

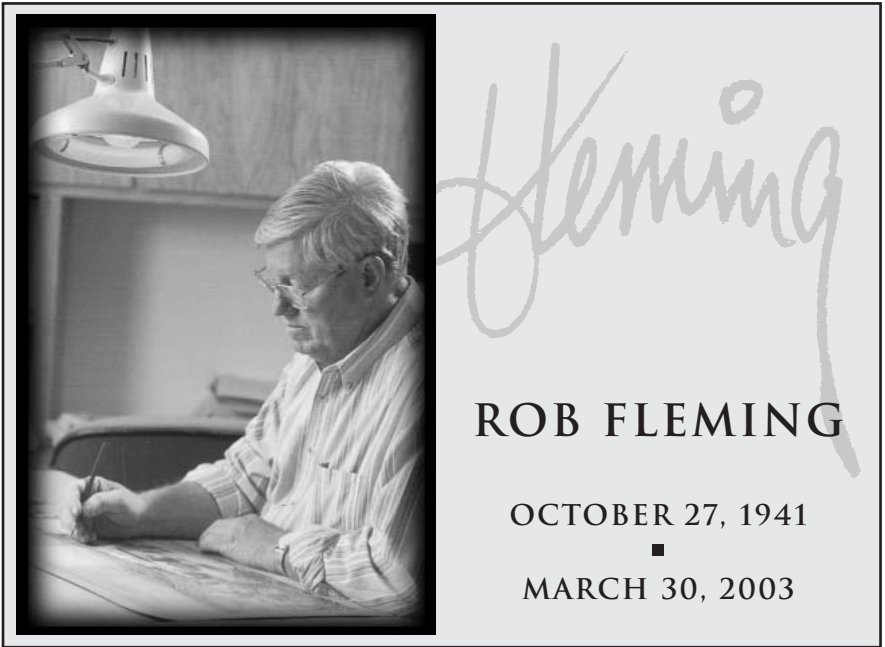
TEXAS PARKS AND WILDLIFE

Backyard Birds in Texas

BY MARK KLYM



In Memory of Rob Fleming



Rob Fleming passed away on March 30, 2003 after a lengthy battle with cancer. Rob earned his art degree from Southwest Texas State University and was a successful commercial artist in Houston before opening his own design studio in 1982. Rob joined TPWD in 1990 as a staff illustrator and was the Fine Art Manager in the Creative Services Branch of the Communications Division. Rob provided many illustrations for TPWD programs throughout his career and was the winner of numerous awards for his work. Leaving the paints to the painters, Rob wove his own brand of magic with Prismacolor pencils. Whether a still-life study or a Texas landscape, Rob's technique of color layering created distinctive and truly unique pencil paintings. His colorful pencil studies are in various corporate and private collections throughout the state, and his art graces many TPWD posters, brochures, books and reports. His gentle style and wonderful talent will truly be missed.

Cover illustration of Downy Woodpecker by Rob Fleming.

Introduction

Birdwatching, or birding as it is more often referred to, is one of the fastest growing hobbies today. Reasons for this popularity are as diverse as birders — aesthetics of the birds, the chance to get out in nature or a simple love for birds. Each has been given at one time or another for why people get started in birding.

By creating a habitat that is welcoming to the birds that visit your backyard, you can enjoy the hobby of birding without even leaving the comfort of your living room. Technology is making it possible for you to enjoy both the sight and the sound of these marvelous creatures while learning about our complex and delicate ecosystems. To learn more about creating backyard habitats for wildlife, there is a great book “Texas Wildscapes Gardening for Wildlife” available at most book stores.

Record Keeping

“Aren’t the hummingbirds late this year?” “I don’t have as many cardinals in my yard as I used to.” “Where have all the mockingbirds gone?” These are some of the questions biologists and experienced birders deal with everyday, and yet often when they look at the records the biologists find that this year is no different from previous years. Records can ease concerns, build excitement and even introduce new ideas to an existing hobby.

Records, or field notes, need not be anything fancy unless you are trying to identify a bird you have not seen before — then you want to be as detailed as possible. For most records though, a date, name of the species seen, number of birds and possibly some unique behavior notes will be more than enough. Avoid abbreviations — you will not remember what they are and neither will anyone else.

