

# A Guide to Bird-watching and South Texas Wintering Birds

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Larry Ditto: Page 14–Scaled Quail

Timothy Fulbright: Page 1–Orange-crowned Warbler; Page 2–Ruby-crowned Kinglet, Lincoln’s Sparrow; Page 10–Ruby-crowned Kinglet; Page 11–Orange-crowned Warbler

Christina Kleberg: Cover–Birdwatchers

Thomas Langschied: Page 8–Vermilion Flycatcher

Hugh Lieck: Cover–Harris’s Hawk, Green Jay, Ruby-crowned Kinglet; Page 5–Black-bellied Whistling Duck, Blue-winged Teal; Page 6–Great Blue Heron, Harris’s Hawk, Crested Caracara; Page 7–American Kestrel, Sandhill Crane, Mourning Dove, Inca Dove; Page 8–Golden-fronted Woodpecker, Eastern Phoebe, Great Kiskadee; Page 9–Couch’s Kingbird, Green Jay, Black-crested Titmouse; Page 10–Northern Mockingbird, Curve-billed Thrasher; Page 11–Northern Cardinal, Lark Sparrow, Savannah Sparrow; Page 13–Pyrrhuloxia, Northern Cardinal; Page 15–Cinnamon Teal

Glenn Perrigo: Page 5–Northern Shoveler, Pied-billed Grebe; Page 6–Red-tailed Hawk; Page 9–Loggerhead Shrike; Page 10–American Robin

*Editor Alan M. Fedynich, Ph.D.*



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# A Guide to Bird-watching and South Texas Wintering Birds

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This guide is designed to introduce you to the basic components of bird-watching and to help you learn some of the common birds that winter in South Texas. First and foremost, realize that bird-watching can be whatever you want it to be, whether it is taking a moment to appreciate the first flight of geese of the season, or the intensely colored Vermilion Flycatcher at a water tank, or keeping a daily bird list. Bird-watching offers an opportunity to enjoy the outdoors that many people overlook. If you are one of those people who have overlooked the birdlife of South Texas, you may be in for a refreshing surprise.

## Bird-watching Basics

The heart of bird-watching involves identifying a bird that you encounter while in the outdoors or in your back yard. While this may seem straight forward, it is complicated by the diversity of birdlife found in South Texas. Over 540 bird species, or 86% of the state's birdlife, have been recorded in the South Texas area. Despite this incredible and daunting list of birds, once

you understand the basics, bird-watching can and should be an enjoyable and rewarding activity.

The consistent and correct identification of a bird involves patience, careful observation, and practice. Careful observation includes noting several different features that can include size, shape, color, behavior, habitat, and songs or calls. Understanding the different terms and plumage patterns noted in Figures 1 and 2 will allow you to refine your observations.

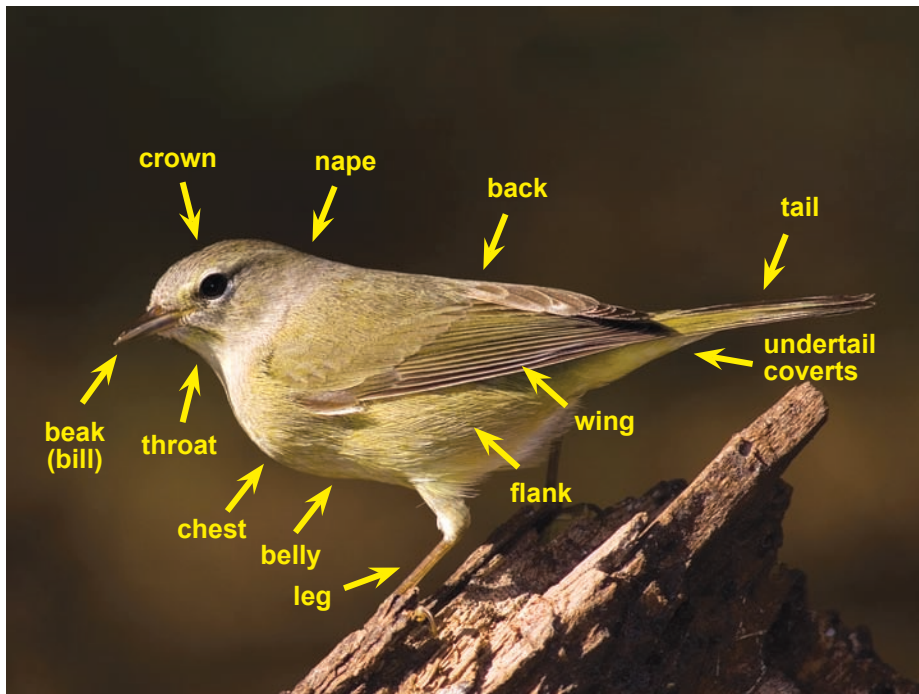


Figure 1. Basic terms used to describe bird topography as demonstrated on this Orange-crowned Warbler.





**Figure 2. Additional important terms that are used to identify birds as shown on a Ruby-crowned Kinglet and Lincoln's Sparrow (inset).**

In learning to identify a bird, careful observation is the key. Look at the bird and note characteristics about the bird you are seeing. These characteristics are collectively known as field marks. First step, take note of the overall size of the bird. Is it large like a turkey or the size of a quail or smaller? Next, consider shape or silhouette. Is it long-legged and long-necked like a heron or short-legged and short-necked like a dove?

What shape is its beak (bill)? The shape of the beak is the single best feature to narrow a bird down to a particular family of birds. In fact, beak shape and overall head pattern are the two most important features in identifying most birds to a particular species.

Next, note the color of different parts of the bird. Is the head a different color than the back or belly? Is there an eye ring or a wing bar? When considering color, keep in mind the influence that lighting can have on color. Overcast conditions or shade can make a bird appear darker than it actually is.

Also consider the habitat where the bird is found. Is it associated with water or is it moving through the trees? Be careful of assumptions. Just because it is floating on the water does not necessarily make it a duck. There are many other birds that float on the water like a duck. Again, shape can be important, as in the shape of the bill. A duck has a spatulate or spoon-like bill, whereas a

grebe or coot has a more pointed, stout bill. So, noting and combining various field marks can greatly narrow down the identity of the bird. This takes practice, so do not expect to identify every bird you see on your first attempts at bird-watching.

Behavior, whether in flight or feeding, can also help to narrow down your identification of a particular bird. Some hawks soar high overhead, whereas others fly low over the ground. The American Kestrel, a small falcon, often hovers while looking for prey, and this behavior in combination with its small size and pointed wing shape can help to quickly determine its identity.

Also, do not forget to consider songs or calls. Learning and appreciating a bird's song is often overlooked, even by those who have been observing birds for years. Most birds that vocalize have very distinctive calls or songs and can be readily identified to species by listening to their vocalizations. Think about the unique sound of a Northern Bobwhite or the gobble of a Wild Turkey. These songs and calls can often be learned after you have first identified the bird visually and then continued to study it, listening for any unique sounds it may utter. But, just like other senses, some people have a "better ear" than others and this, like visual observations, requires practice.

To be absolutely redundant, it all comes down to practice, which means spending time looking at birds.

Besides the careful study of a particular bird on your own, the value of spending time in the field with others familiar with the local or regional birds cannot be understated.

Also, failure to appreciate and select appropriate tools for bird-watching will complicate one's ability to identify a bird. These complications enhance the frustration and loss of interest in birds that many people experience when beginning. So, let us now consider the different "tools of the trade" as it relates to bird-watching.

## **Tools of the Trade**

### **Binoculars**

Binoculars are the cornerstone piece of equipment for bird-watching. Binoculars can help transform a distant red bird into a vibrant and dazzling colored creature that may have other distinct features. When selecting binoculars it is very important to find a pair that is comfortable. Binoculars that are too heavy or bulky are less likely to be used or kept handy.

While selecting a pair of comfortable binoculars you will invariably notice two numbers separated by an "x" such as 7x35. The first number refers to the magnification of the optical eyepieces within the binoculars. The seven in the example above means that the viewed object, or the bird in this case, will be seven times closer. The second number is the diameter, in millimeters, of the front or objective lens and primarily represents light gathering capabilities of the lens. The smaller this number is, the less light that is allowed into the optics, which can also decrease the field of view.

Magnification of 7x to 8x usually works well for many birdwatchers, though some find the 10x to be better. However, as magnification increases, it becomes more difficult to hold the binoculars steady. The size of the objective lens can greatly affect the amount of light gathered and the field of view. A good objective lens for bird-watching should be 30 or greater. The smaller the objective lens the smaller the field of view, so having a larger objective lens can directly influence the clarity of the view and improve your ability to find the bird. A nice combination for most bird-watching would be a binocular that is 8x40.

