

BIRDNOTES

FROM SAPSUCKER WOODS

Interpreting and conserving the earth's biological diversity through research, education, and citizen science focused on birds.



Spring Bird FAQs

Spring is an exciting time for bird watching. Migratory birds return from a long winter away, bringing songs and color to liven up the landscape. Spring is also a time when birds engage in many intriguing behaviors right outside our windows. This issue of *BirdNotes* answers questions that the Cornell Lab of Ornithology often receives when the birds return each year.

I have a hunch that the bird singing outside my window is the same as the one who nested here last year. Could that be true?

Possibly. Many migratory songbirds return to the same territory or local area each spring after traveling thousands of miles to and from their wintering grounds. One Yellow Warbler with leg band #1750-17109 and nicknamed “Wally,” returned to breed at Long Point Bird Observatory in Ontario, Canada, for 10 consecutive years. Wally traveled some 44,700 miles to and from Canada and Central America over the years and fathered about 40 young Yellow Warblers.

Wally is exceptional, though—he held the longevity record for Yellow Warblers. Migratory songbirds tend to have short lives (annual mortality rates are about 50 percent), so some of the birds in your yard each year are probably newcomers. Studies of banded birds show that 20–60 percent of migratory songbirds typically return to the same local area. At one study site in Kansas, 4 in 10 male Baltimore Orioles returned to the same site in consecutive years. Return rates are about 7 in 10 for American Robins on Vancouver Island, Canada, and better than 8 in 10 for Purple Martins returning to a colony in Texas.


Did You Know . . .

- The smallest bird nests are about the size of a thimble. Bee Hummingbirds in Cuba build tiny cups just .8 inches across and 1 inch high. The largest North American nests are built by Bald Eagles. One nest near St. Petersburg, Florida, was 20 feet deep and 9.5 feet across.
- A pair of Barn Swallows makes more than 1,200 trips, carrying mud in their bills to build a nest.
- One Osprey nest was re-used by various pairs for 45 consecutive years.
- A male House Wren in Illinois brought food to his nestlings 1,217 times in a single day.

From the Cornell Lab of Ornithology's Home Study Course in Bird Biology
For more information about the Home Study Course, visit www.birds.cornell.edu/homestudy or call (800) 843-2473 (United States calls only) or (607) 254-2452.

Every morning lately I've been awoken by a cardinal that keeps flinging itself against my window. Why is it doing that?

Passions run high in spring, when birds are hormonally primed for defending territories and mating. We often receive reports of birds



intentionally flying at windows, car mirrors, and hubcaps. These birds are fending off brazen intruders—their own reflections.

Many birds defend territories in spring to protect areas with plentiful food and keep others of their species from interfering with mating and nesting activities. Because a reflection is a perfect match, returning blow for blow and tiring only when the bird tires, every encounter ends as a draw. The bird may return day after day for hours to continue the fight. To banish the phantom intruder, break up the reflection by rubbing a bar of soap on the window or covering it up from the outside during the hours when the reflection is most problematic. You will only have to do this temporarily, until the bird turns its attention to nesting.

I have a mockingbird in my yard who imitates car alarms and subway trains. Why?

Although some birds learn their species' song during their first year of life, others, including mockingbirds, continue adding to their repertoire as they grow older. Northern Mockingbirds can learn as many as 200 songs, and often mimic sounds in their environment including other birds, car alarms, and creaky gates. Why? One theory is that a female prefers a male who sings more songs, and a male can quickly add to his repertoire by imitating the sounds around him. Possessing a diverse assortment of songs may indicate that he is an especially talented learner, or that he is an older male with proven longevity and survival skills—good traits to pass on to offspring. An older male may also be more experienced in raising young or may have access to better resources. According to one study on the Edwards Plateau in Texas, mockingbirds with the largest repertoires have the best territories, laden with foods such as insects, wild grapes, and persimmons.

Many people find mockingbird serenades entertaining by day, but few appreciate it when the songs of ardent, unmated males continue into the night. The best solution is probably wearing earplugs. Shouting, banging on pots, and shining lights are unlikely to deter a lonely male for long, but when he finds his mate, the yard should quiet down at night again.

Is it ok to keep feeding birds in spring and summer?

Yes. Some people maintain bird feeders only in winter, when many species visit feeders frequently. Black-capped Chickadees rely less on feeders during the warmer months when they switch to a high-protein insect diet. However, migrants may find bird feeders to be an especially welcome source of fuel along their journey to their spring breeding grounds. And in summertime, even though food is plentiful, birds require greater amounts of food to feed their rapidly growing nestlings.

You can offer a variety of foods to attract a diversity of breeding birds. In addition to providing seeds or peanuts, you can slice and hang fruit to attract birds such as orioles, mockingbirds, catbirds, and tanagers. Robins, thrushes, and bluebirds will eat dried raisins and currants that you have soaked in water. Hummingbirds come readily to nectar

made with sugar and water (see BirdNotes No. 2, "Attracting Hummingbirds"). Keep the supply of fruit and nectar fresh so it doesn't spoil. Although suet spoils in warm temperatures, many commercial brands can be offered throughout the summer. Birds that are feeding nestlings particularly enjoy mealworms. You can purchase them from a pet store or grow them yourself.

Whether or not to keep your feeders up year-round is a personal decision. In the Treman Bird Feeding Garden at the Cornell Lab of Ornithology, we keep our feeders filled year-round, for the benefit of the birds and the pleasure of our bird-loving visitors.

Recommended books

FeederWatcher's Guide to Bird Feeding, by Jack Griggs and Margaret Barker. HarperResource 2000.

The Bird Watching Answer Book: Everything You Need to Know to Enjoy Birds in Your Backyard and Beyond, Laura Erickson. Storey Publishing 2009.

The Audubon Society Guide to Attracting Birds: Creating Natural Habitats for Properties Large and Small, by Stephen Kress. Comstock Publishing Associates 2006.

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