

# Songbirds



**Indigo Bunting**  
Image: Audubon Society

**Varsity**  
**Lake Shelbyville Eco-Meet 2013**



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Birds are members of the Class Aves that is divided up into 23 orders, 142 families, 2,057 genera and 9,702 species.

Songbirds belong to the order Passeriforms known as passerines. The passerines are perching birds. The name, Passeriforms, means "sparrow shaped."

Perching birds make up the largest order of birds in the world. There are 59 families and about 5,100 species, which means perching birds, make up about 60% of all living birds.

Perching birds range in size all the way from tiny kinglets and warblers to the magnificent raven. Passerines are believed to be the most advanced of all birds, as well as the most adaptive and intelligent. They all share the same type of foot, with three toes pointed forward and one backward. This foot is adapted for gripping a perch. The muscles and tendons of their legs are designed to tighten the grip on the perch if the bird begins to fall backward. Very handy, when you have to sleep twenty feet above the ground!

Birds communicate by; vocalizations, such as songs and calls; other noises, like tapping and drumming; and behaviors such as courtship flights and dances. Communication is important to birds, especially in habitats where vegetation impedes vision, such as forests, grasslands and wetlands.

Each species has its own specific song or songs. Some birds, such as the cardinal, have over a dozen calls and songs. Others, such as the mocking bird, are able to mimic the songs of different birds, humans and our products; starlings can imitate a car alarm. Just like humans, bird songs have regional dialects. Some birds are born knowing how to sing. Others must listen to calls of adult birds of their kind and practice the calls before perfecting them.

When alerting others of danger, birds *call*. Calls are also made when feeding or migrating. Young communicate with their parents through a location call. When a covey of

bobwhite is split up, they locate each other and rejoin the group through a gathering call.

Most songbirds are seed, insect, or nectar eaters. The shape of the bill is a clue to their diet; sparrows have strong bills to break open seeds; flycatchers have pointed bills for capturing insects.

One might guess that the shrike -- a songbird -- is a raptor by looking at its sharp down-curved bill. Because it is a passerine, and cannot grip prey tightly, it captures grasshoppers and other insects and impales them on thorns and barbed wire. It uses tools to replace the talons it does not have.

All songbirds are land birds and are found in every continent except Antarctica. They are extremely adaptable, making their homes in almost every environment. In the continental United States, songbirds can be found in evergreen forests, deciduous forests, gardens, marshes, beaches, prairies, farmland, deserts, along roadsides, and in large cities.

Most songbirds are considered arboreal, making their homes in and around trees. The homes are found from the upper canopy of a dense forest to the middle and lower levels of trees to the trunks and roots. Even the underbrush and forest floor are home to many species of songbirds.

The eyes of songbirds are adapted to life in and among the forest. The eyes adapt quickly to the variances in light intensities so the birds have no problem flying from the dense woods out into the bright sunlight of an open field.

Songbirds have many predators; among them are *raptors*, birds with sharp bills and talons for tearing flesh. *Accipiters*, such as the Cooper's hawk, are a specialized group of raptors. Their short wings and long, rudder-like tails are excellent for maneuvering through branches and trees. They seem to rely on the element of surprise for their hunting

success and often take songbirds from backyard bird feeders.

To protect themselves, songbirds have developed an alarm system called "*mobbing*." When a predator invades the territory, songbirds will chatter a series of sharp, hoarse chirps, alerting other birds of the threatening intruder. When the other birds hear the alarm, they also sound the alarm and come to investigate the source of the disturbance. The small birds will gang up on the hawk, owl or raccoon, showing an impressive display of aggression despite their diminutive size. Many small birds working together can easily drive off a large predator by harassing it relentlessly. Groups of blackbirds, chickadees, sparrows, wrens and jays dive-bomb, peck and scratch fleeing raptors. It's remarkable that the hawks don't turn around and gobble one of the pestering passerines but the smaller birds' maneuverability seems to protect them.