In the event you see a bird you are unfamiliar with, a photograph is often the best way to find help in identifying the bird. Some birds are quite easy to identify from a description — a large white bird with a huge, pouch like beak that spends a lot of time in water is likely an American White Pelican. Descriptions like “a small brown bird with a long tail” may get you to a wren, but is it a Carolina Wren or a Bewick’s Wren? A photograph can often show features you would forget to mention in field

notes. If photographs are not taken, be sure to mention habitat features in your description since they may be significant to the identification.

Identification Tips

“How can you be sure that that is the bird you are seeing?” This is probably one of the most common questions asked on a birding trip, and honestly most people are lucky if they can identify 50 percent of the birds they see. Let’s face it, these birds are moving, in some cases quite quickly, and they often have no reason to give you the “textbook look” of a profile image that is seen in the field guides. There are however, a few things you can do to make it a little more likely that you will get a good look at the birds you want to see and maybe even get a chance to identify some!

First, place yard features that are likely to attract birds in a prominent spot that is easy to see – preferably from a number of angles within your house. Fountains and ponds, berry and seed bearing plants should be placed to allow you easy access for watching. Hiding these features really defeats your purpose!

Have a good field guide handy! The experienced authors of these books will often highlight important features and distinctive characteristics that will help you separate confusing and difficult features. Don’t forget to look at habitat characteristics that may rule out a species you are considering.

Be consistent and sequential in the way you approach a new bird. Look at features like the feet and beak that will help you determine what family of birds you should be considering. Start at the same place and examine all features of the bird including head, back, wings, tail, rump, belly, legs and feet. This will ensure that you are taking note of features you can then look for in the field guide. Take notes and pictures if possible. They will help you in describing the bird to other birders. Learn to use terms that are common among birders – primaries, nape, retrices – these will ensure you are talking about the same thing when you discuss a bird.

Finally, don’t be afraid to simply say “I don’t know.” Some birds may simply never be identified to everyone’s satisfaction.

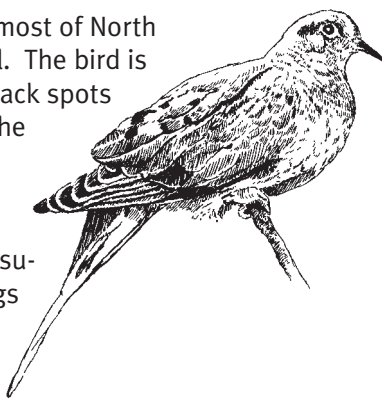
Common Backyard Birds.

The species included here were selected as common backyard birds that can be found through most of Texas. There were other species that could have been included, but these represent a good cross section of Texas diversity.

The birds are introduced in the order they would appear in any field guide you are likely to find.

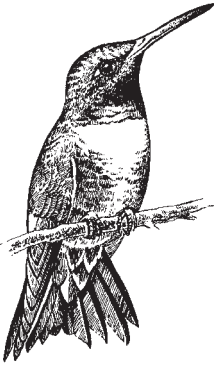
Mourning Dove

The Mourning Dove is found throughout most of North America. This bird has a long pointed tail. The bird is generally gray brown overall with large black spots on the wings. It is among the largest of the native doves you are likely to see in your backyard in Texas. The song is a soft, mournful hooting “ooAAH coo coo coo” often mistaken for an owl although it is usually heard only during the day. Their wings produce a soft whistle like sound when they first flush.



Eastern Screech-owl.

This is the screech owl that is found east of the Pecos River in Texas. West of the Pecos River, the Western Screech Owl is the screech owl that may be found. The Eastern Screech-owl is found in two color forms, gray and red, which are typically separated by range. An eared owl that can relax the ear tufts, it has a faintly spotted breast with soft buffy overtones. Both color morphs will have a greenish bill, though this may be difficult to see. The primary song is a descending whinny, while a long whistled trill of one pitch known as the tremolo song is also common.



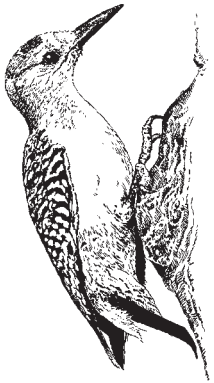
Black-chinned Hummingbird

This is the common hummingbird west of the Interstate 35 corridor. While it does occur east of 35, it is generally replaced there by its cousin the Ruby-throated Hummingbird. Hummingbirds fly with extremely fast wing beats (about 70 per second), and often move very fast, making them difficult to see. Their long bill and habit of pumping their tail when hovering distinguish them from their Ruby-throated counterparts. The tips of their wings are broad and curved. If the light is right, you may see a purple band below their black chin.

