BIRD GUIDE
for KIDS
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The Madison Audubon Bird Guide for Kids was created to further Madison Audubon’s mission to protect and improve habitat for birds and other wildlife through land acquisition and management, education, and advocacy. This guide provides a simple introduction to some of the most common birds southern Wisconsin students might see in their schoolyards, neighborhoods, and backyards.

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ABOUT THIS GUIDE

HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE

Birds in this guide are categorized as “Songbirds,” “Birds of Prey,” and “Other Birds.” Each bird page gives a description of the adult’s appearance, one or more photos of the adult bird (unless noted), as well as the following information:

- How big is this bird? Look for the black circle to see how it compares to other birds.
- Where will you find this bird? What type of habitat does it live in and where does it typically find its food?
- What does this bird’s nest look like? What is it made from? Where does this bird nest?
- What types of food does this bird eat?
- What sounds does this bird make? What are its common songs and calls?
- Fun Fact: A cool tidbit about this bird that will help you remember it!
BIRDS BY THE SEASONS

What time of year should you expect to see the birds in this guide in southern Wisconsin? We’ve got the answer here!

YEAR-ROUND

Blue jay
American goldfinch
American crow
House sparrow
Black-capped chickadee
Eastern screech-owl
Tufted titmouse
Red-tailed hawk
White-breasted nuthatch
Cooper’s hawk
European starling
Mourning dove
Northern cardinal
Downy woodpecker
House Finch
Hairy woodpecker

SUMMER

Barn swallow
Red-winged blackbird
House wren
Common grackle
American robin
Baltimore oriole
Eastern bluebird
Ruby-throated hummingbird
Gray catbird
Chimney swift

WINTER

Dark-eyed junco

Fun Fact: Approximately 400 different kinds of birds have been seen in Wisconsin.

BLUE JAY

Bright blue on top and white below. Tuft of feathers (crest) on head and a black ring around neck. White bars on wings.

Forests and urban and suburban areas, especially with oak trees and bird feeders. Usually searches for food on the ground.

Insects, nuts, seeds, and grains.

Open cup made from twigs, grass, rootlets, and sometimes mud. Nests in trees.

Jay, jay and tweedle-dee. Many other calls.

Fun Fact: The blue jay is an intelligent bird. In captivity, blue jays have used strips of newspaper as tools to get food.
AMERICAN CROW

All black with a strong, black beak and rather short, square-tipped tail.

Fields, open woodlands, forests, agricultural fields, parking lots, towns, and garbage dumps. Found in groups and feeds on the ground.

Grains, seeds, nuts, fruits, insects, fish, bird eggs, mice, earthworms, garbage, and more.

Fun Fact: In the winter, crows sleep in groups (roosts) of a few hundred up to 2 million.

Open bowl made of twigs and lined with pine needles, weeds, or animal hair. Nests in trees, preferring evergreens.

A harsh caw.

BARN SWALLOW

Long, forked tail. Steel blue back and cinnamon-colored forehead and throat. Reddish-brown to creamy white chest and belly.

Fields, parks, roadway edges, marshes, meadows, ponds, and other open habitats. Feeds almost exclusively in flight.

Primarily flies, along with beetles, bees, wasps, butterflies, and other flying insects.

Cup-shaped nest of mud lined with grass and feathers. Nests on rafters, barn beams, sheds, the undersides of bridges, and other structures.

A long series of twittering squeaks followed by many mechanical-sounding whirrs.

Fun Fact: Legend says the barn swallow stole fire from the gods, so an angry god burned away its middle tail feathers!
BLACK-CAPPED CHICKADEE

Black cap on head, black chin, and white cheeks. Gray back, wings, and tail. White underside with dark cream sides.

Deciduous and mixed forests, open woods, parks, and disturbed areas. Usually perched on trees and shrubs.

Seeds, berries, insects, spiders, and suet.

Digs out a cavity in dead trees or branches and builds a cup-shaped nest inside. Nest often made of moss and lined with rabbit fur.

Fee-bee or cheese-burger. Also, chickadee-dee-dee when alarmed.

Fun Fact: Chickadees hide seeds to eat later and can remember thousands of hiding places.

TUFTED TITMOUSE

Mostly gray and white with a perky tuft of feathers on top of head (crest). Black forehead and a rusty-colored tinge on sides.

Woodlands, backyards, parks, and orchards. Flits among branches looking for food. Will hold a seed with its feet and hammer it open with its beak.

Mainly insects. Also spiders, snails, seeds, nuts, and berries.

Cup-shaped nest made of damp leaves, moss, and grasses and lined with hair, fur, or wool. Nests are built in natural holes or old woodpecker holes.

Peter-peter-peter repeated several times. Also a mechanical tsee-day-day-day.