Birders mimic the harsh chirping "psh" sound of the alarm call made by songbirds. Curious birds will often appear in an effort to learn the cause of the alarm. This trick is usually successful. Make the sound: "psh" and repeat it five or six times at a moderate volume. Sometimes the response is dramatic with dozens of small birds flocking immediately, looking for the invader. Warblers, juncos, chickadees, bushtits, towhees and even jays will come. Other times, you just hear the birds chirping away, un-fooled by your attempt.

## ***Select Songbird Species***

Participants in this Eco-Meet section should be prepared to identify specific species based visual appearance, vocal songs, and/or the information contained in each section. Recordings of specific bird songs can be found by following the internet hyperlink in each description. **Participants only need to be able to identify birds by song, not call. Bear this in mind while listening to recordings.** Links will take participants to the Cornell Ornithology Lab's Bird Guide.



### **American Goldfinch**

**Plumage:** Summer Male: brilliant yellow with black cap, wings and tail, orange bill. Female: olive. Winter: Both are olive.

**Song:** The song is sustained, clear and light. When sung during its roller coaster flight pattern, each dip is punctuated by the bright "per-

chick-o-ree" or "ti-dee-di-di."

Recording:

[http://www.allaboutbirds.org/guide/american\\_goldfinch/sounds](http://www.allaboutbirds.org/guide/american_goldfinch/sounds)

**Habitat:** Patches of thistle and weeds, among dandelions on lawns, roadsides, open woods, and edges. In winter often visits home feeders.

**Nest:** A beautiful cup of grasses and plant fibers in shrub fork, lined with thistle "down." Four – five pale blue eggs.

**Food:** Primarily seeds, insects taken during nesting.

**Notes:** They are notoriously late nesters, waiting for thistle heads to develop their "downy" seeds late in the summer. Because they nest so late, only a single brood is raised each season. While the female is on the nest the male stays close by and will feed her.

## Eastern Blue Bird



**Plumage:** Striking blue above; red chestnut throat, neck and upper breast, white lower belly, female much duller.

**Song:** A musical "chur-wi" or "tru-a-ly" 3 or 4 soft gurgling notes.

Recording:

[http://www.allaboutbirds.org/guide/Eastern\\_Bluebird/sounds](http://www.allaboutbirds.org/guide/Eastern_Bluebird/sounds)

**Habitat:** Open woodlands, meadows and fields.

**Nest:** A cup of twigs placed in a natural cavity, abandoned nest hole or nest box. Four to five pale blue eggs. Two broods per year.

**Food:** Eats mostly insects, earthworms and spiders but also snails, lizards and frogs. Eats berries and seeds in winter

**Notes:** Once nearly eliminated from Illinois due to a lack of nesting cavities, bluebirds have made a remarkable

comeback with the aid of bird enthusiasts who have put up thousands of bluebird boxes.

## **Baltimore Oriole**



**Plumage:** About 7 inches in length, the male Baltimore oriole has a black hood, throat, back and wings. Its breast, stomach, and rump are bright orange. It also has an orange patch on the top of each wing and white wing bars. The tail is mostly black with orange fringes. The markings of the female are similar to the male but are a much paler orange with an olive hood.

**Song:** Both sexes sing, although the female's song is usually simpler and is normally heard only during the early courtship phase. Song is made up of rich, slurred whistles that have a distinctive quality, sounding like: "hue-lee, hue-lee, hue-lee".

Recording:

[http://www.allaboutbirds.org/guide/Baltimore Oriole/sounds](http://www.allaboutbirds.org/guide/Baltimore_Oriole/sounds)

**Habitat:** Open woodlands, river forests, shade trees in parks, yards, gardens and orchards.

**Nest:** Pendulant, very well made, strong pouch of grasses and plant fibers. Four grayish white or light blue eggs are laid.

**Food:** Forages in bushes and trees often in high canopy. The oriole eats insects, caterpillars, berries and fruits, sips nectar from nectar feeders and will eat oranges and grape jelly.

## **Blue Jay**



**Plumage:** Bright blue above with much white and black in the wings and tail; dingy white below; black facial markings; prominent crest.

**Song:** A raucous jay-jay, harsh cries, and a rich variety of other calls, one is almost identical to the

scream of the Red-shouldered Hawk. Also a musical "queedle-queedle".

