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Wildlife Portrait Series No. 3

Song Birds

Reproductions of paintings
by Bob Hines

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ROBIN

(*Turdus migratorius*)

Probably the best known of the United States birds, and widely believed a harbinger of spring, adults are 10 inches long. They breed in the United States and Canada, and winter in most of the United States, ranging south to Guatemala.

One of the most cherished of our native birds, the robin is an omnivorous feeder. While its food includes many worms and insects, it is especially fond of fruit, particularly cherries, mulberries, and strawberries. Like the bluebird, it is a thrush.

Highly adaptable, it is friendly and trusting in cities and towns, and wild and distrustful of man when living in wilderness areas.

GOLDFINCH

(*Spinus sp.*)

The male is the only small, yellow bird with black wings and tail, with flight that is extremely undulating. In winter the species concentrate in areas where seed-laden plants are common.

They breed from Canada to Mexico and winter in the same range, nesting in July and August, after most birds have finished. The song is long-sustained, clear, light, and canary-like. In its flight, each dip is often punctuated by a simple cry of *ti-dee-di-di.*

Goldfinches are found along hedgerows, wood margins, brushy fields, and flower gardens, especially where cosmos are growing.

SONG SPARROW

(*Melospiza melodia*)

This is the most widely distributed of all our native sparrows, appearing in one form or another from Florida to Alaska and range in color from pale to dark brown.

They love water and are most numerous where streams, ponds, or marshes offer dense cover, but yards with shrubs and vines will attract them.

Their space requirements are small. A pair will live and nest in 1½ acres or less. They nest on or near the ground, both parents help raise the young, and they raise up to four broods a year. Cowbirds often lay eggs in their nests, and are considered with dogs, cats, and rats as their greatest enemies.

There are many sparrows with spotted breasts, but the heavy dot in the center of the chest and the streaks on breast and flanks distinguish this bird from others.

STELLER'S JAY
(*Cyanocitta stelleri*)

Watch for this "blue jay" as you drive through the coniferous forests either in the coast range or in higher mountains of the West. Your first glimpse probably will be of a large—11-inch—bird gliding across the road. Upon alighting, it frequently will hop up from branch to branch until near the top of a pine from which it sails off in the direction of its choice. At times, when it has been pampered with handouts, these crested jays may become quite tame and inquisitive in their search for food.

Its scolding notes are harsh, and its call often mimics the red-tailed hawk. Around its own nest, or those of other birds, where they frequently steal eggs, these brightly plumaged birds can be surprisingly quiet.

The Steller's Jay is resident from southern Alaska, south through Mexico and Central America, mostly west of the Rockies, except in western Texas.

CHICKADEE

(*Parus sp.*)

Length about 5 inches. Resident in most of North America.

Because of its delightful notes, its flitting ways, and its fearlessness, the chickadee is one of our best known birds. It responds to human encouragement, and by hanging a constant supply of suet this black-capped visitor can be made a regular feeder in suburban gardens or city yards. Though small in size, these cousins of the titmice are highly useful against insects, gleaned mostly from the twigs and branches of trees. The chickadee's food is made up of insects and seeds, largely seeds of pines, with a few of the poison ivy, some weeds, and sunflowers.

RED-WINGED BLACKBIRD

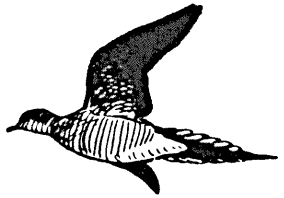
(*Agelaius phoeniceus*)

About 9½ inches long, the red-wing breeds in most of North America; it winters in the southern half of United States and down clear to Costa Rica.

The prairies of the upper Mississippi Valley, with their numerous sloughs and ponds, furnish ideal nesting places for red-wings, and this region has become the great breeding ground for the species, pouring forth the vast flocks that sometimes play havoc with grainfields. Red-wings are gregarious, living in flocks and breeding in communities. Their food is about one-fourth insects and three-fourths vegetable.

MOURNING DOVE

(*Zenaida macroura*)



A dark spot on the side of the neck distinguishes this bird from other native doves and pigeons except for the white-wing of the southwest. Also known as turtle dove, the "mourner" frequently nests in suburban and city shrubbery throughout the United States, Mexico, and southern Canada; it winters from the central United States to Panama—and is part of folklore in all those countries.

Mourning doves eat the seeds of plants, including grain, plus berries and the small wild fruits of any region through which they pass. Despite that melancholy but peaceful "coo," they are restless migratory creatures. Doves live in the large cities, small towns, villages, and countryside; songs are sung and poems written about them; they are esteemed game birds that may nest in trees in your yard.

BLACK-HEADED GROSBEAK

(*Pheucticus melanocephalus*)

Throughout the West these chunky—7-inch—finches are quite common and conspicious. Their black heads, heavy bills, and wings with white patches are sufficient for identification; they fly with rapid wing beats. They are the only bird with a buffy collar, and the cinnamon-brown rump and underparts separate them from the towhees.

The arrival of singing male Black-headed Grosbeaks from their winter homes in southern Mexico is an unfailing sign of spring. Singing perches in tall firs have become well established before the females normally arrive about two weeks later. Mated pairs utilize broad-leaved woodlands for nesting. These birds nest from southwestern Canada, through western United States west of the Missouri River, and south through western Texas and Mexico.

Some persons become best acquainted with this valuable bird because of its interest in potato bugs. They also take wild fruit and berries.

ACORN WOODPECKER
(*Melanerpes formicivorus*)

Some persons are intrigued by the bizarre appearance of the Acorn, or California Woodpecker—strikingly black and white, with white wing patches and rump. Equally impressive is the bird's ability to store acorns—utility poles and tree trunks are often studded with holes; many with acorns neatly fitted, small end innermost. After the preliminary excavation, the acorn is pounded in by the birds stout bill; a fairly secure storage spot until next needed for food.

These are birds of the oak woodlands, mostly in California, southwestern Oregon, but extending into Arizona, New Mexico, and sparingly into Texas, southward into Mexico.

They are noisy, with loud *chaks,* and when two or more are on the same pole or tree, there is much scrambling, with wing spreading, and other forms of "display." The world would be a duller place without these entertaining woodpeckers.

KILLDEER

(*Charadrius vociferus*)

These birds are commonplace in appearance and not very large at a length of 10 inches, but are distinguished by piercing and oft-repeated cries of "kildee." They breed throughout the United States and most of Canada, and winter from the central United States to South America.

The killdeer is probably the best known of the shorebirds, perhaps because of its contrasting colors and startling cry. It is noisy and restless, like people, but most of its activities are beneficial to man. Its food is harmful insects, particularly weevils and bettles, flies, ticks, and wondrously enough, mosquitos and their larvae.

The four pointed eggs are marked like pebbles, and laid in an unlined depression on the ground. Such dangerous sites as gravel roads, quarries, or even potato patches have been used.