The Black-chinned Hummingbird is noted for a husky “tiv” or “tipip” type call.

Ruby-throated Hummingbird

The eastern counterpart to the Black-chinned Hummingbird above, the Ruby-throated Hummingbird is the most common species east of Interstate 35. Also like the Black-chinned, this species is found west as far as El Paso on occasion. When resting, the tail extends well beyond the tip of the wings. The wing tips are narrow and straight. It does not use its tail much when hovering. The call is very similar to that of the Black-chinned, but slightly sharper. They are also fond of making a rattling t t t t call.



Golden-fronted Woodpecker

The Golden-fronted Woodpecker is found in the Texas Hill Country and South Texas brush lands. A black and white striped bird with a small red cap, it sports a golden or orange yellow nape. A large all white rump distinguishes this bird from the look alike Red-bellied Woodpecker. A loud, harsh kurr is the typical call of this woodpecker.

Red-bellied Woodpecker

East of Interstate 35, this is the most common woodpecker in Texas. Slightly smaller than the Golden-fronted Woodpecker, the Red-bellied Woodpecker sports a red nape, spotted rump and a small white patch on the underside of the wings. A loud, rich quirr with slightly rising tone is the common call.

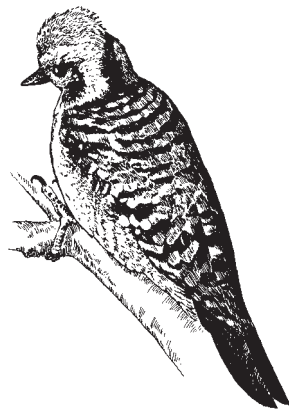


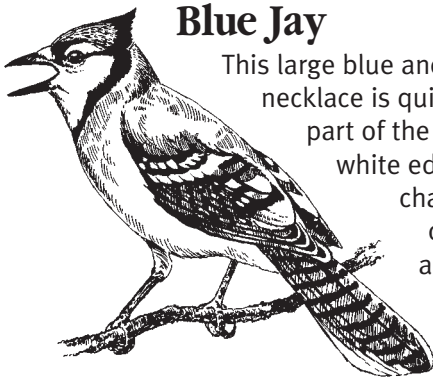
Downy Woodpecker

This smaller woodpecker common in the eastern portions of the state, occurrences in the hill country and west are spotty at best. Black and white wings, a white back, intricate black and white face with a small red crown to the rear of the head and obvious feather tufts over a small bill mark this bird. A short, gentle “pik” and a squeaky descending “kikikikiki ...” growing faster to the end are the common calls of this bird.

Ladder-backed Woodpecker

The Ladder-backed Woodpecker is found from the Hill Country westward through Texas. Smaller than the Golden-fronted and Red-bellied Woodpeckers, this bird has a black and white back, striped rump and red crown that extends only to the eye on the top of the bird’s head. A sharp “pwik” call and rattle call “kweekweek-weekweekchr” that always ends in low grating notes mark this bird’s presence.



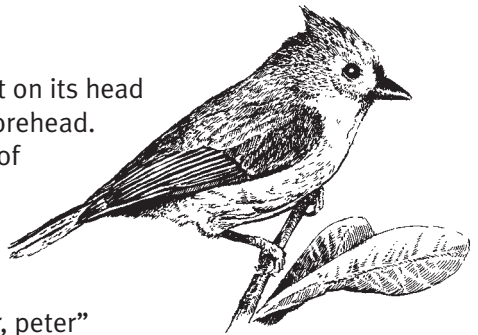


Blue Jay

This large blue and white bird with its black mask and necklace is quite familiar to people in the eastern part of the state. A long blue tail with obvious white edging and plain gray breast are also characteristic of this bird. A shrill, descending scream of “jaaaay” and a whistled “toolili” are frequent calls of this bird.

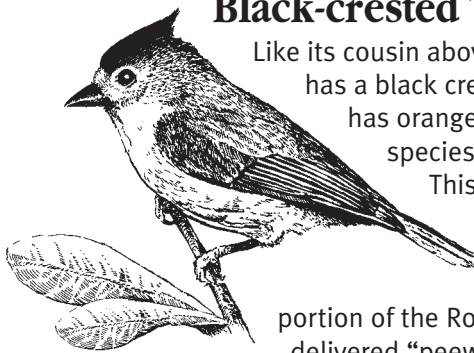
Tufted Titmouse

This gray bird with a little gray crest on its head sports orange flanks, and a black forehead. It is found in Texas commonly east of Interstate 35. In the Hill Country, Rolling Plains and South Texas, it is less frequent, often replaced by the Black-crested Titmouse. A clear whistled “peter, peter, peter, peter” is the song of this species.