Many beginners make the mistake of selecting pocket-sized (compact) binoculars (i.e., 8x20 or 10x25) for ease of carrying only to be frustrated at their inability to locate and clearly see the birds. These pocket-sized

binoculars might be useful in some endeavors, but bird-watching is not one of them.

Another important consideration when shopping for binoculars is the quality of the optics. There is an incredible variety of makes and types of binoculars. Overall quality of binoculars has steadily, if not significantly, improved over the years, given improved manufacturing techniques. The price of binoculars does not necessarily reflect quality, but it can help. To find the right pair of binoculars, try a store or local bird festival where there is wide variety of models to try out. Searching the internet can also produce some nice web sites that have reviewed various binocular models for bird-watching.

If you have not used binoculars very much, it can take some time getting used to them. To use binoculars efficiently, remember to continue staring at the point of interest, a bird in this case, and pick up the binoculars to your eyes. Many beginners often look down at their binoculars first and thus lose eye contact with the bird, making the bird challenging to relocate.

### **Spotting Scope**

A spotting scope can be a useful tool for enjoying and identifying birds. Spotting scopes usually have more magnification than binoculars, 20x or more. Because of the increase in magnification, these optics exhibit a decreased field of view and a need for good stability. Purchase a sturdy tripod because it is a necessary accessory. The decreased field of view encourages use of spotting scopes to areas where birds are in open to fairly open habitats. Spotting scopes work great when there is an interest in looking at ducks on a lake or shorebirds foraging on open mudflats.

Overall, spotting scopes tend to be more of an investment than binoculars, especially when considering the accompanying tripod. Many people make the mistake of investing most of their money in the spotting scope and spending little on the tripod. The spotting scope is only as stable as its base and higher quality tripods are typically more stable and durable. Similar to binoculars, it is best to learn about the different brands available of both spotting scopes and tripods. As with binoculars, there are several internet sources that provide reviews of the different spotting scopes that are best for bird-watching.

### **Field Guide**

A good field guide is an essential tool in the identification of birds. The number of field guides for birds is

staggering compared to 25 years ago. When selecting a field guide, one should consider several important characteristics: portability, illustration quality (drawings versus pictures), multiple images to a page, and range maps that are well marked and located close to the illustrations.

Given the abundance of bird field guides, the lack of a good field guide specifically for Texas is disappointing. Those available are either lacking good illustrations or overall number of birds depicted. There are several good North American or eastern U.S. field guides that fit the above important characteristics (Fig. 3).

Modern technology has come to the rescue for some new field guides. One in particular uses digitally enhanced photographs, thereby reducing the problem that photographs can sometimes represent. Some cell phones have access to bird field guide applications that can be downloaded from the internet, and these can help reduce the problem of keeping a typical hardbound field guide handy. Some of these downloadable field guide applications can also be tailored to the birds in a particular state, month, or habitat type—a very handy feature. A huge advantage with many of these field guide applications is the bird calls and songs that are included for each of the species covered. The biggest drawback is viewing the screens of these devices in the sunlight.

Be careful of confusing field guides with other in-depth books about birds. I consider these more detailed books quite nice when in the home or office, but very cumbersome for any trip afield. Books in this category are quite numerous, but there are many books relating to Texas birds that can be great general references.

### Notebook

A field notebook is an accessory to bird-watching that is often only appreciated well after someone has become interested in birds. All too often, birdwatchers reflect back on birds they saw when they were just getting started, but cannot find any reference to it. A field notebook is an excellent way to keep lists of things seen

or of unfamiliar birds drawn or sketched in the field for later identification. Some people use their field guide to record first sightings of each bird species, which is fine, but it doesn't replace the value of a small notebook for more room to record more detailed sightings.

### Introduction to Some Common Winter Birds

The following is a two-part section designed to help you learn some of the birds that winter in South Texas. These are not necessarily the most common birds, but they are a good representative group designed to help introduce new or beginning birdwatchers to a subset of the overall spectrum of birds found in South Texas during the winter. Some of these species are year-round residents, and others are strictly winter residents.

Part 1 of the section (Primary Focus Bird Guide) includes a picture of each of the species with arrows pointing to important field marks to look for in identifying each particular species. These arrows will be in yellow or red depending on the background of the photo and which color allows better viewing. Besides the list of important field marks, you will find information on size (overall bird length in inches denoted by " next to name), residency classification, habitat, similar species, and possible special notes on behavior or female plumage. Part 2 of the section (Advanced Focus Bird List) also provides specific information on each species featured, but without the accompanying photo.

Focusing on these groups will allow you to channel your interests on a fairly small group of birds initially, and then expand to include more species later. No doubt, there will be some species that may be familiar to you that have not been included in these lists, but you can include those on your own and consider yourself further along in your bird-watching endeavors. Also note that male and female are alike in plumage unless otherwise noted.

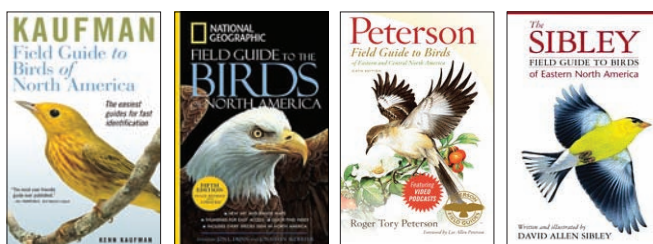
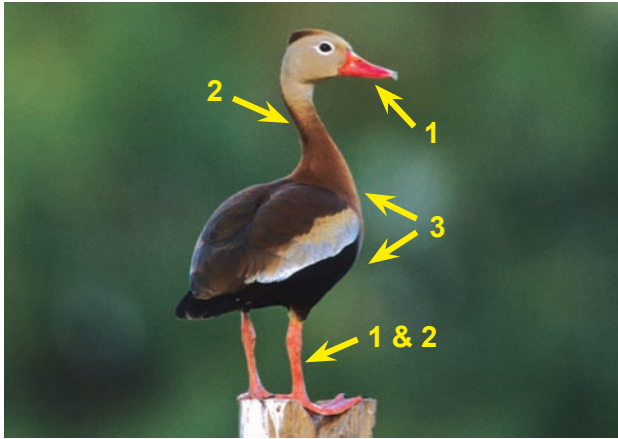


Figure 3. Four useful field guides for South Texas birds.



## Part 1 – Primary Focus Bird Guide



**Black-bellied Whistling-Duck 21”**  
**Year-round Resident**

**Key field marks**

1. Red beak, pink legs and feet
2. Long-necked and long-legged
3. Reddish-brown chest, black belly, bold white stripe on wing

**Special note:** these ducks can perch in trees and utilize nest boxes for nesting

**Habitat:** ponds and small lakes

**Similar species:** none



**Blue-winged Teal 16”**  
**Winter Resident**

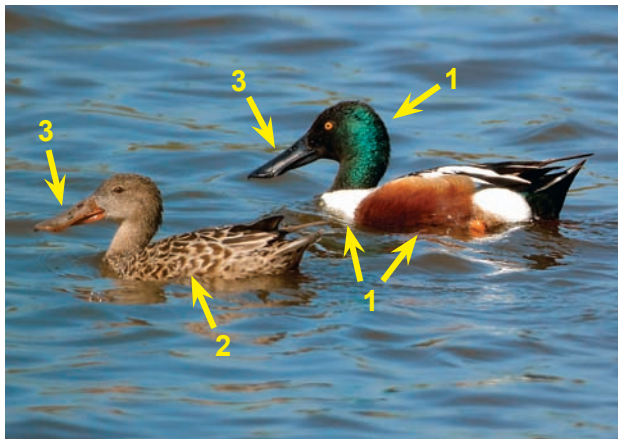
**Key field marks**

1. Male has bluish-gray head with white crescent
2. Chest, flanks and belly are brown with black spots
3. White flank and black undertail

