes but also the behaviors and sound of birds around us, is one of the fastest growing pastimes in North America – and Texans have a lot of birds that we can enjoy across the Lone Star State. From the beautiful, aerobatic and feisty hummingbirds that dart back and forth around the beautiful flowers of our gardens, to the silent owls patrolling our forests and field, Texas is by far the most bird diverse state in the nation.*

One of the best ways to learn to enjoy birds is by watching what comes to your own back yard. From the comfort of your back porch, you can see many of the birds shown in this booklet, depending on where your porch is. The availability of appropriate habitat features is the factor that will determine whether some of these species are present, and you will certainly not be able to see all of these birds in every garden across the state, but you should be able to see enough of these birds to help you develop skills of observation that you can take with you into the field wherever you go.

## **You Can Help Birds**

A quick look at the areas these birds are found in will show you that many of them are facing a loss of habitats. Birds that require trees or brush find our cities unwelcoming because of the loss of these plants. Birds that require large open grasslands find large agricultural fields, industrial complexes or cities instead of the flowing prairie grasses they need. These changes, often referred to as habitat loss, are the most significant threat birds face in North America today. Without habitat – appropriate food, shelter, water and space – animals are not able to survive.

Since habitat loss is a significant threat to the future of birds in our communities, the best way we can help birds is to replace or restore some of that habitat. This has worked very effectively with some species. In the early 1900s, bluebirds – especially Eastern Bluebirds – were nearly wiped out by a lack of effective nesting sites following the

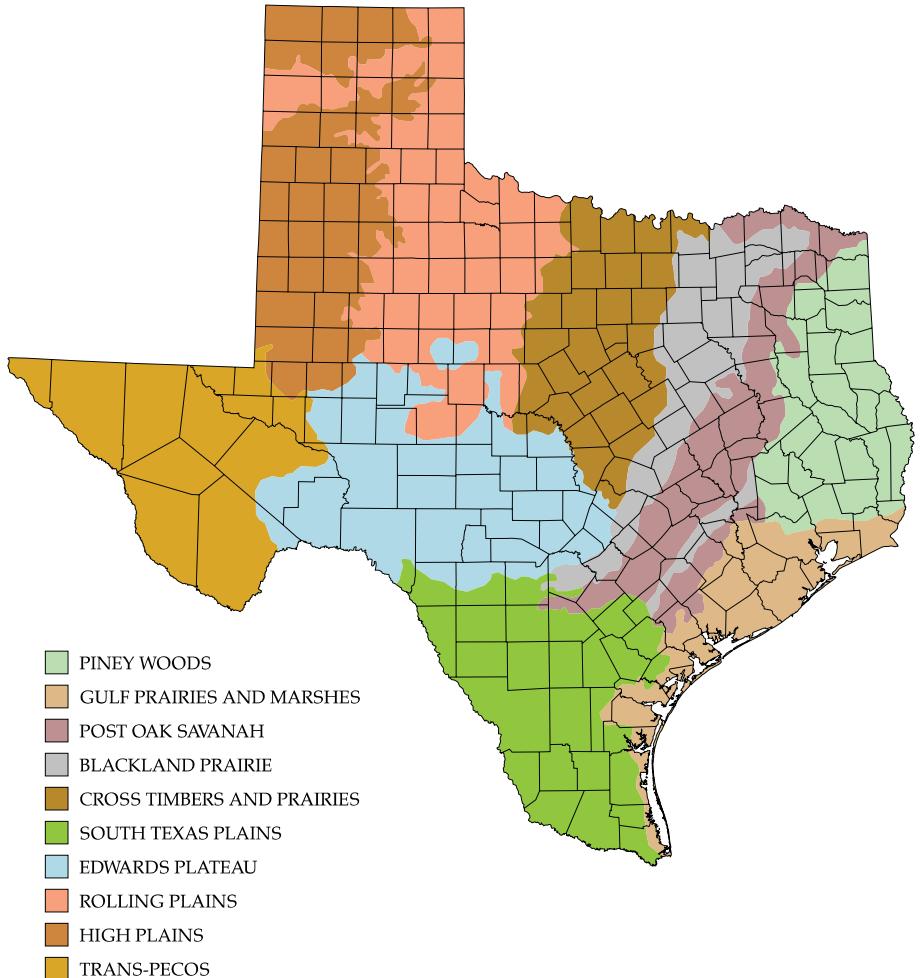
industrial revolution and the introduction of competitive foreign species. By putting back that habitat feature, in the form of a “bird house” in appropriate places, people were able to ensure that these birds will be enjoyed by our grand children for years to come.

You can do the same thing in your back yard. A “birdhouse,” depending on what plants are nearby, might be used by a chickadee, a wren, a fly-catcher, a woodpecker, or any number of other common species. Some birds do not use “birdhouses” though, and for these you may have to reintroduce some brush, some tall grasses, or even some trees to make them feel at home. As you learn more about the birds you enjoy, you will be able to change small things in your landscape that can make big differences in what birds you see.

## **Why Would I Want to Learn About Birds?**

The answers to this question are almost as numerous as the people asking the question – each and every person you ask will have a different answer. For some, the mere beauty of these animals is fascinating – colors from brilliant reds to subtle blues can be found in the bird community. The delicacy of an animal that weighs only as much as a dime draws the attention of others, while still others are captivated by the concept of self propelled flight. Regardless of the reason you choose to learn about birds, spending time watching these amazing creatures will be well rewarded!

## Ecoregions of Texas





### **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



### Great Egret

- Likely to be found in flooded fields, drainage ditches, stock tanks, ponds and waterways
- Call is a deep croak
- Seasonal occurrences statewide



### 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



## **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”

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## 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 “deeeeeee” 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



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## **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; 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.



MARK KLYM

*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



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### Black-crested Titmouse

- Gray back, buffy side, black crest, pale forehead
- Call a very angry “ti ti ti sii sii zhee zhee”
- 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



### Verdin

- Gray bird with yellow head
- Gleans insects from twigs and flowers.
- Call a high-pitched “tseewf”
- 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 winter may be feeding on small fruit; also eats insects
- Song a warbling whistle “tu-wheat-tudu”; also dry chatter
- Uncommon to common statewide. In west more likely to be replaced by Western or Mountain Bluebirds



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## 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 in late winter



## 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 increasing in numbers later in the winter



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## White-throated Sparrow

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



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## 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-eek”; 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**

The diversity (numbers and different kinds) of birds found in any location will be very dependent on the habitat available to the animals. Understanding the habitat, and the role of different features in the bird's life, will help you not only to find more birds but also to become a better conservationist. Understanding the bird behavior will help you to understand and predict changes in the habitat around your home and help you to conserve and protect the natural beauty of your region. Good birding.

## **For More Information**

Texas Parks and Wildlife bird publications  
[www.tpwd.state.tx.us/publications/huntwild/wild/species/nongame](http://www.tpwd.state.tx.us/publications/huntwild/wild/species/nongame)

Birding in Texas State Parks  
[www.tpwd.state.tx.us/state-parks/parks/things-to-do/birding-in-state-parks](http://www.tpwd.state.tx.us/state-parks/parks/things-to-do/birding-in-state-parks)

World Birding Center  
[www.theworldbirdingcenter.com](http://www.theworldbirdingcenter.com)

Cornell Laboratory of Ornithology  
[www.allaboutbirds.org](http://www.allaboutbirds.org)

USGS Patuxent Lab  
[www.pwrc.usgs.gov](http://www.pwrc.usgs.gov)

Audubon Texas  
<http://tx.audubon.org>

Texas Ornithological Society  
[www.texasbirds.org](http://www.texasbirds.org)



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