Recording: [http://www.allaboutbirds.org/guide/blue\\_jay/sounds](http://www.allaboutbirds.org/guide/blue_jay/sounds)

**Habitat:** Chiefly oak forest, but now also city parks and suburban yards, especially where oak trees predominate.

**Nest:** 4-6 brown-spotted greenish eggs laid in a coarsely built nest of sticks, lined with grass and well concealed in a crotch or forked branch of a tree, often a conifer.

**Notes:** Although sometimes disliked because they chase smaller birds away from feeders, Blue Jays are among the handsomest of birds. They often bury seeds and acorns, and since many are never retrieved they are, in effect, tree planters. They regularly mob predators, and their raucous screaming makes it easy to locate a hawk or a roosting owl. Although seen all year, they are migratory and travel in large loose flocks in spring and fall. Birds from farther north replace local populations in winter

## Tufted Titmouse



**Plumage:** Sparrow-sized. Gray above and whitish below, with rust-colored sides and conspicuous gray crest.

**Song:** A whistled series of 4 to 8 notes sounding like "Peter-Peter," repeated over and over.

Recording:

[http://www.allaboutbirds.org/guide/tufted\\_titmouse/sounds](http://www.allaboutbirds.org/guide/tufted_titmouse/sounds)

**Habitat:** Swampy or moist woodlands, and shade trees in villages and city parks; in winter, at feeders.

**Nest:** 5 or 6 brown-dotted white eggs laid in a tree cavity or bird box stuffed with leaves and moss.

**Food:** Eats insects, and their larvae, spiders, snails, various berries, acorns and other nuts and seeds. It often clings to the bark of trees and turns upside down to pick spiders and insects from the underside of a twig or leaf.

## **Black Capped Chickadee**



**Plumage:** Black-capped Chickadees are approximately 5 inches in length. A small active bird with a black cap, white cheeks, and a black bib makes it easy to recognize. Both sexes are similar in appearance.

**Song:** The call is a buzzy "chickadee-dee-dee-dee," song has 2-3 whistled notes, "fee-bee-bee, "

Recording: [http://www.allaboutbirds.org/guide/Black-capped\\_Chickadee/sounds](http://www.allaboutbirds.org/guide/Black-capped_Chickadee/sounds)

**Habitat:** Deciduous woodlands and residential areas.

**Nest:** 6-8 white eggs, lightly speckled with brown, placed in a cavity in a rotten stub or birdhouse lined with feathers, grass, and plant down.

**Food:** Forages on trees for insects, insect eggs, seeds, berries, moths and caterpillars. The Black-Capped Chickadee hides seeds and other food items for later recovery. Each item is placed in a different spot and a bird can remember thousands of hiding places

**Notes:** So similar are the Carolina and Black-capped Chickadees that Audubon did not realize that they were different species until 1834 -- over a century after chickadees had been discovered by Europeans. The two species have much the same needs. Both species are found in Illinois. Both are familiar visitors to feeders and regular

members of the mixed flocks of small birds that roam the winter woods.

## **House Wren**



**Plumage:** House Wrens are small, chunky birds approximately 4.75 inches in length, with thin, slightly down-curved bills and short, rounded wings. Their tails are often held tilted up at a steep angle. Their upperparts are warm brown, and they have a slight whitish superciliary stripe over the eye. The wings, tail, and flanks are barred with black. The throat, breast, and belly are whitish.

**Song:** The familiar loud song begins with a chatter of rapid notes, followed by cascades of doubled notes and groups of trills. Females sing as well, most often in the first few days after pairing. Songs are repeated with great frequency, as often as three to four times per minute.

Recording: [http://www.allaboutbirds.org/guide/house\\_wren/sounds](http://www.allaboutbirds.org/guide/house_wren/sounds)

**Habitat:** forest edges, open woodlands, swamps, city parks, and suburban areas.

**Nest:** A wide variety of sites are used for nesting. Nest boxes are readily accepted, and other, more unusual, locations noted include cans in garbage heaps, large abandoned hornet nests, old shoes, boots, hats, or the pockets of a scarecrow. Once an appropriate site is selected, the wrens fill the nest cavity with coarse twigs, sticks, and grass. The nest is lined with feathers, wool, hair, or catkins. A wren will sometimes fill all of the nesting boxes in an area just to keep out the competition.