**Special note:** female is light brown; both male and female show light blue patch on wing in flight

**Habitat:** ponds and lakes

**Similar species:** male quite distinctive; female similar to other female teal



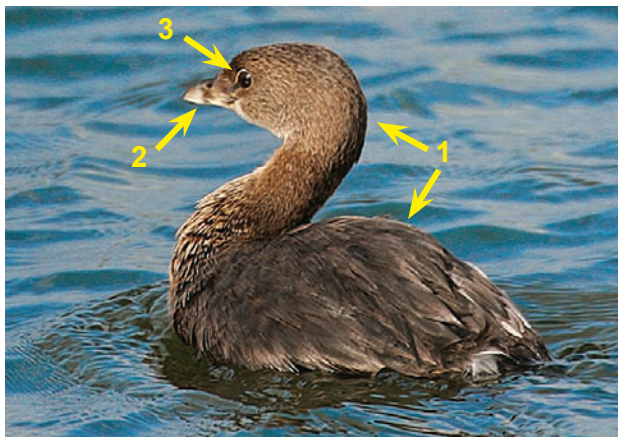
**Northern Shoveler 19”**  
**Winter Resident**

**Key field marks**

1. Male has dark greenish head, white chest and rusty brown sides
2. Female is mottled brown overall
3. Males and females have a very spatulate beak

**Habitat:** ponds and lakes

**Similar species:** the male Mallard has dark brown chest and white sides



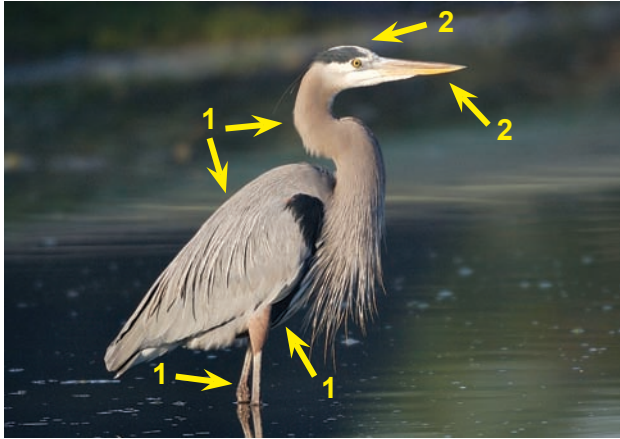
**Pied-billed Grebe 13”**  
**Year-round Resident**

**Key field marks**

1. Small, grayish-brown waterbird
2. Short, thick, blunt beak
3. Dark eye

**Habitat:** ponds and lakes

**Similar species:** Least Grebe is smaller, has a golden colored eye, and a smaller pointed beak; often misidentified as a duck



**Great Blue Heron 46”  
Year-round Resident**

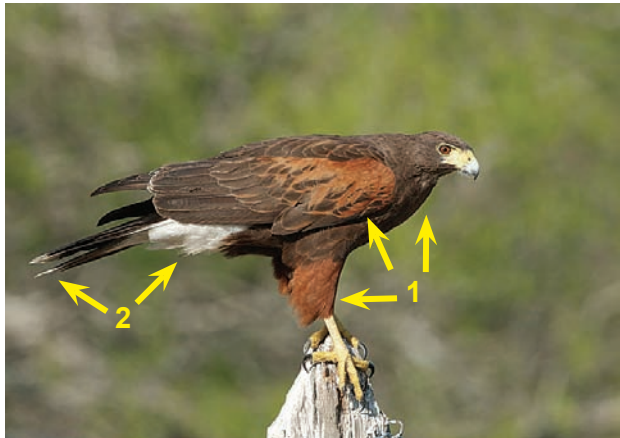
**Key field marks**

1. Large, long-necked and long-legged grayish wading bird; dark belly
2. Head white with dark crown stripe; yellowish beak

**Special note:** flies with head and neck pulled back

**Habitat:** wetlands, ponds, and lakes

**Similar species:** Sandhill Crane flies with neck straight out like goose; head pattern different



**Harris's Hawk 20”  
Year-round Resident**

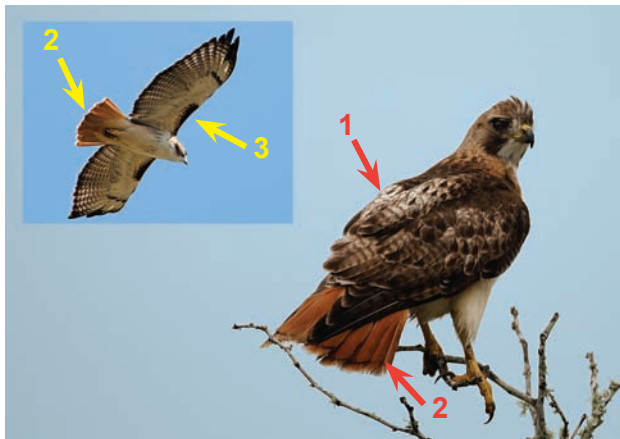
**Key field marks**

1. Overall dark brown hawk with chestnut shoulders and leg feathers
2. Tail white at base and tip, large black band between

**Special note:** frequently hunts in pairs or groups

**Habitat:** brush/woodland areas

**Similar species:** in flight, sometimes confused with Northern Harrier (hawk), because of white band at base of upper tail



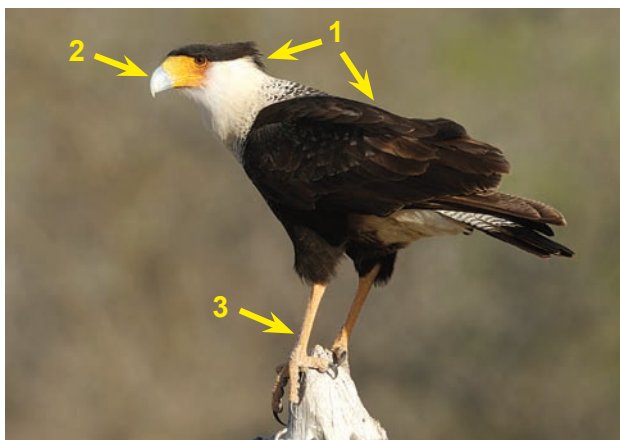
**Red-tailed Hawk 19”  
Year-round Resident (more common in winter)**

**Key field marks**

1. A large hawk with a brown and white mottled back, chest and belly are whitish colored; some birds have brown streaks across belly
2. Top of tail on adults is reddish; immatures have a brown tail with many narrow darker bands
3. On flying birds, note dark area on under side of wing at leading edge of wing close to body

**Habitat:** open fields and mature brushland areas

**Similar species:** Ferruginous Hawk is the only other hawk with a reddish tail, but lacks mottled back; lacks dark area on under side of wing; has feathered legs to feet



**Crested Caracara 23”  
Year-round Resident**

**Key field marks (for adult)**

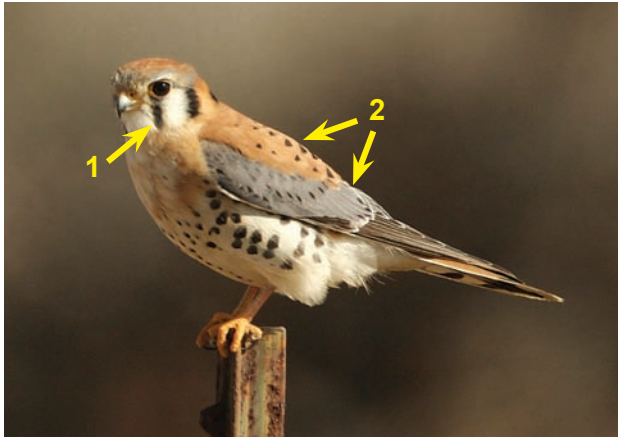
1. Adult has black crown, body, and wings; white on the neck, wing patches, and base of tail
2. Large bluish-gray beak, orange face
3. Yellow legs and feet

**Special note:** immatures are similar, but body is brown and buffy where adult is black and white; pink face and a streaked chest

**Habitat:** open brush areas, often near water

**Similar species:** possibly Bald Eagle; eagle much larger and adult has all white head





**American Kestrel 9”  
Winter Resident**

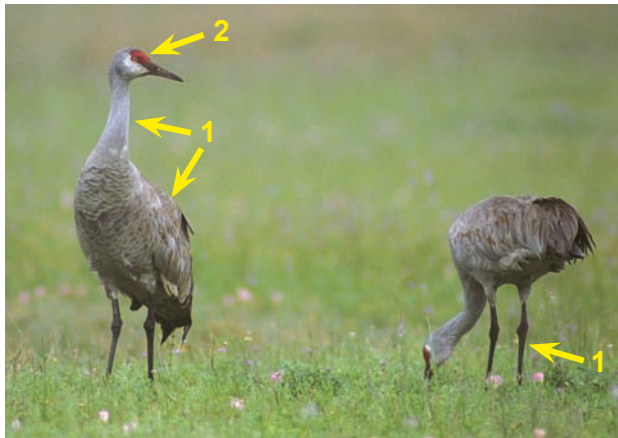
**Key field marks**

1. Head is marked by two vertical, black stripes that extend down toward neck, white between stripes; gray crown and white throat
2. Male has rusty brown back and blue wings; female similar to male, but has brown wings

