

Among the more than twenty separate orders which classify birds, no group is larger and none has a closer hold on the human heart than the songbirds. Appearing as a prominent theme in our art, architecture, music, fashion, and literature, the songbird rarely fails to provide us with inspiration and to brighten our lives. Songbirds belong to the order Passeriformes or “perching birds,” which scientists refer to as “passerines.” Songbird species compose almost half of all the bird species in the world and they are the most familiar. Where species like eagles, hawks, cranes, and grouse may seem more remote, like creatures of the wilderness; songbirds are common in our yards, gardens, and parks.

With more than 5,000 species known worldwide, there are exceptions to almost any generalization made about songbirds. However, all songbird species have the same foot shape—three toes in the front and one in the back.



Most songbirds are relatively small. Their genuine popularity with humans however, seems to arise from their tendency to be quite colorful (especially the males) and to produce vocalizations (songs) that are usually quite pleasing to the human ear.

In our area of North America, the males of most songbird species pour forth their melodies on early spring and summer mornings. They use songs to announce their claim to nesting territories and warn other birds to stay away. If all goes well, the irresistible combination of vividly colorful plumage and vibrant song will attract a mate and a nestful of young birds will be the result.

Baby songbirds are “altricial” or blind and helpless at hatching. In some species both male and female adults provide for their nestlings. In others, only the female incubates the eggs and feeds the young.

In whatever way you choose to study songbirds, the experience is sure to be rewarding. A bright yellow goldfinch dining on seed at your backyard feeder, the brilliant flash of an orange and black oriole among green foliage or the musical productions of a mockingbird or thrush are just the beginning of many ways to enjoy these birds. Equipped with a pair of binoculars, a field guide, and an adventurous spirit you can search along park trails and among leafy canopies for glimpses of more elusive species—like the warblers. Active and highly varied in color and behavior, warblers are tiny feathered jewels which are often overlooked and they are well worth the extra effort. The following are just a few favorites among the many songbird species commonly seen in the East Bay Regional Parks.



**American Robin**  
*Turdus migratorius*  
L 8½-10"

An all-time backyard favorite in much of North America, the robin is also widespread in the natural areas of California. Look for this bird strolling in grassy patches tugging up earthworms or probing for ants. The handsome rust-colored breast and solid plumpness of this thrush combined with its elegantly cheerful song (*cheerily-cheeri-up-cheerio*) make the robin a welcome and familiar component of park wildlife.



**Hermit Thrush** (also bottom cover photo)  
*Catharus guttatus*  
L 6-7"

The song of this small, spotted brown thrush is only heard in dense woods and is considered by many to be among the most beautiful of any songbird. Described as “ethereal” and “flute-like,” the hermit’s song is distinctly liquid in nature. In reality, the song of this species is exquisite enough to defy description. It must be heard to be believed. A sharply pointed bill, distinct dark spots on the creamy breast, rust-red rump and tail, and nervous wing flicking behavior help identify this inconspicuous bird that will thrill you with its voice.



**American Goldfinch** (top cover photo)  
*Carduelis tristis*  
L 4½-5"

Once referred to as wild canaries, goldfinches are social songsters, traveling in flocks and often singing in flight. The male American goldfinch is the most vivid yellow of our three local species. Finches feed on weed seeds, flower buds, and occasionally insects. Goldfinches’ undulating, “roller coaster” flight pattern and tendency to sing jubilantly while aloft make them easy to identify. Often goldfinches can be attracted to residential feeding stations stocked with thistle seed.

**Bewick’s Wren**  
*Thryomanes bewickii*  
L 4½-5¼"

Hopping and bobbing in and out of parkland berry thickets, or scrubby chaparral, or probing under your roof shingles, eaves or firewood pile, the always curious Bewick’s wren inspects every crack, crevice, and cavity for a possible insect meal or future nest site. The striking white “supercillium” (*i.e. eyebrow stripe*) and solid rusty back help distinguish this year-round resident from other wrens. The Bewick’s long tail is usually held in a stiff, almost comical vertical tilt and waved about threateningly as the wren scolds territorial intruders. As a singer this wren produces a complex collection of burr-like buzzing ending in a long, sweet trill.



Golden Gate Audubon Society’s Website

**Birding Field Guides:**

The Sibley Field Guide to Birds of Western North America, David Allen Sibley

Western Birds, Roger Tory Peterson

Field Guide to the Birds of North America, National Geographic

Field Guide to the Birds of North America, National Wildlife Federation

Field Guide to the Birds, Western Region, Donald & Lillian Stokes

Visitor Centers & Recreation Services

ARDENWOOD HISTORIC FARM  
Fremont, 510-544-2797  
awvisit@ebparks.org

BLACK DIAMOND MINES  
Antioch, 510-544-2750  
bdvisit@ebparks.org

COYOTE HILLS REGIONAL PARK  
Fremont, 510-544-3220  
chvisit@ebparks.org

CRAB COVE at CROWN BEACH  
Alameda, 510-544-3187  
ccove@ebparks.org

SUNOL REGIONAL WILDERNESS  
Sunol, 510-544-3249  
svisit@ebparks.org

TILDEN NATURE AREA/EEC  
and LITTLE FARM  
Berkeley, 510-544-2233  
tnarea@ebparks.org

OUTDOOR RECREATION UNIT  
District-wide programs, 510-544-2512  
recreation@ebparks.org

TILDEN, BOTANIC GARDEN  
Berkeley, 510-544-3169  
bgarden@ebparks.org  
www.nativeplants.org

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**Common Songbirds**  
of the  
East Bay Regional Parks