Fun Fact: Tufted titmice will sometimes line their nests with hair plucked directly from living animals.
WHITE-BREASTED NUTHATCH

All white face and chest with a black (or gray) stripe down its head. Lower belly is orange-brown.

Mature woods, parks, and yards, especially with deciduous trees. Creeps along trunks and branches probing the bark for food.

Mainly insects, including larvae, beetles, and caterpillars. Also eats seeds and nuts.

Lines a natural tree hole or old woodpecker hole with fur, bark, and dirt. Builds a cup-shaped nest of grass, bark, and features on top.

A rapid wha-wha-wha. Also a loud, nasal yank repeated a few times.

Fun Fact: Nuthatches can move head first down trees and can hang upside down beneath branches.

HOUSE WREN

Dark brown on top and paler below with bars on wings and tail. Fairly long, curved beak and long tail.

Open forests, backyards, farmyards, and city parks. In winter: brushy tangles and hedgerows. Looks for food in low tree branches and shrubs.

Spiders and insects such as beetles, caterpillars, and earwigs. Also eats snail shells.

Piles twigs into old woodpecker holes, natural crevices, and nest boxes. Builds a cup of twigs and soft materials on top.

Long, jumbled bubbling. Males often sing 9-11 times per minute during breeding season.

Fun Fact: House wrens can live anywhere from Canada to the tip of South America.
**AMERICAN ROBIN**

Brick-red chest, gray back, and streaks on white chin. Small white spots around the eyes. Male usually has a blacker head and slightly richer colors than the female.

- Lawns, fields, city parks, woodlands, and forests. Searches for food on the ground.
- Earthworms, insects, snails, and a variety of fruits.

*Fun Fact:* The robin is the state bird of Wisconsin. A robin can eat as much as 14 feet of earthworms in one day.

**EASTERN BLUEBIRD**

Bright blue on top with a reddish brown throat and chest and a white belly. Females are paler and duller than the males.

- Meadows, open areas surrounded by trees, golf courses, pastures, and backyards. Perches above fields looking for insects on the ground to eat.
- Insects caught on the ground like crickets and beetles. Also eats fruits and berries.

*Fun Fact:* Since the 1960s, volunteers have been building nest boxes across America to keep eastern bluebirds from going extinct.
GRAY CATBIRD

Smooth gray with a black cap on the top of its head. Long tail with chestnut coloring underneath.

Dense shrubs, vine tangles, roadsides, and residential areas. Hops along the ground to find food.

Mainly insects like ants and grasshoppers. Also eats fruit and berries.

Fun Fact: The gray catbird's song may last for up to 10 minutes.

EUROPEAN STARLING

A chunky short-tailed bird with a thin, straight beak. Feathers are black with purple and green gloss in spring and summer. Beak is bright yellow in the spring. In the fall, feathers have many white spots that go away during the winter. A non-native, invasive species.

Towns, suburbs, and countryside near human settlements. Feeds on the ground on lawns, fields, and sidewalks. Travels in large, loud groups.

Mainly insects but will eat almost anything including fruits, seeds, nectar, and garbage.

Fills a hollow in a building or old woodpecker hole with pine needles, grass, and trash. Builds a cup lined with feathers, leaves, and grass on top.

A wide variety of sounds. Able to copy the calls and songs of other birds.

Fun Fact: Shakespeare mentioned the European starling in his works. People wanted it in America and brought it over in the 1890s.
DARK-EYED JUNCO

Solid gray on head, back, and sides. White belly and pale pink beak. Female is slightly browner than male.

Coniferous or mixed forests. In the winter: open woodlands, fields, parks, and backyards. Hops along the ground to find food.

Primarily seeds and sometimes insects.

Woven cup made of a variety of materials such as grass, pine needles, twigs, leaves, hair, moss, or ferns. Usually nests on the ground.

A loud trill of 7-23 notes that lasts up to 2 seconds.

Fun Fact: In the summer, dark-eyed juncos can be found very far north, even in the Arctic.

NORTHERN CARDINAL

Male is bright red with a tuft of feathers on the top of its head (a crest). Black face with a stout, red beak. Female is brown with a tinge of red. It also has a crest and a big, red beak.

Forest edges, overgrown fields, hedgerows, backyards, and other shrubby areas. Searches for food on or near the ground.

Seeds, fruit, and sometimes insects.

Cup made of coarse twigs, leaves, grapevine bark, and grasses, stems, rootlets, and pine needles. Nests in shrubs or saplings.

Birdie, birdie, birdie or cheer, cheer, cheer.

Fun Fact: Male cardinals are very territorial. When one sees its reflection, it may spend hours fighting the imaginary intruder.
**RED-WINGED BLACKBIRD**

Male is all black with a shoulder patch that is bright red and bordered with yellow. Female is streaky brown with a cream colored “eyebrow.” Spikier beak and darker belly than a sparrow.