**Special note:** often hovers while looking for prey

**Habitat:** shrub-grassland/park habitat

**Similar species:** Merlin lacks the distinctive head marking



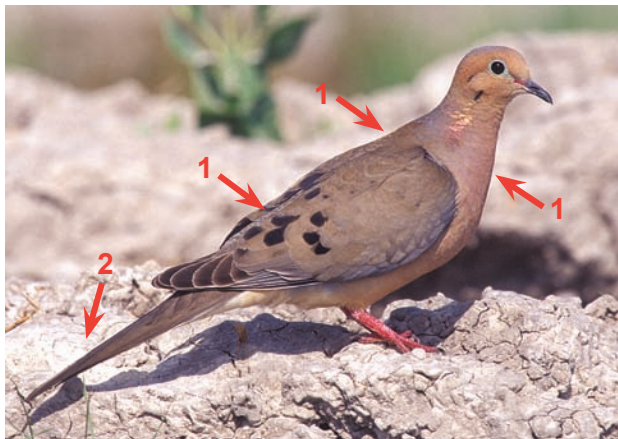
**Sandhill Crane 41”  
Winter Resident**

**Key field marks**

1. A large, gray long-necked and long-legged bird
2. Red crown on top of head

**Habitat:** found in a variety of upland areas; roosts in wooded wetlands

**Similar species:** often confused with Great Blue Heron in flight; herons do not fly with neck fully extended



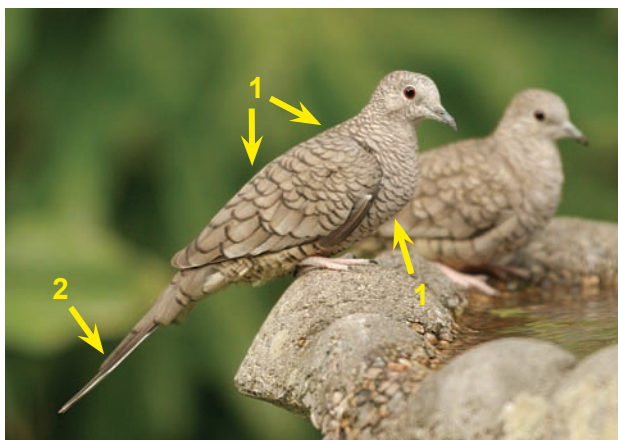
**Mourning Dove 12”  
Year-round Resident**

**Key field marks**

1. Brownish-gray medium-sized dove with black spots on the wings
2. Long pointed tail

**Habitat:** variety of habitats

**Similar species:** other doves; no other medium-to-large dove has a pointed tail



**Inca Dove 8”  
Year-round Resident**

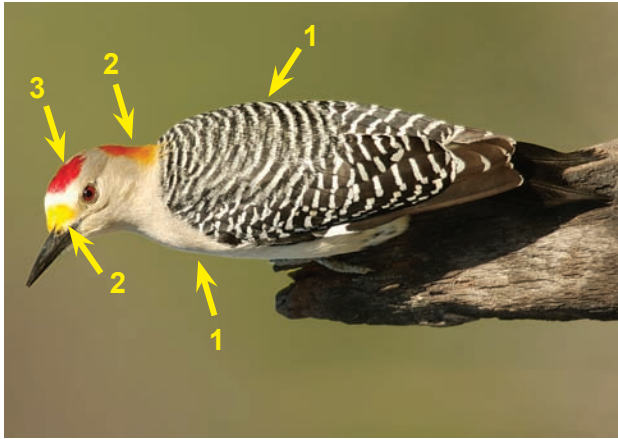
**Key field marks**

1. Small gray dove, feathers of body and wing are edged with black giving it a scaled appearance
2. Long tail

**Special note:** in flight, reddish-colored wings are seen

**Habitat:** open brush/woodland and in urban areas

**Similar species:** Common Ground-Dove has a short black tail and lacks the scaled appearance on the wings and back



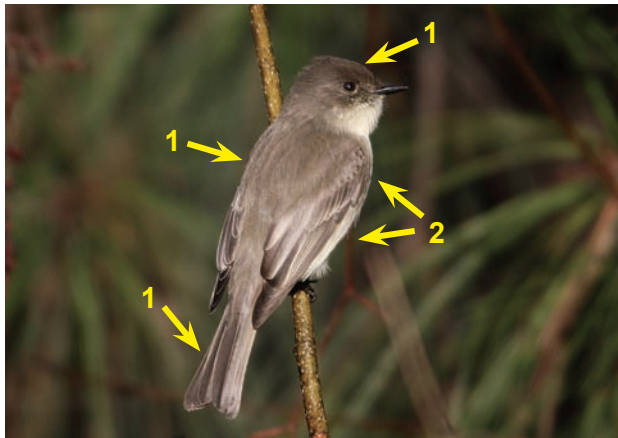
**Golden-fronted Woodpecker 9.5"**  
**Year-round Resident**

**Key field marks**

1. Black and white striped back and wings, chest and belly gray
2. Golden color above bill and orange-yellow nape
3. Male has red crown

**Habitat:** variety of brush/woodland areas

**Similar species:** Ladder-backed Woodpecker is smaller and has a black and white striped head



**Eastern Phoebe 7"**  
**Winter Resident**

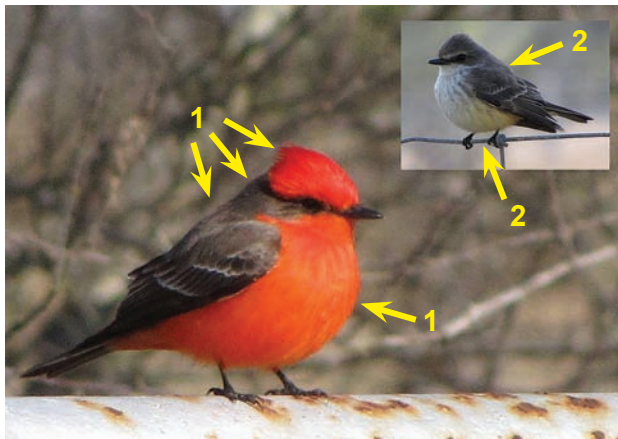
**Key field marks**

1. Dark gray head, gray back and tail; no eye ring
2. Whitish chest and whitish to pale yellow belly

**Special note:** often wags tail while perched

**Habitat:** variety of open brush/woodland areas

**Similar species:** Say's Phoebe is darker overall and has a cinnamon colored belly and a longer black tail; Vermilion Flycatcher female is smaller and lighter gray with dusky streaks on chest and has shorter tail



**Vermilion Flycatcher 6"**  
**Year-round Resident**

**Key field marks**

1. Adult male distinctive; bright red crown and under parts; facial mask, back, wings, and tail are blackish
2. Female has a grayish crown, back, and wings; whitish chest with yellow or peach-colored belly

**Habitat:** in winter, prefers open brush/woodland areas with water nearby (e.g., stock tanks, etc.)

**Similar species:** male often confused with male Northern Cardinal; female often confused with Say's Phoebe, which is larger and darker overall, also has a longer tail and cinnamon belly



**Great Kiskadee 10"**  
**Year-round Resident**

**Key field marks**

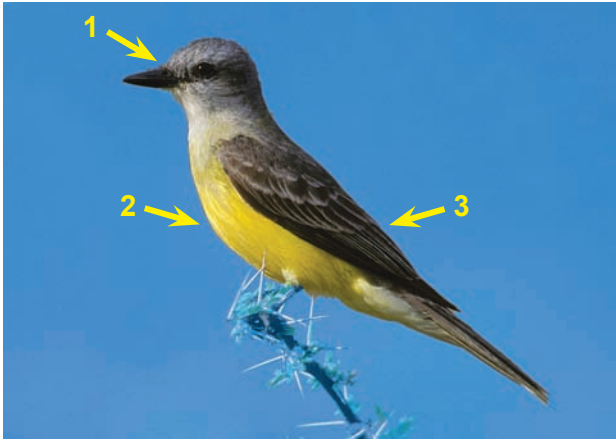
1. Black and white striped head
2. Bright yellow belly and chest
3. Rusty-colored wings