**Food:** Eats mostly insects, larvae, and insect eggs, also snails, berries and fruits.

**Notes:** House Wrens are known for their aggressive defense of territories and nest sites. Especially when crowded, they destroy the eggs of competing species in the vicinity of their territories

## **Killdeer**



Although the killdeer is classified as a shorebird, rather than a songbird, it is common to our area and easily recognizable.

**Plumage:** The killdeer has brown upper feathers and white undersides. It has a brown head with a black band between its eyes, white "eyebrows" and black bands around its upper

chest. It has a sharp, black bill, long legs and a long tail. Males and females look the same.

**Song:** This noisy and handsome bird gets both its Latin name and its common name from its call. The common name tells us what it says, and the second part of the Latin name describes its tone. The loud and almost hysterical sound of *kill-dee* or *kill-deeah* is *repeated* frequently by both male and female.

Recording: <http://www.birdjam.com/birdsong.php?id=18>

**Habitat:** It frequents only open places, such as fields, pastures, and dry uplands. Golf courses and airfields, with their short grass, are also favorite habitats.

**Nest:** -The killdeer nests on open ground, often on gravel, generally in a situation that gives the bird on the nest an extended view in all directions. The nest can also be found in pastures, meadows, cultivated fields. Gravel roads and the spaces between the ties of a railroad, and even a graveled roof, have all been chosen by this bird for laying its eggs. They may use a slight depression in the gravel to hold the eggs, but they don't line the nest at all. Since there is no structure to stand out from its surroundings, a killdeer nest blends into its background. The speckled eggs look like stones.



### **Killdeer feigning broken wing**

**Notes:** Unlike songbirds, the baby killdeer are *precocial*, meaning that the young are hatched with feathers and are up and running as soon as their feathers dry. If a predator approaches, a nesting Killdeer performs a conspicuous distraction display, dragging itself as if mortally wounded, often on one foot, its wings seemingly broken and its rusty tail fanned toward the intruder. This feigning of injury is effective in luring the predator away from the eggs or young, at which point the bird then "recovers" and flies off, calling loudly.



## **Scarlet Tanager**

**Plumage:** 7 1/2" breeding plumage, male brilliant scarlet with black wings and tail. In non-breeding plumage, female and male olive green; male has black wings.

**Song:** Song a hurried, burry, repetitive warble, somewhat like that of a robin. Call notes an emphatic, nasal "chip-bang".

Recording: [http://www.allaboutbirds.org/guide/Scarlet\\_Tanager/sounds](http://www.allaboutbirds.org/guide/Scarlet_Tanager/sounds)

**Habitat:** Chiefly mature woodlands, especially oak and pine.

**Nest:** 3 or 4 brown-spotted greenish eggs in a shallow nest of twigs and stems lined with grass and placed on a horizontal branch.

**Food:** May forage on ground but most likely in tops of trees. Eats insects, including wasps, bees, and caterpillars. Catches insects on the fly.

**Notes:** The brilliantly colored male Scarlet Tanager gleams in the sunlight but is often difficult to see in thick foliage, especially if the bird is motionless or moving slowly from branch to branch high up in the tree canopy. It is conspicuous only when perched on a dead tree limb or when feeding on the ground during a cold, rainy spell. During late summer or early autumn, some of the males may show a patchwork plumage of red and green as they undergo a molt

to olive green, except for their wings and tails, which remain black throughout the winter.



### **Indigo Bunting**

**Plumage:** 5 1/2" Sparrow-sized. In bright sunlight male brilliant turquoise blue, otherwise looks black, wings and tail darker. Female drab brown, paler beneath.

**Song:** Rapid, excited warble, each note or phrase given twice. "Sweet-sweet, sweeter-sweeter, here-here." Call is a "wet" spit or plik.