Black-crested Titmouse

Like its cousin above, this bird is small and gray, but it has a black crest above the pale forehead. It also has orange flanks. As juveniles, the two species are often difficult to distinguish.

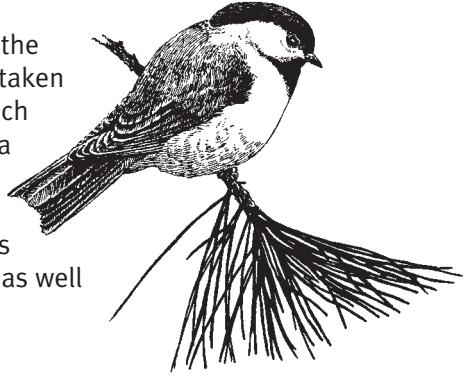


This bird is the “western” species of titmouse in Texas, and is limited in the United States to the Hill Country, South Texas and a small

portion of the Rolling Plains. Five to seven rapidly delivered “peew, peew, peew, peew, peew” phrases is the song of the Black-crested Titmouse.

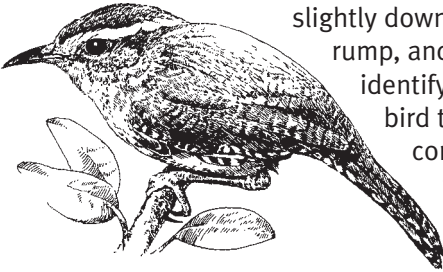
Carolina Chickadee

This small bird is found throughout the eastern half of our state. Often mistaken for the Black-capped Chickadee which does not occur in Texas, the Carolina Chickadee is a small gray bird with long tail, black cap and bib, white cheeks and buff colored belly. It has a typical “chikadeedeedeede” call as well as a “see bee see bay” type call.



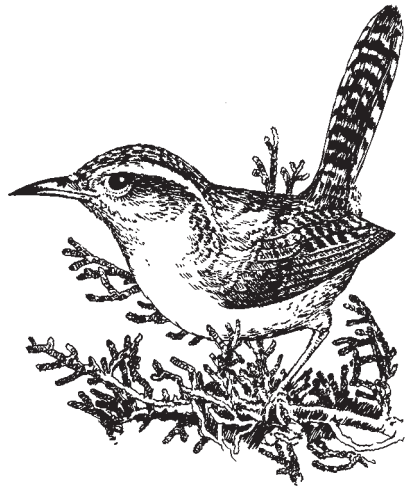
Carolina Wren

Another one of our eastern birds, this species sports a red-brown back, mid length tail, white eye stripe and a longer, pointed, slightly down curved bill. Its spotted wings and rump, and rich buffy orange breast help to identify it. You are more likely to hear this bird than to see it at first. In spring it commonly sings a “tea kettle tea kettle tea kettle tea” or “pidaro pidaro pidaro” song.



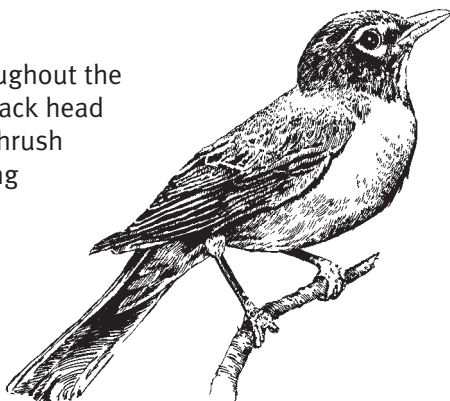
Bewick's Wren

This bird is found throughout the state of Texas, overlapping the range of the Carolina Wren in the east. It is a browner bird than the Carolina Wren with a longer tail that is tipped in white at the corners. The belly of the Bewick's Wren is gray. This bird has a very varied call often including melodious or buzzy trills.



American Robin

This familiar large bird found throughout the state is noted for its red breast, black head and gray back. A member of the thrush family, it has a very melodious song sometimes described as “cheerly cheerly cheerly.”