**Special note:** very vocal, common call a very strident "Kis Ka Dee!"

**Habitat:** found in woodland/open mature brush areas, often near water

**Similar species:** none





**Couch's Kingbird 9"**  
**Year-round Resident**

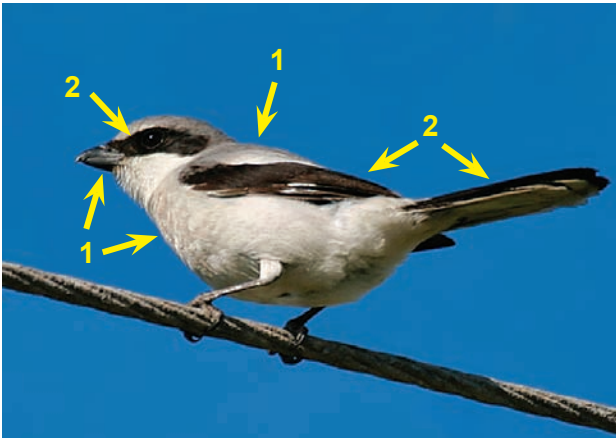
**Key field marks**

1. Grayish head; thick, dark beak
2. Bright yellow belly and upper chest
3. Greenish back, brownish gray wings and tail

**Special note:** typical call "Ka breer!"

**Habitat:** variety of brush/woodland areas

**Similar species:** Tropical Kingbird (very rare) has a deeper notched tail and a different call; Western Kingbird (summer) has less yellow on upper chest and a black tail with white outer tail feathers



**Loggerhead Shrike 9"**  
**Year-round Resident (more common in winter)**

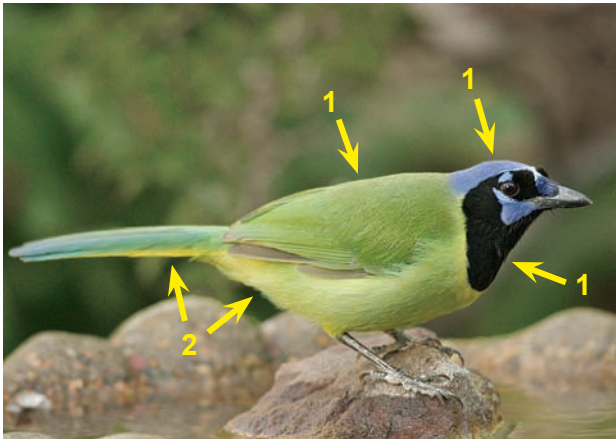
**Key field marks**

1. Black, white, and gray bird with short, hooked beak
2. Black facial mask; wings and tail are black

**Special note:** often impales prey on thorns or barbed wire; for this behavior, it is sometimes called butcherbird

**Habitat:** open areas with scattered bushes and trees

**Similar species:** Northern Mockingbird lacks black mask and has a longer, slender, pointed beak



**Green Jay 10.5"**  
**Year-round Resident**

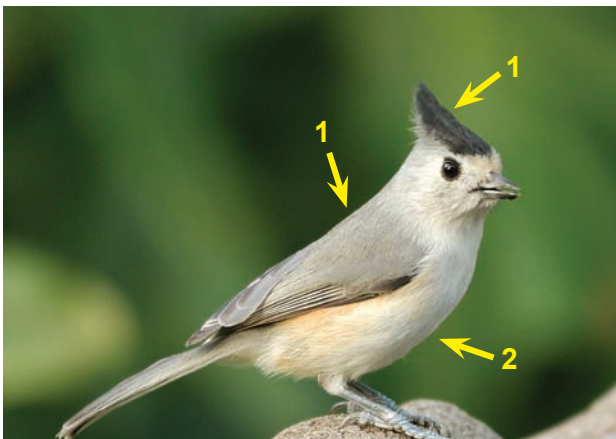
**Key field marks**

1. Blue crown, black throat and upper chest, emerald green back
2. Yellow-green below, yellow outer tail feathers

**Special note:** very gregarious and noisy species; visits bird feeders

**Habitat:** variety of brush/woodland areas

**Similar species:** none



**Black-crested Titmouse 6.25"**  
**Year-round Resident**

**Key field marks**

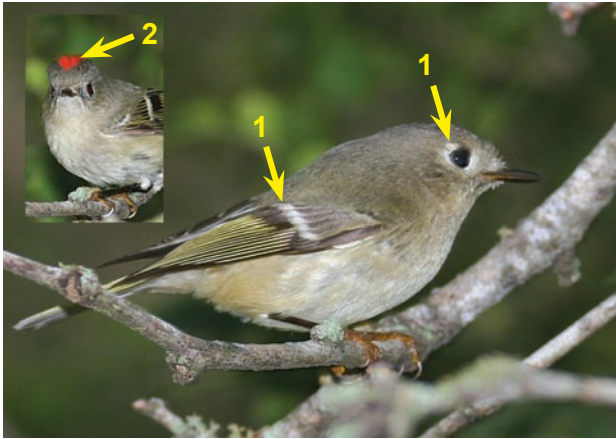
1. Small, gray-backed bird with a black crest
2. Underparts whitish with rusty flanks

**Special note:** visits bird feeders if small sunflower seeds are available

**Habitat:** variety of brush/woodland areas

**Similar species:** Tufted Titmouse, which is primarily found in northeastern areas of South Texas, has gray not black crest





**Ruby-crowned Kinglet 4”  
Winter Resident**

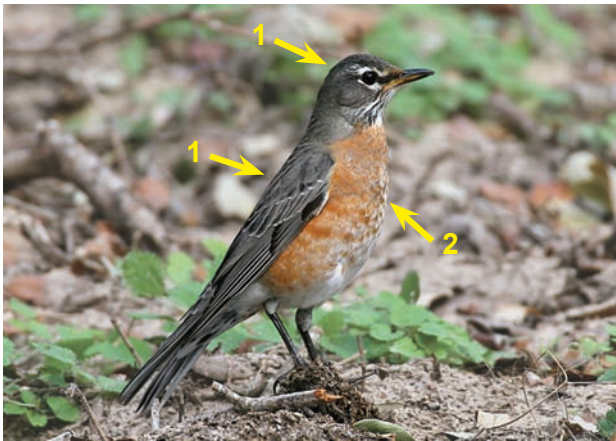
**Key field marks**

1. Tiny olive-gray bird with white eye ring and wing bar
2. When excited, red crown feathers appear

**Special note:** a very active and hard to follow bird

**Habitat:** variety of brush/woodland areas

**Similar species:** Golden-crowned Kinglet has a striped crown and no eye ring



**American Robin 10”  
Winter Resident**

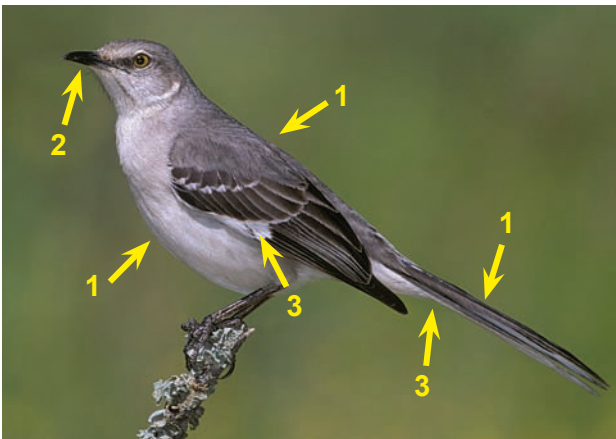
**Key field marks**

1. Blackish gray head with partial white eye ring; back and tail are gray
2. Orange breast/flanks

**Special note:** often seen foraging on ground

**Habitat:** variety of brush/woodland areas

**Similar species:** none



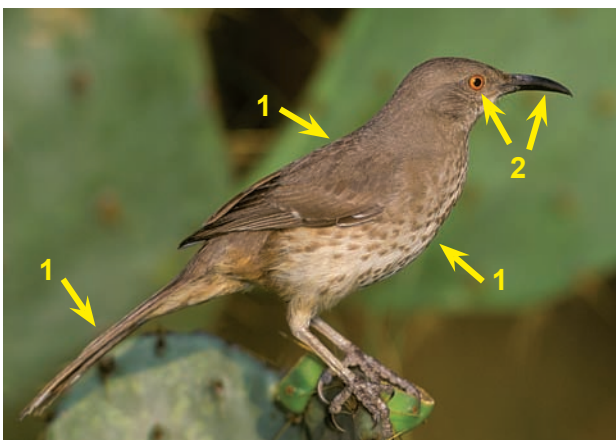
**Northern Mockingbird 10”  
Year-round Resident (state bird of Texas)**