- Marshes, agricultural fields, and pastures. Searches along the ground for food. Often perches high over its territory.
- Mainly insects in summer and seeds like corn and wheat in the winter.
- Winds plant material around upright stems and weaves in a platform of wet vegetation. Adds more wet leaves and plasters inside with mud to form a cup. Nests low in shrubs, trees, and marsh vegetation.
- Conk-la-ree! Also a distinctive check.

*Fun Fact:* Red-winged blackbirds sleep (roost) in large numbers. Each morning, they spread out, traveling up to 50 miles to feed.

**COMMON GRACKLE**

Glossy purple head with bronze, shiny body. Appears black from a distance. Bright, golden eyes and strong beak. Long legs and tail.

- Agricultural fields, city parks, suburban lawns, woodlands, and meadows. Often in large, noisy flocks. Pecks the ground in search of food.
- Mainly seeds, especially agricultural grains like corn and rice. Also eats insects, frogs, mice, and birds.
- Bulky cup made of twigs, leaves, grasses, paper, and cornhusks. It is reinforced with mud and lined with grass and horsehair. Nests high in coniferous trees.
- A rough readle-eak along with high-pitched whistles. A variety of other squeaks and croaks.

*Fun Fact:* Common grackles will let ants crawl all over them. The ants release formic acid that may rid the birds of parasites.
Baltimore Oriole

Male is bright orange with black head, back, and wings. Wings have white bars. Female is usually brown on top and slightly orange underneath with white bars on its wings. It sometimes has black on its head.

- Open woodlands, parks, and backyards with leafy deciduous trees. Found high in trees or in bushes searching for food.
- Insects, nectar, and fruits such as raspberries, oranges, and cherries.
- Sock-like hanging nest woven from thin fibers made of grass, wool, horsehair, twine, or fishing line. Nest is hung high in a tree using these fibers.
- “Here, come right here, dear.” Has a flute-like sound.

Fun Fact: The Baltimore oriole was named for Lord Baltimore, founder of Maryland, because his coat of arms had similar colors.

House Finch

Male has red “eyebrow,” forehead, throat, and chest. Whitish belly with dark stripes on sides. Female is plainer with brown face and blurry stripes all over pale belly.

- Buildings, lawns, small conifers, barns, urban areas, and many natural habitats. Feeds on the ground, at feeders, or on fruiting trees in big flocks.
- Seeds, buds, and fruits such as cherries, blackberries, and strawberries.
- Cup made of stems, leaves, rootlets, twigs, string, wool, and feathers. Nests in trees and on buildings.
- A jumbled warbling composed of short notes or a sharp cheep.

Fun Fact: Pigments in the berries and fruit house finches eat make their feathers red. Females prefer the reddest male they can find.
**AMERICAN GOLDFINCH**

In summer, male is bright yellow with black wings, tail, and forehead. Female is duller yellow-green in summer. Winter goldfinches vary from yellowish to brown to gray, but still have white bars on their black wings.

- **Summer male**
- **Summer female**
- **Winter male**

Weedy fields, overgrown areas, suburbs, parks, and backyards. Often perched on seed heads of plants like thistles and dandelions.

Seeds from sunflowers, thistle, asters, trees, and grasses.

**Fun Fact:** Goldfinches shed their body feathers (molt) twice each year, once in late winter and again in late summer.

**HOUSE SPARROW**

Male has a black throat and white cheeks. The top of its head is gray and the back of its neck is red-brown. Females have stripes of black, brown, and dark cream on back and are dirty white below. Females have a pale cream “eyebrow.” A non-native, invasive species.

- **Male**
- **Female**

Cities, towns, suburbs, and farms, especially around livestock. Hops along the ground to find food.

Grains, seeds, livestock feed, discarded food, and sometimes insects.

**Fun Fact:** House sparrows were brought over from Europe in 1851. In 9 years, they spread from New York to the Rocky Mountains.

Po-ta-to-chip call and a variable song made of twitters and warbles.
EASTERN SCREECH-OWL

A small owl with blotchy coloring and yellow eyes. Usually gray, but sometimes red or brown. Typically has prominent "ear" tufts though they are sometimes flattened.

Fun Fact: Screech-owls throw-up the bones, fur, and feathers of their prey in an oval pellet. We learn about their diet from pellets.

RED-TAILED HAWK

Large hawk with very broad, rounded wings and a short, wide tail. Brown back and pale chest, with a streaked belly. Underside of wing has a dark bar between shoulder and wrist. Tail is usually pale below and cinnamon-red above, but red color shows through in flight.

Fun Fact: Red-tailed hawks have been known to steal prey from other raptors.
**COOPER’S HAWK**

Blue-gray above with reddish bars underneath. Broad, rounded wings and a very long, rounded tail. Red eyes. Young (juvenile) has yellow eyes and is brown above with sharp, brown streaks on chest. Keeps juvenile plumage for over a year.