Recording: [http://www.allaboutbirds.org/guide/Indigo\\_Bunting/sounds](http://www.allaboutbirds.org/guide/Indigo_Bunting/sounds)

**Habitat:** Brushy slopes, abandoned farmland, old pastures and fields grown to scrub, woodland clearings, and forest edges adjacent to fields.

**Nest:** 3 or 4 pale blue eggs in a compact woven cup of leaves and grass placed in a sapling or bush in relatively thick vegetation and within a few feet of the ground.

**Food:** Eats a variety of insects and larvae, especially in summer; also dandelion seeds, weed seeds, small grains, and wild berries.

**Notes:** Indigo Buntings have no blue pigment; they are actually black, but the diffraction of light through the structure of the feathers makes them appear blue. These attractive birds are also found in rural roadside thickets and

along the right-of-way of railroads, where woodlands meet open areas. They are beneficial to farmers and fruit growers, consuming many insect pests and weed seeds.

### **House Finch**



**Plumage:** 5-6" Sparrow-sized. Most adult males bright red on crown, breast, and rump, Female has plain, un-stripped head and heavy streaking on light underside. Immature males less highly colored, often orange or yellowish on head and breast.

**Song:** A chirp call like that of a young House Sparrow." chee" or "chee-wheet". The song is an extensive series of warbling notes ending in a "zeee", canary like, but without the musical trills and rolls. Sings from a high tree,

antenna, or similar post for prolonged periods

Recording: [http://www.allaboutbirds.org/guide/House\\_Finch/sounds](http://www.allaboutbirds.org/guide/House_Finch/sounds)

**Habitat:** cities and suburbs, fields and gardens

**Nest:** 3-5 bluish, lightly streaked or spotted eggs, with each pair breeding 2-4 times a summer; tightly woven, compact nest set in a bush, thicket, natural cavity, or on a building.

**Notes & Food:** House Finches are omnivorous, eating insect pests as well as grass and weed seeds. Garden-bred birds join large field flocks during the fall, often feeding in farmers' fields, and may become agricultural pests. The eastern population of this species is descended from cage birds released near New York City in the 1940s. For years

the birds barely survived on Long Island, but they then spread into suburban areas. In the late 1960s and 1970s they finally established themselves in urban New York, where their musical song and bright colors add a cheerful touch.



### **White-breasted Nuthatch**

**Plumage:** 5-6" Sparrow-sized. Blue-gray above, white under parts and face, black crown. Usually seen creeping on tree trunks, head downward.

**Song:** Call is a nasal "yank-yank". Song a series of low whistled notes, "wee, wee, wee, wee, wee, wee, wee, wee".

Recording:

[http://www.allaboutbirds.org/guide/White-breasted\\_Nuthatch/sounds](http://www.allaboutbirds.org/guide/White-breasted_Nuthatch/sounds)

**Habitat:** Deciduous and mixed forests.

**Nest:** 5 or 6 white eggs, lightly speckled with red-brown, in a cup of twigs and grass lined with feathers and hair in a natural cavity, bird box, or hole excavated by the birds.

**Food:** Eats various seeds, nuts spiders and insects.

**Notes:** The habit of creeping headfirst down a tree trunk, then stopping and looking around with head held out at a 90-degree angle, is characteristic of nuthatches. The White-breasted is an inquisitive, acrobatic bird, pausing occasionally to hang and hammer at a crack. Essentially non-migratory, during the fall it stores food for winter in

crevices behind loose tree bark. They are familiar visitors to bird feeders.

## **American Robin**



**Plumage:** 9-11"  
Gray above, brick red below. Head and tail black in males, dull gray in females. Young birds are spotted below.

**Song:** Song is a series of rich caroling notes, rising and

falling in pitch: "cheer-up, cheerily, cheer-up, cheerily"

Recording: [http://www.allaboutbirds.org/guide/American\\_Robin/sounds](http://www.allaboutbirds.org/guide/American_Robin/sounds)

**Habitat:** Towns, gardens, open woodlands, and agricultural land.

**Nest:** 3-5 blue-green eggs in a well-made cup of mud reinforced with grass and twigs, lined with softer grasses, and placed in a tree or on a ledge or windowsill. Robins usually have 2 broods a season.