**Key field marks**

1. Long-tailed gray bird; lighter gray chest and belly
2. Slender, medium-length beak
3. Large white wing patches and white outer tail feathers show in flight

**Habitat:** variety of upland areas

**Similar species:** Loggerhead Shrike



**Curve-billed Thrasher 10”  
Year-round Resident**

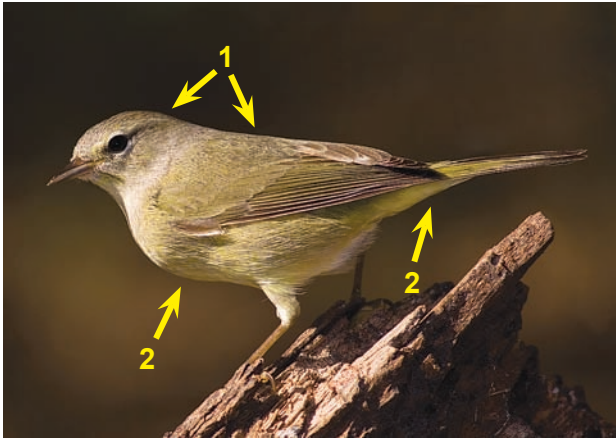
**Key field marks**

1. Long-tailed brownish-gray bird; dark spots on lighter chest, flank, and belly
2. Fairly long, curved beak; orange eye

**Special note:** white tips on outer tail feathers seen in flight

**Habitat:** variety of upland areas

**Similar species:** Long-billed Thrasher has a rusty brown back and tail, black streaks on white underparts; Sage Thrasher has a shorter and straighter bill, yellow eye, and a streaked chest



**Orange-crowned Warbler 5”**  
**Winter Resident**

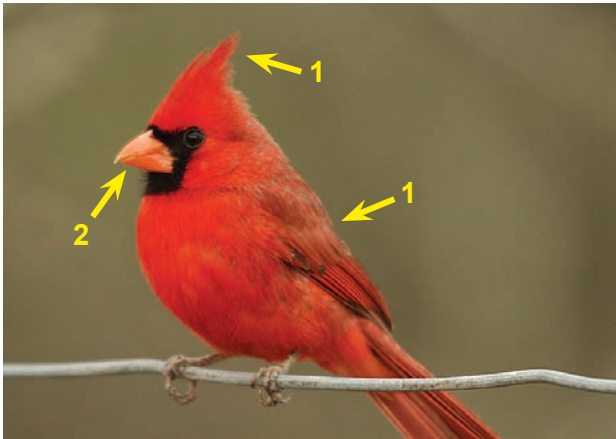
**Key field marks**

1. Small, plain bird, greenish-gray upper parts
2. Paler greenish-yellow belly and undertail coverts

**Special note:** orange crown patch seldom visible

**Habitat:** variety of brush/woodland areas

**Similar species:** Tennessee Warbler (mid-spring/fall migrant) has white undertail coverts



**Northern Cardinal 9”**  
**Year-round Resident**

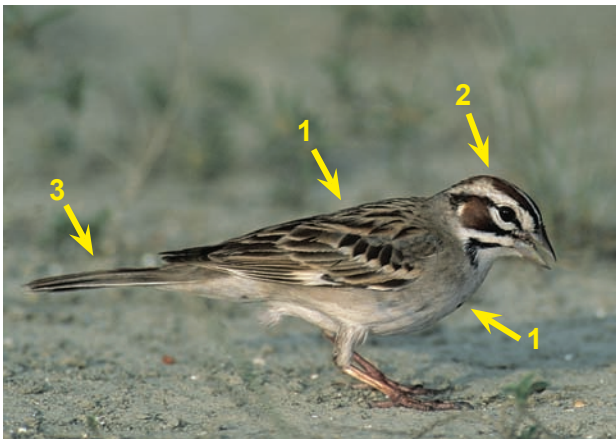
**Key field marks**

1. Male mostly red; head has pointed red crest
2. Thick red-orange, pointed beak

**Special note:** female similar to male but has a light brown overall color

**Habitat:** variety of brush/woodland areas

**Similar species:** Pyrrhuloxia very similar to female cardinal, but has a yellow, stubby, parrot-like beak



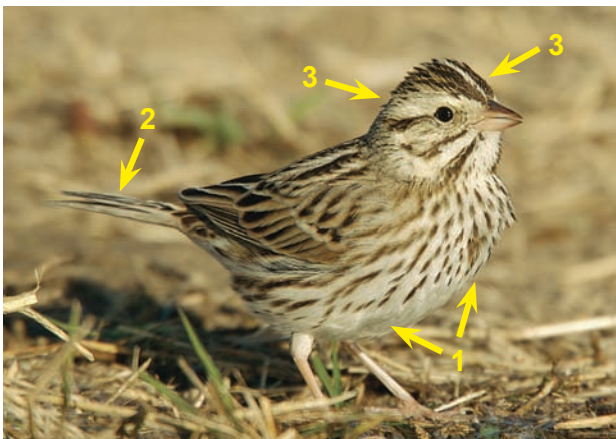
**Lark Sparrow 6.5”**  
**Year-round Resident (flocks in winter)**

**Key field marks**

1. Large, brownish-backed bird; whitish chest and belly unstreaked, dark central breast spot
2. Chestnut and white pattern on head is very distinctive
3. Fairly long, black tail, with bold white corners that are most obvious in flight

**Habitat:** variety of open upland habitats

**Similar species:** no other sparrow has such a unique head pattern



**Savannah Sparrow 5.5”**  
**Winter Resident**

**Key field marks**

1. Small, brownish bird, upper chest and flanks white with brown streaks
2. Short, notched tail
3. Eyebrow can be white or yellow; slender, white crown stripe

**Habitat:** open upland habitat

**Similar species:** Vesper Sparrow larger, lacks bold eyebrow and in flight shows white outer tail feathers; Song Sparrow larger, gray eyebrow, thick, dark malar stripe, and has longer rounded tail



## Part 2 – Advanced Focus Bird List

This list represents additional bird species that can be found during winter in South Texas. A field guide will be helpful to further identify these particular species.

- 1. Gadwall 20” Winter Resident**

The Gadwall is a large duck; males are most distinctive; body is mostly gray with a black rump and undertail coverts. Females are mottled brown; their bill is gray bordered by orange. In flight, both sexes show a pronounced white wing patch.
- 2. American Wigeon 20” Winter Resident**

This is a large, warm brown-colored duck; the male is most distinctive, especially in breeding plumage; the grayish head has a bold white crown stripe with a dark green eye patch. The light gray bill is small and black-tipped.
- 3. Cinnamon Teal 16” Winter Resident**

This teal is a medium-sized duck; male is distinctive in breeding plumage with bright chestnut-brown body, head, and reddish-orange eye. The female is brown, very similar to other female teal. Bill is longer and more spatulate than other teal.
- 4. Scaled Quail 10” Year-round Resident**

It is a gray quail with a small whitish tuft; the bluish-gray neck and chest are scaled in appearance. The belly is russet, and dark gray flanks have prominent white ovals. This quail is limited to dry upland habitats of western and southern regions of Texas and is commonly referred to as Blue Quail.
- 5. Least Grebe 9.5” Year-round Resident**

The Least Grebe is a very small gray waterbird; the golden yellow eye is distinctive. This grebe is often misidentified as a baby duck.
- 6. Neotropic Cormorant 26” Year-round Resident**

This is a large, dark long-tailed waterbird with a long hooked beak. The similar Double-crested Cormorant is larger and shorter-tailed. Perched cormorants frequently spread their wings to dry.
- 7. Great Egret 39” Year-round Resident**

The Great Egret is a large, white long-legged wading bird; they have a long yellow beak with black legs and feet.
- 8. Cattle Egret 19” Year-round Resident**

It is a small, white long-legged wading bird with a short stout yellow bill and yellow or greenish legs and feet. This egret is often seen well away from water in fields or pastures in association with cattle or horses.
- 9. Northern Harrier 20” Winter Resident**

A medium-sized white-rumped hawk, the Northern Harrier has long wings and tail. Unlike most hawks, this species is sexually dimorphic (male and female different color). Adult males are gray above and whitish below, whereas adult females are brown above and white below with dark brown streaks. Immatures appear similar to females, but have buffy, unstreaked underparts. The harrier prefers grassland and open shrub-grassland habitats and often glides low to the ground while foraging. Formerly known as the Marsh Hawk.
- 10. Cooper’s Hawk 16.5” Winter Resident**

