



Mockingbirds (*Mimus polyglottos*)¹

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DESCRIPTION

The northern mockingbird is a medium-sized songbird measuring about 23 cm (about 9 in.) and weighing about 50 g (about 2 oz.), with longish legs and tail and a slightly curved bill.

The grayish-brown color, two parallel white wing bars and broad white wing patch, which is easily seen in flight, distinguish this bird from its cousins, the brown thrasher and the catbird.

RANGE AND HABITAT

A non-migrating, year-round resident of all areas of the United States, Cuba, the Bahamas, and Mexico, the mockingbird is commonly seen in short, grassy lawn areas, which they prefer when foraging for insects. For this reason, it is quite fond of suburban mowed lawns. It is not common in dense forest interiors but can be seen at forest edges.

FOOD

The mockingbird is omnivorous. About half its diet consists of arthropods, including beetles, ants, bees, wasps, and grasshoppers, but it will also eat earthworms and small lizards. These aggressive feeders can often be observed chasing down a

grasshopper on a lawn, running, hopping and lunging at the prey, or flying just above the ground maneuvering behind a large wasp. They are also fond of zebra butterflies (*Heliconius charitonius*), which are commonly available in southern Florida. In the fall or whenever available at a feeder, the mockingbird enjoys eating fruits, both wild and cultivated.

REPRODUCTION

The mockingbird is monogamous, usually for the length of a breeding season, and occasionally mates for life. Some pairs in southern Florida have been known to stay together for at least eight years (their average lifespan in the wild).

In the spring, mockingbirds can be seen performing their swift, acrobatic flights, male chasing female, often accompanied by the exchange of soft "hew" calls, repeatedly perching next to each other and taking off again. It is estimated that this behavior may assist the birds in sizing up the general health of the potential mate to make sure that it is of good breeding stock, so to speak. Other observed displays include jumping from a perch, flapping wings to ascend perhaps one meter, then parachuting with open wings back down to the perch again.

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Mockingbirds build and use several nests during the breeding season, laying two or three eggs in each nest. In Florida, nest building starts as early as late February, although March is more common. Each pair produces two to three broods per season, with the female laying a total of about nine eggs. Broods frequently overlap, and the male cares for the fledglings while the female incubates the next clutch of eggs.

The nests are built low to the ground in shrubs and trees, usually between one and three meters high, mostly by the male using dead twigs lined with grasses and dead leaves and/or human artifacts such as paper, foil, plastics, and even shredded cigarette filters.

The accessibility of the nests makes them vulnerable to molestation, and nesting birds may abandon the eggs if disturbed during incubation. But rarely will the parent birds abandon the nest once the eggs have hatched.

Eggs are smooth and oval, about 18 mm x 24 mm (.75 in. x 1 in.). They can be bluish gray or greenish white to darker shades of blue and green, and heavily marked with spots, blotches and short scrawls in various shades of brown. In southern Florida, the female bird incubates the eggs for 12-13 days, while the male forages for food and defends the territory from intruders. Both parents feed the hatchlings and defend the eggs and hatchlings against potential predators.

When the chicks are about 12 days old, they will venture from the nest and hop around on the ground or in low shrubs. During this transitional period (after leaving the nest and before they can fly), the young birds are still in the care of the parents, who feed them up to five times per hour. If found hopping around on the ground, they should be placed low in a tree or in a shrub and left alone. The parents will continue to care for them for several days until they learn to forage for themselves.

Many Floridians have experienced the wrath of the mockingbird defending its nest. Fiercely territorial, male mockingbirds have been known to recognize individual humans and will selectively attack them while ignoring other humans who pass

by. Although we rarely intend to disturb nests, this behavior is not completely in vain. In southern Florida it has been noted that the strength of attacks against potential predators is directly associated with nesting success.

During the two-week period that the nest is in use, it is best to avoid the area and to advise children and visitors do the same. As a native, non-game migratory song bird, the mocker is protected against harm or molestation by local, state and federal laws.

In addition to their renown bravado, mockingbirds are revered songsters. These birds have extraordinarily diverse repertoires acquired through imitating the calls, songs and parts of songs of other birds, other animals such as dogs and cats, humans, mechanical sounds, and even the sounds of other mockingbirds.

Both sexes sing, but females much less so. Two males in southern Florida were reported to have approximately 200 song types each! Lists of other birds and sounds imitated by mockingbirds were common early in this century. Male birds can often be heard bellowing their borrowed tunes late at night and into the wee hours of the morning, especially during a full moon.

VALUE / IMPORTANCE TO HUMANS

Mockingbirds are natural pest controllers, consuming large quantities of beetles, ants, wasps, and grasshoppers. By eating a variety of berries and other fruits, they also assist plants by dispersing seeds. And their beautiful singing is an invaluable accompaniment to suburban life in South Florida.

CAUSES OF ENDANGERMENT

The mockingbird flourishes in developed, suburban areas, because of its fondness of mowed lawns. It also thrives in land developed for agriculture, as fruit is a favorite part of the mockingbird diet.

NUISANCE PROBLEMS

Mockingbirds are extremely territorial and become defensive against potential predators. If you or your child or pet approaches a nest, either

knowingly or otherwise, the mockingbird will defend its nest by swooping and chasing the intruder. No known harm has resulted in attacks from mockingbirds. This behavior is temporary and will only continue for as long as there are hatchlings in the nest (about two weeks). It is best to avoid the nesting area during this short period. As a songbird it is protected by the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission and cannot be physically harmed, nor can the habitat be molested in any way.

REFERENCES / SUGGESTED READING

Derrickson, K.C. and R. Breitwisch. 1992. "Northern Mockingbird." *The Birds of North America*, No.7 (A.Poole, P. Stettenheim, and F. Gill, Eds.). Philadelphia: The Academy of Natural Sciences; Washington, D.C.: The American Ornithologists' Union.