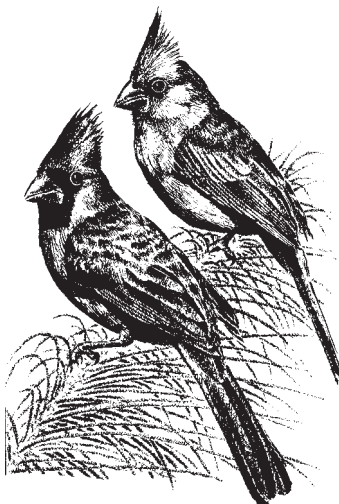
Northern Mockingbird

No discussion of backyard birds in Texas would be complete without a look at our state bird! This gray bird with white patches on the wings and tail is found all across the Lone Star State. Their very melodious song is repeated two to six times and varies

dramatically.

Northern Cardinal

The “redbird” as the Northern Cardinal is often called, is a red bird with black mask, long tail and red bill. The female does not look at all like the male, being grayer with an orange crest. Juvenile birds may have a gray bill. Cardinals are found throughout the state.



House Finch

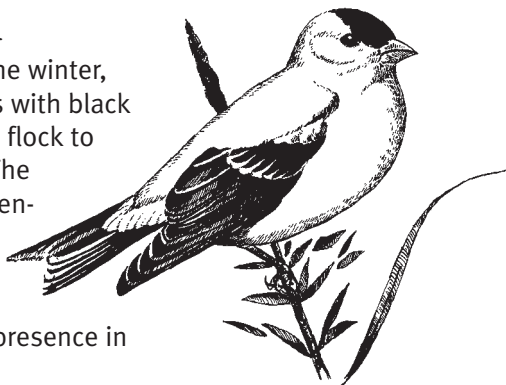


Found throughout the state, the House Finch is a gray streaked bird with a rather long, slightly notched tail and an orange red blush to the head and breast – strongest on the head. The head is plain and the bill is short. A varied warble that begins with a husky whistle and ends in a burry “veeerrr” note is the call of this bird.

American Goldfinch

Found throughout the state in the winter, these are the bright yellow birds with black wings and a black forehead that flock to sunflower and thistle feeders. The female is a paler yellow. Both genders show white in the wing that is visible in flight.

Repeated phrases of “toWEE toWEE toWEE” mark this bird’s presence in your yard.



Conservation Issues

One of the greatest threats to a continuing diverse bird population in Texas is the rapid loss of habitat being experienced by many species as our cities continue to encroach into new territories. This encroachment has resulted in the loss of many unique habitat types, resulting in species being listed as endangered or threatened simply because they have no place to turn for suitable living situations.

To help alleviate some of this pressure, you can restore native habitat to your backyard. The Texas Wildscapes program at Texas Parks and Wildlife Department has some great tips on how to do this. Encouraging others in your community to join you in this effort will enhance the impact of your effort. Communities can maintain native areas within their parklands, while schools, businesses and other community organizations can also be encouraged to help in the efforts.

Feral cats and wandering pets kill millions of individuals of wildlife each year within the state of Texas. While the cat has been kept as a house pet for thousands of years, it is not native to North America and North American bird species have not fully adapted to the added predator pressure presented by the cat. Keeping your cat indoors, and encouraging your neighbors to do the same, will not only help to increase the diversity and density of wildlife in your yard, it will also improve the life expectancy of your pet!

Providing food for birds is a somewhat controversial issue among birders. If you are going to supplement the natural foods in your yard through feeders, please ensure the feeders are maintained and monitor the birds for evidence of illness. Should illness show up at your feeders, the food should be changed and the feeders carefully cleaned before they are reestablished.

Do your part to reduce habitat for pests, especially mosquitos. The chemical sprays used by municipal pest control services are often toxic to birds when consumed in quantities. By eliminating standing water and keeping grass areas to a minimum and well trimmed, you reduce habitat for these pests. Your area is less likely to be declared “infested” and the sprays are unnecessary.

Large, plate glass windows are often a collision hazard for birds. Prevent these collisions by making the birds aware that the window is not open sky. Screens, potted plants with waving branches and even hawk silhouettes make the “open sky” less appealing. Turning indoor lights off at night, especially in tall buildings, will also reduce these collisions.

These and other simple conservation issues can be managed in your backyard. Talk to local birding and nature clubs, Audubon societies and other interest groups about specific issues in your area.

Resources

Birding

Identification Books

Sibley, David Allen. 2000. *National Audubon Society the Sibley Guide to Birds*. Alfred A. Knopf. New York.

Field Guides

Dunn, Jon L. Editor. 2006. *Field Guide to the Birds of North America*. Fifth Edition. National Geographic Society. Washington, DC.

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