The Cooper’s Hawk is a medium-sized, long-tailed hawk with rounded wings and tail; adults are bluish-gray above, rust colored below; immatures are brown above and streaked below. It is a solitary bird and is seldom seen far from cover.
- 11. White-tailed Hawk 23” Year-round Resident**

This species is a large, long-winged, short-tailed hawk; adults are gray above, bleach white below; tail is white with a narrow black band toward tip. Immatures are black to brown with a white patch on the chest. On both adults and immatures, wings extend past the tail when perched.
- 12. American Coot 15” Year-round Resident**

The American Coot is a medium-sized, dark waterbird; it is all black except for a short, stout white beak. Feet are lobed not webbed like a duck and is often referred to as a mudhen.
- 13. Killdeer 10.5” Year-round Resident**

It is a noisy ground bird (shorebird) that is colored brown above and white below with two black bands on the upper chest. The Killdeer is often found well away from water in open areas. The bird’s name is derived from the call—a strident “killdee, killdee.”
- 14. Spotted Sandpiper 7.5” Winter Resident**

This squat shorebird is plain brown above, with a white belly and a medium length beak. It often bobs its tail when walking. Spots on belly are only present in summer. This sandpiper is usually common around the edges of water tanks and small lakes. It is similar to the Solitary Sandpiper.
- 15. Common Ground-Dove 6.5” Year-round Resident**

It is a small, grayish-brown dove that has a short black tail. In flight, it shows rusty colored wings. The Common Ground-Dove is the smallest dove in the U.S. It may be confused with the Inca Dove.



**16. Belted Kingfisher 13” Winter Resident**

This is a solitary, large-billed, dark-crested water-side bird that is bluish-gray above and white below. The male has a white neck band and gray chest band; the female has an additional brown band below the gray chest band.

**17. Say’s Phoebe 7.5” Winter Resident**

This medium-sized flycatcher has a dark gray head and back, black tail, and a buff-colored belly. It is often confused with the female Vermilion Flycatcher, which is much smaller and lighter in color. They prefer open shrub-grassland and park-like habitats, often perching on open fence lines.

**18. Cedar Waxwing 7.25” Winter Resident**

The waxwing is a medium-sized, light brown bird with a crest similar to a Northern Cardinal, and has a narrow black face mask. Tail is bluish-gray with a thin yellow band at the tip. In winter, waxwings are very nomadic and sociable, usually seen in flocks; they often feed on fruit.

**19. Yellow-rumped Warbler 5.5” Winter Resident**

In winter plumage, it is a fairly small, plain bird with a grayish-brown head and back with a bright yellow patch at the base of the tail. Underparts are whitish with dark streaks. Warblers are small, active birds of wooded habitats.

**20. Lark Bunting 7.0” Winter Resident**

In winter, this large sparrow is brown-grayish above; chest and belly are whitish with dark streaks. In flight, the large white wing patches are quite noticeable. Males often have some black color on the face, wings, and belly. Lark Buntings are often seen in large flocks.

**21. Lincoln’s Sparrow 5.5” Winter Resident**

It is a dark brown-backed sparrow with a long dark tail; head is grayish with a buffy malar stripe. Chest is light buffy with fine dark streaks. This species prefers brushy areas, but can often be seen scratching for seeds on the ground under bird feeders.

**22. White-crowned Sparrow 7” Winter Resident**

This large sparrow is quite distinctive with its broad black and white crown stripes. The back and wings are brownish; the upper chest and the belly are gray and unstreaked. It likes brushy areas including areas near ranch houses and barns.

**23. Pyrrhuloxia 8.75” Year-round Resident**

It is a close relative of the Northern Cardinal; male is gray with a red crest, face, and belly. The female is similar to the male, but grayish brown overall and it is often misidentified as a female Northern Cardinal. Both males and females have a yellow, thick, curved stubby bill.

**24. Audubon’s Oriole 9.5” Year-round Resident**

This is a medium-sized, yellow and black bird; it has a yellow body with black head, wings, and tail. Its song is reminiscent of a person whistling a simple song. It was previously called the Black-headed Oriole.

**25. American Goldfinch 5” Winter Resident**

In winter plumage, this is a small black-winged, yellowish brown to grayish bird. The black wing has two prominent white wing bars. It often occurs in flocks and frequents niger seed feeders.

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**Parting Quiz**



**1**



**2**

Two species often encountered in the South Texas brushland and often misidentified as one or the other. Both species are covered in this bulletin. Do you know what species each of these birds are? (answer on next page)

## Parting Quiz Answered

First, it may be helpful to know they are both just a little smaller than a Northern Mockingbird, which is 10 inches long. Now let us turn our attention to what can be observed in the photographs. Both birds have an overall shape that is similar—a slender body and crown feathers that project up into a fairly pointed crest. In South Texas, these characteristics reduce the list of candidates down to three species, the Cedar Waxwing, Northern Cardinal, and Pyrrhuloxia.

The Cedar Waxwing can be eliminated quickly by beak shape, since it is not a seed eater and as such has a noticeably thinner beak than the birds in the photos. So, this leaves the Northern Cardinal and Pyrrhuloxia. The males of both species have pronounced areas of red, with the cardinal being entirely red and rather unmistakable. This leaves the females of both species. An easy way to separate these two species, again involves the beak, both in shape and color.

A Northern Cardinal's beak is triangular that comes to a distinct point, while the Pyrrhuloxia's beak is more blunt since the upper part of the beak curves around and down over the lower portion of the beak. Another point worth considering when dealing with these two species is the color of the beak, a Northern Cardinal's beak is red, whereas a Pyrrhuloxia's beak is yellow-orange. So the combination of those two field marks (beak shape and color) makes picture 1 a female Pyrrhuloxia and picture 2 a female Northern Cardinal.

### How did you do?

As you can see, careful observation is the name of the game when it comes to bird-watching. Now grab some binoculars and go forth into the great outdoors and see how many of those focus birds you can find. Good luck and good birding!



Cinnamon Teal (male and female) – advanced focus bird #3

## The South Texas Wintering Birds Program

The South Texas Wintering Birds (STWB) program, administered by the Caesar Kleberg Wildlife Research Institute, is largely web-based and involves people who own or manage land in South Texas and are interested in better understanding the birdlife on their property. The website allows landowners to report bird species observed on their property throughout the year.

This website was developed by the Cornell Laboratory of Ornithology and was cloned from their popular eBird website. The big difference between the STWB and eBird websites is the privacy of information for the landowner. Only those who are registered under a certain username and password in the STWB program will have access to information from a specific property or location in South Texas. So, privacy of information for a particular landholding is the key value of the STWB database.

The STWB database will also allow you, as a property owner or manager, to not only see the number of bird species you have noted by week, month, or year, but will ultimately show arrival, departure, and abundance

patterns for particular species. This information will also be available to researchers and educators at a county or higher level, to help uncover patterns in bird movements and ranges across South Texas.

As more and more landowners participate, the full picture of South Texas birdlife can be better understood by scientists, landowners, and bird enthusiasts. This understanding is crucial for managing habitats that will conserve our heritage and the unique birdlife of South Texas for future generations.

Much of what is known about South Texas birdlife is based on what has been noted on public areas. With the STWB project, we hope to encourage landowners and managers in South Texas to help fill in the gaps of what is known from another treasure of South Texas—its private lands.

If you have property in South Texas and are interested in being part of this important project, we encourage you to log on to the STWB website ([www.stwb.org](http://www.stwb.org)) or contact us by email ([thomas.langschieid@tamuk.edu](mailto:thomas.langschieid@tamuk.edu)) so we can help get you started on recording birds on your property.