**Fun Fact:** A Cooper’s hawk captures a bird with its feet and squeezes it to death. They’ve even been known to drown prey.

**Forests and subdivisions, backyards, and parks with trees.** Flies after and catches other birds for food.

**Mainly medium-sized birds such as mourning doves and American robins.** Sometimes eats small mammals.

**Cup made of piled sticks and lined with bark flakes and green twigs.** Nests in trees on flat ground.

**Usually silent. Sometimes a loud cak-cak-cak in defense or a kik call to a mate.**

**RUBY-THROATED HUMMINGBIRD**

Tiny bird. Long, thin beak. Male has a shiny, ruby-red throat that looks black in most lights. Has white chest, green sides, and black, forked tail. Female is green on top and whitish below with white tip on its tail.

**Fun Fact:** Ruby-throated hummingbirds can beat their wings about 53 times a second.

**Open woodlands, grasslands, parks, gardens, and yards.** Usually seen flying or hovering to eat.

**Nectar of red or orange tubular flowers.** Also eats tree sap and insects caught in mid-air.

**Thimble-sized nest made of thistle or dandelion down and held together with spider silk or pine resin.** Nests in trees.

**Chee-dit.** Wings make a quiet humming sound.

**Male**

**Female**
**CHIMNEY SWIFT**

All dark gray with slightly paler throat. Easiest to identify by shape. Long, narrow, curved wings. Slender body with round head and short, tapered tail. Sometimes called "a cigar with wings."

- Urban and suburban habitats, especially places with many chimneys. Spends most of its life in flight. Snatches food from the air.
- Airborne insects such as flies, bees, wasps, ants, and beetles.
- Fun Fact: Chimney swift numbers are in decline as new chimneys are often covered and narrow, which prevents them from nesting.

**MOURNING DOVE**

Mostly plain with black spots on wings. Long, pointed tail. Male has a pinkish chest and is blue-gray on the top of its head. Female is a duller plain brown.

- Everywhere except the deep woods. Often seen in fields or overhead perches like telephone wires. Feeds on the ground and in the open.
- 99% of diet is seeds. Sometimes it eats snails and berries.
- Fun Fact: Unlike humans, mourning doves can drink slightly salty water without becoming dehydrated.

- Flimsy nest of pine needles, twigs, and grass stems. Nests in trees, on the ground, or on gutters of buildings.
- Hoo-la-hoop, hoop, hoop.
DOWNY WOODPECKER

Small woodpecker. Black with white back, white belly, and striped face. Has a very short beak. Male has a red spot on back of head.

Woodlands, parks, and backyards. Moves quickly over tree trunks, branches, and stems of grasses and flowers looking for food.

Mainly insects like beetle larvae that live inside wood or tree bark. Also eats berries, acorns, and grains.

Digs a nest hole in dead trees or dead parts of living trees. Usually nests in deciduous trees.

A string of high-pitched notes as well as a sharp pik note. Also drums on trees with its beak.

Fun Fact: Think—downy woodpeckers are downsized compared to hairy woodpeckers—to help remember the difference.

HAIRY WOODPECKER

Larger, with a much longer beak than the downy woodpecker. Black with white back, white belly, and striped face. Male has a red spot on back of head.

Mature forests, suburbs, parks, and woodlands. Hitches up tree trunks and along big branches.

Mainly insects, especially larvae of wood and bark beetles, ants, and moth pupae. Also eats fruit and seeds.

Digs a hole in dead trees or dead stubs of living trees. Nest hole is bare except for a bed of wood chips.

Short, sharp peek note. Also rapidly drums on trees with its beak.

Fun Fact: Woodpeckers don’t drum on trees when eating. They are actually quiet eaters and drum in order to communicate.
**BIRDING CHECKLIST**

Keep track of the birds you discover. When you see or hear a bird in the wild, place an “X” in the box next to its name. See how many you can find!

### BIRDS IN THIS GUIDE

| ☐ Blue jay | ☐ Common grackle |
| ☐ American crow | ☐ Baltimore oriole |
| ☐ Barn swallow | ☐ House finch |
| ☐ Black-capped chickadee | ☐ American goldfinch |
| ☐ Tufted titmouse | ☐ House sparrow |
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| ☐ European starling | ☐ Mourning dove |
| ☐ Dark-eyed junco | ☐ Downy woodpecker |
| ☐ Northern cardinal | ☐ Hairy woodpecker |
| ☐ Red-winged blackbird | |

### OTHER BIRDS YOU’VE SEEN

- ☐ ______________________
- ☐ ______________________
- ☐ ______________________
- ☐ ______________________

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**Fun Fact:** From January to December 2013, one birder saw a record of 750 different bird species in the U.S., Canada, and nearby islands.
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