

ABOUT THE COVER

Northern Mockingbird

The Northern Mockingbird (*Mimus polyglottos*) is well named, with both its genus and species names reflecting its ability to mimic and produce a bewildering assortment of sounds. This medium-sized songbird is monomorphic in plumage: both sexes are bluish-gray above, pale below, with prominent white wingbars, and large white wing patches that are prominent in flight. Mockingbirds have long, white-edged tails, and moderately long, slightly decurved bills. Their wings are broad, and they have a thin dark eye line. Juveniles have lightly spotted breasts. They tend to favor high, exposed perches, and may be confused with Northern Shrikes in winter — many “mocking-shrikes” are reported each year. Northern Mockingbirds are polytypic, with two subspecies recognized, and are closely related to the Tropical Mockingbird.

Northern Mockingbirds are found throughout the United States to southern Canada, and south to southern Mexico, the Bahamas, and Greater Antilles. Most mockingbirds are sedentary, but northern populations may be partially migratory. In Massachusetts, some migration occurs, but the mockingbird is considered a common resident, with substantial numbers overwintering; e.g., 324 were reported on the Concord Christmas Bird Count in 1980. They are most numerous in fall and winter on the outer coast.


Northern Mockingbirds are usually monogamous and often produce two broods. They may mate for life. Their preferred habitat is suburban thickets and dense shrubbery, parks, and edges of cultivated land. Males usually sing from the tops of trees in spring and summer, and their song is thought to function mainly to attract mates. Both males and females sing, typically in bouts consisting of repetitions of single song types. Males may have 150 or more song types, a number that increases with age as new songs are learned. Their songs may mimic other bird species or other environmental sounds such as a creaking gate. Their spring and fall repertoires are sometimes entirely different.

Courtship displays include an acrobatic flight in which the male chases the female; an aerial display in which the male flies up from a perch and parachutes back to it, prominently displaying his white wing patches; and a display in which the male runs along a branch as he sings. Some pairs of Northern Mockingbirds remain on their breeding territory year-round, while others have distinct breeding and wintering territories. They are pugnacious in their defense of their territory, particularly against other mockingbirds; fighting often occurs. Males perform a “boundary dance” during which males face each other on a territorial boundary and hop laterally, first in one direction and then in another. This sometimes leads to fighting with grappling and bill jabbing. These encounters are very intense, and they may even extend up and over buildings or shrubs. Females defend their territory against other females. As an edge species, they are subject to nest predation by jays, crows, and cats, but they will mob and strike intruders. Anecdotes involving attacks on mailmen, dogs, neighbors, and other interlopers abound.

Nest sites are selected by the male, and he builds one to three nests before eggs are laid. The nest is typically a cup of twigs lined with grass, rootlets, leaves, and

often human refuse such as paper, aluminum foil, plastic, or cigarette filters. The nest is usually placed from three to ten feet up in shrubs or small trees. The usual clutch is three to five bluish-green eggs, splotched brownish-red. The female does all of the incubation during the twelve to thirteen days until hatching. As new hatches, the nestlings are nearly naked, blind, and helpless. The female does most of the brooding until the young fledge in about twelve days. They then hop and run about the shrubbery, flying about a week later. Both parents feed insects and some fruit to the young. The male continues to feed the young for about two weeks after fledging.

Northern Mockingbirds forage mostly on the ground, walking, running, hopping, and flashing their white wing panels — presumably to scare up insects. They will hawk insects near the ground and will pounce on prey from low perches. They are omnivorous, eating arthropods of all sorts, spiders, fruit, berries, and even small lizards.

During the nineteenth century mockingbirds were heavily procured as cage birds, leading in some instances to local extinctions. During the past century they have declined somewhat in the southern part of their range but have expanded their range northward considerably. In Massachusetts, mockingbirds were considered a “very rare summer resident” in 1901, but are currently common. Earlier northern populations were probably limited by severe winters and starvation. Their increase in the north coincides with a gradual warming trend in New England since the mid-1950s, but they have also benefited significantly from suburban plantings of ornamentals, especially multiflora rose. Mockingbirds’ suburban habitat preferences allow people to commonly hear and enjoy their wonderful song repertoire, even if the song commences a little earlier in the morning than some might wish. 

William E. Davis, Jr.

About the Cover Artist

Bird Observer is pleased to again welcome Barry Van Dusen as our cover artist. Barry’s fine work has appeared as a cover feature more times than that of any other artist, and we are grateful for his continuing contributions. Barry was trained as an artist, but his association with Massachusetts Audubon Society, which began in 1982, first provided him with the opportunity to work with nature subjects on a professional basis. Subsequently, he discovered the work of European wildlife artists, with their emphasis on direct field sketching, a technique which has become part of his own methodology. Barry’s skills as a field artist have afforded him the opportunity to work and travel with other nature artists on projects sponsored by the Artists for Nature Foundation. He has traveled to Ireland, Spain, India, and Peru with the ANF. Barry has regular exhibitions in New England and participates as well in national exhibitions such as *Birds in Art* (Wausau, Wisconsin) and *Art of the Animal Kingdom* (Bennington, Vermont). He regularly exhibits with the Society of Wildlife Artists (London) and his work has been shown in France, Holland, Ireland, and Scotland. He also is a contributor to *Bird Watcher’s Digest* and *Birder’s World* magazines. Barry resides in the central Massachusetts town of Princeton. Further information and examples of his work can be found at his website: <<http://www.barryvandusen.com>>. 