Scaled Quail – advanced focus bird #4



## An Alphabetical List of Winter Birds of South Texas

\_\_\_ Anhinga  
 \_\_\_ Avocet, American  
 \_\_\_ Bittern, American  
 \_\_\_ Blackbird, Brewer's  
 \_\_\_ Blackbird, Red-winged  
 \_\_\_ Bluebird, Eastern  
 \_\_\_ Bobwhite, Northern  
 \_\_\_ Bufflehead (duck)  
 \_\_\_ **Bunting, Lark**  
 \_\_\_ Canvasback (duck)  
 \_\_\_ **Caracara, Crested**  
 \_\_\_ **Cardinal, Northern**  
 \_\_\_ Chachalaca, Plain  
 \_\_\_ **Coot, American**  
 \_\_\_ Cormorant, Double-crested  
 \_\_\_ **Cormorant, Neotropic**  
 \_\_\_ Cowbird, Bronzed  
 \_\_\_ Cowbird, Brown-headed  
 \_\_\_ **Crane, Sandhill**  
 \_\_\_ Curlew, Long-billed  
 \_\_\_ **Dove, Common Ground-**  
 \_\_\_ Dove, Eurasian Collared-  
 \_\_\_ **Dove, Inca**  
 \_\_\_ **Dove, Mourning**  
 \_\_\_ Dove, White-tipped  
 \_\_\_ Dove, White-winged  
 \_\_\_ Dowitcher, Long-billed  
 \_\_\_ **Duck, Black-bellied Whistling-**  
 \_\_\_ Duck, Fulvous Whistling-  
 \_\_\_ Duck, Mottled  
 \_\_\_ Duck, Ring-necked  
 \_\_\_ Duck, Ruddy  
 \_\_\_ Duck, Wood  
 \_\_\_ **Egret, Cattle**  
 \_\_\_ **Egret, Great**  
 \_\_\_ Egret, Reddish  
 \_\_\_ Egret, Snowy  
 \_\_\_ Falcon, Peregrine  
 \_\_\_ Finch, House  
 \_\_\_ Flycatcher, Ash-throated  
 \_\_\_ Flycatcher, Scissor-tailed  
 \_\_\_ **Flycatcher, Vermilion**  
 \_\_\_ **Gadwall (duck)**  
 \_\_\_ Gnatcatcher, Black-tailed  
 \_\_\_ Gnatcatcher, Blue-gray  
 \_\_\_ **Goldfinch, American**  
 \_\_\_ Goldfinch, Lesser  
 \_\_\_ Goose, Canada  
 \_\_\_ Goose, Greater White-fronted  
 \_\_\_ Goose, Ross's  
 \_\_\_ Goose, Snow  
 \_\_\_ Grackle, Great-tailed  
 \_\_\_ Grebe, Eared  
 \_\_\_ **Grebe, Least**  
 \_\_\_ **Grebe, Pied-billed**  
 \_\_\_ Gull, Laughing

This list excludes many rare and coastal species. The species in red represent those birds covered in this bulletin.

\_\_\_ Gull, Ring-billed  
 \_\_\_ **Harrier, Northern**  
 \_\_\_ **Hawk, Cooper's**  
 \_\_\_ Hawk, Ferruginous  
 \_\_\_ **Hawk, Harris's**  
 \_\_\_ Hawk, Red-shouldered  
 \_\_\_ **Hawk, Red-tailed**  
 \_\_\_ Hawk, Sharp-shinned  
 \_\_\_ **Hawk, White-tailed**  
 \_\_\_ Heron, Black-crowned Night-  
 \_\_\_ **Heron, Great Blue**  
 \_\_\_ Heron, Green  
 \_\_\_ Heron, Little Blue  
 \_\_\_ Heron, Tricolored  
 \_\_\_ Hummingbird, Rufous  
 \_\_\_ Ibis, White  
 \_\_\_ Ibis, White-faced  
 \_\_\_ **Jay, Green**  
 \_\_\_ **Kestrel, American**  
 \_\_\_ Killdeer  
 \_\_\_ **Kingbird, Couch's**  
 \_\_\_ **Kingfisher, Belted**  
 \_\_\_ Kingfisher, Green  
 \_\_\_ Kingfisher, Ringed  
 \_\_\_ Kinglet, Golden-crowned  
 \_\_\_ **Kinglet, Ruby-crowned**  
 \_\_\_ **Kiskadee, Great**  
 \_\_\_ Kite, White-tailed  
 \_\_\_ Lark, Horned  
 \_\_\_ Martin, Purple  
 \_\_\_ Meadowlark, Eastern  
 \_\_\_ Meadowlark, Western  
 \_\_\_ Merganser, Hooded  
 \_\_\_ Merlin  
 \_\_\_ **Mockingbird, Northern**  
 \_\_\_ Moorhen, Common  
 \_\_\_ **Oriole, Audubon's**  
 \_\_\_ Osprey  
 \_\_\_ Owl, Barn  
 \_\_\_ Owl, Burrowing  
 \_\_\_ Owl, Eastern Screech-  
 \_\_\_ Owl, Ferruginous Pygmy-  
 \_\_\_ Owl, Great Horned  
 \_\_\_ Pauraque, Common  
 \_\_\_ Phoebe, Black  
 \_\_\_ **Phoebe, Eastern**  
 \_\_\_ **Phoebe, Say's**  
 \_\_\_ Pigeon, Rock  
 \_\_\_ Pintail, Northern  
 \_\_\_ Pipit, American  
 \_\_\_ Pipit, Sprague's  
 \_\_\_ **Pyrrhuloxia**  
 \_\_\_ **Quail, Scaled**  
 \_\_\_ Rail, Virginia  
 \_\_\_ Raven, Chihuahuan  
 \_\_\_ Redhead (duck)  
 \_\_\_ Roadrunner, Greater  
 \_\_\_ **Robin, American**  
 \_\_\_ Sandpiper, Least  
 \_\_\_ Sandpiper, Solitary  
 \_\_\_ **Sandpiper, Spotted**  
 \_\_\_ Sandpiper, Stilt  
 \_\_\_ Sapsucker, Yellow-bellied  
 \_\_\_ Scaup, Lesser

\_\_\_ **Shoveler, Northern**  
 \_\_\_ **Shrike, Loggerhead**  
 \_\_\_ Siskin, Pine  
 \_\_\_ Snipe, Wilson's  
 \_\_\_ Sora (rail)  
 \_\_\_ Sparrow, Black-throated  
 \_\_\_ Sparrow, Cassin's  
 \_\_\_ Sparrow, Chipping  
 \_\_\_ Sparrow, Clay-colored  
 \_\_\_ Sparrow, Field  
 \_\_\_ Sparrow, Grasshopper  
 \_\_\_ Sparrow, House  
 \_\_\_ **Sparrow, Lark**  
 \_\_\_ Sparrow, Le Conte's  
 \_\_\_ **Sparrow, Lincoln's**  
 \_\_\_ Sparrow, Olive  
 \_\_\_ **Sparrow, Savannah**  
 \_\_\_ Sparrow, Song  
 \_\_\_ Sparrow, Swamp  
 \_\_\_ Sparrow, Vesper  
 \_\_\_ **Sparrow, White-crowned**  
 \_\_\_ Spoonbill, Roseate  
 \_\_\_ Starling, European  
 \_\_\_ Stilt, Black-necked  
 \_\_\_ Swallow, Barn  
 \_\_\_ Swallow, Cave  
 \_\_\_ Swallow, Northern Rough-winged  
 \_\_\_ Swallow, Tree  
 \_\_\_ **Teal, Blue-winged**  
 \_\_\_ **Teal, Cinnamon**  
 \_\_\_ Teal, Green-winged  
 \_\_\_ Tern, Caspian  
 \_\_\_ Tern, Forster's  
 \_\_\_ **Thrasher, Curve-billed**  
 \_\_\_ Thrasher, Long-billed  
 \_\_\_ Thrasher, Sage  
 \_\_\_ Thrush, Hermit  
 \_\_\_ **Titmouse, Black-crested**  
 \_\_\_ Towhee, Green-tailed  
 \_\_\_ Towhee, Spotted  
 \_\_\_ Turkey, Wild  
 \_\_\_ Verdin  
 \_\_\_ Vireo, Blue-headed  
 \_\_\_ Vireo, White-eyed  
 \_\_\_ Vulture, Black  
 \_\_\_ Vulture, Turkey  
 \_\_\_ Warbler, Black-and-white  
 \_\_\_ Warbler, Black-throated Green  
 \_\_\_ **Warbler, Orange-crowned**  
 \_\_\_ Warbler, Pine  
 \_\_\_ **Warbler, Yellow-rumped**  
 \_\_\_ **Waxwing, Cedar**  
 \_\_\_ **Wigeon, American**  
 \_\_\_ **Woodpecker, Golden-fronted**  
 \_\_\_ Woodpecker, Ladder-backed  
 \_\_\_ Wren, Bewick's  
 \_\_\_ Wren, Cactus  
 \_\_\_ Wren, Carolina  
 \_\_\_ Wren, House  
 \_\_\_ Wren, Marsh  
 \_\_\_ Wren, Sedge  
 \_\_\_ Yellowlegs, Greater  
 \_\_\_ Yellowlegs, Lesser  
 \_\_\_ Yellowthroat, Common



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