

Northern Mockingbird
(*Mimus polyglottos*)



The Northern Mockingbird is the state bird of Florida - and of four other southern states - Arkansas, Mississippi, Tennessee, and Texas - also, formerly of South Carolina. It was designated Florida's state bird on April 23, 1927 but its designation is currently under reconsideration. The Northern part of its name is to distinguish it from the Tropical Mockingbird (*Mimus gilvus*) which is a resident bird from southern Mexico to northern Brazil and some of the Caribbean islands.

There are about seventeen species of Mockingbirds in the world but the Northern Mockingbird is the only species native to the United States. However, until the 19th century the Northern Mockingbird was only found in the Southeastern states. It began nesting in the Northeast during the 19th century and expanded its range into Ohio and the

upper Midwest during the 20th century. Currently its range extends from New Brunswick on the east, through most of the continental United States below the Northern Plain States (below the 44th parallel) and into northern Mexico. It is generally considered a resident species within its range but, during harsh winters, some of the population in the northern parts of its range will migrate further south. The Northern Mockingbird is a medium sized, slender bird - about ten inches tall with a twelve to fourteen inch wingspan.



It has a gray-brown head and back and very dark gray wings with white parallel wing bars and a large white patch that is most noticeable during flight. Its chest and belly are very light gray and its beak, legs, and feet are black. Female Northern Mockingbirds are slightly smaller

with a bit less white on their wings. Juveniles are a dull gray with heavily streaked chests and gray bills. Mockingbirds get their name because of their ability to mimic sounds. The adult male Northern Mockingbird can sing up to 200 different sounds, including the songs of other bird species, some animal and insect sounds, human speech, musical instruments, and even mechanical sounds such as car alarms. Males have been known to have two distinct repertoires, one for spring and summer and one for autumn and winter. Females also sing but not as loudly or as frequently. They sing mostly during the fall, it is believed, to mark their winter territory or occasionally at other times when the male has left their territory and the female is defending it. Male juveniles sing the loudest and the most because they are trying to attract a mate and establish a territory. They also sing more during a full moon. If you hear a Northern Mockingbird singing at night, it is most likely a juvenile male. There are few ways you can discourage him; you could put up fake owls, mirrors, or moving objects or you could help him attract a mate by mimicking his song, i.e. record his song and play it loudly and often!

Left to their own devices, males usually attract a female within three weeks and cease the night singing. Once the male mockingbird has attracted a mate, the couple performs an elaborate mating dance. They face each other from a distance with their heads and tails erect, run toward each other while flashing their white wing patches, then retreat and repeat and repeat. Mated Northern Mockingbirds are generally monogamous and remain together in their shared territory for many years. However, incidents of polygamy have been reported. Mated males have been recorded to sing and attract additional mates and mated females have been observed flying over neighboring territory and exchanging calls with the male of that territory. In Florida, nesting season extends from late February to late July or early August. Northern Mockingbirds enjoy a wide ranging habitat, from forest edges to fields and grasslands, to backyards and parks in both urban and rural settings. They build their cup-shaped nest in thick shrubs or trees, usually three to ten feet off the ground. The male builds the foundation from twigs; then, the female adds the lining using material such as moss,

grasses, leaves, animal hair, and trash like cigarette filters or bits of aluminum or paper. Northern Mockingbirds rarely reuse a nest. Because the male does not incubate the eggs or feed the female, she must take a break from incubating to eat. Consequently, she must design the nest lining to keep the eggs warm while she is gone. As the season progresses, less lining is needed for subsequent broods. Incubation takes 12-13 days and the nestlings fledge in another 11-13 days but aren't independent and able to fly well for another week. Both parents feed the young. Northern Mockingbirds are sexually mature when they are about a year old and have an average life expectancy of about 8 years in the wild but can live up to 20 years in captivity.

In Florida, Mockingbirds generally have three or four broods a year, each with 3-5 blue-green eggs with brown markings. If the eggs do not survive to maturity, Northern Mockingbirds have made as many as six nesting attempts in a season. Their eggs are eaten by blue jays, crows, snakes, and squirrels and their nests are parasitized by cowbirds. Other predators include hawks, screech and great horned

owls, and domestic animals.

Northern Mockingbirds are smart and able to recognize and remember individual people and assess the level of threat posed by that person. They are very territorial and will aggressively defend their nest. Mockingbirds have even been known to mob a perceived dangerous intruder with the help of Mockingbirds from neighboring territories.

Northern Mockingbirds are omnivores. During spring and summer they eat mostly insects. They'll spread their wings, exposing their white wing patches, and wag their tail to mobilize hiding insects. Mockingbirds especially like beetles, grasshoppers, caterpillars, ants, and wasps, and will also eat spiders, snails, worms, and even a rare crawfish or small lizard. During fall and winter, when berries and fruit are more abundant, they enjoy apples, grapes, tomatoes, blackberries, raspberries, mulberries, and other berries. Northern Mockingbirds will occasionally come to a backyard feeder during the winter for suet, mealworms cranberries, raisins and other dried fruit.

Northern Mockingbirds are protected by the US Migratory Bird Act. They

were previously trapped and caged as pets for their vocal skills. During the 19th century they nearly vanished from parts of their range but are now considered a species of least concern.