**Notes & Food:** Although considered a harbinger of spring, robin's winter in Illinois, where they frequent cedar bogs and swamps and are not usually noticed by a casual observer, except when they gather in large roosts, often containing thousands of birds. Earthworms are the primary diet of the Robin. It hunts on lawns, standing stock-still with head cocked to one side as though listening for its prey but actually discovering it by sight.

## **Chipping Sparrow**



**Plumage:** 5-5 1/2"

A small sparrow. Upper parts are brown, streaked with black. Under parts, sides of face, and rump are gray. Adult has chestnut crown, white

eyebrow, with thin black line through eye.

**Song:** Thin musical trill, all on 1 note like the whir of a sewing machine "chip, chip, chip, chip, chip, chip, chip" Has a call of "seek."

Recording: [http://www.allaboutbirds.org/guide/Chipping\\_Sparrow/sounds](http://www.allaboutbirds.org/guide/Chipping_Sparrow/sounds)

**Habitat:** Grassy woodland edges, gardens, city parks, brushy pastures, and lawns.

**Nest:** 3-5 pale blue eggs, lightly spotted with brown, in a solid cup of grass and stems, almost always lined with hair, placed in shrubbery or in a tangle of vines.

**Notes & Food:** The Chipping Sparrow's habit of lining its nest with hair has earned it the name "Hair bird." Formerly, it utilized horsehair, but with the decline in the use of horses it takes any hair available and will even pluck strands from the coat of a sleeping dog. Originally inhabitants of natural clearings and brushy forest borders, these sparrows are now found in gardens and suburban areas and have become familiar songbirds. During most of the year they feed on the ground, but in the breeding season males always sing from

an elevated perch. Their food consists mainly of seeds, but in summer the adults and the young feed on insects.

## **Northern Cardinal**



**Plumage:** 8-9" Male bright red with crest, black face, and stout red bill. Female buff-brown tinged with red on crest, wings, and tail.

**Song:** Rich "what-cheer, cheer, cheer; purty-purty-purty-purty" or sweet-sweet-sweet-sweet. Also a metallic chip.

Recording:

[http://www.allaboutbirds.org/guide/Northern\\_Cardinal/sounds](http://www.allaboutbirds.org/guide/Northern_Cardinal/sounds)

**Habitat:** Woodland edges, thickets, brushy swamps, and gardens.

**Nesting:** 3 or 4 pale green eggs, spotted with red-brown, in a deep cup of twigs, leaves, and plant fibers concealed in a thicket.

**Notes & Food:** This species, named after the red robes worn by Roman Catholic cardinals. Cardinals are aggressive birds that occupy territories year-round. Both sexes are accomplished songsters and may be heard at any time of year, rather than just in the spring when most other birds are singing. Seeds form a main part of the diet, although insects are eaten in the breeding season. These birds often come to feeders in winter.

## Brown-Headed Cowbird



**Plumage:** Male is easy to distinguish with its copper-brown colored head and bright metallic blue-black body. The female is a drab brownish gray with faint breast streaking. 7 inches long

**Song:** Flight call: "weee-titi" (high whistle, 2 lower notes)  
Song: bubbly and creaky "glug-glug-gleeee."

Recording: [http://www.allaboutbirds.org/guide/Brown-headed\\_Cowbird/sounds](http://www.allaboutbirds.org/guide/Brown-headed_Cowbird/sounds)

**Habitat:** They spend most of the year mixed in with other blackbirds wandering farmlands, open countryside, prairies, cattle yards and meadows. Can be found on woodland edges, parks, gardens and back yards.

**Nest:** This is the only true nest parasite in North America. They build no nest whatsoever, depositing their eggs in the nests of others.

**Notes and Food:** They feed on insects, grubs, fruits and berries and some seeds. Young birds raised by "foster parents" do not imprint on that species but reunite with pure

catbird flocks after nesting season. At this point you will see them at backyard feeders eating off of the ground.