

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





Wilson's Warbler

Wilsonia pusilla

L 4½-5"

This dazzling, yellow warbler can be easy to spot, but difficult to positively identify because it virtually never stops moving. A tireless insectivore, the ever restless Wilson's warbler seems to chase bugs constantly, hopping, darting, gleaning, probing, and suddenly flitting upward to snatch airborne prey. While the yellow and olive-green female Wilson's might be confused with another warbler species, the silky black cap of the male is distinctive. Quite fond of water, you can sometimes get a good look at this bird by pausing quietly near the shallows at the edge of a stream or pond.



White-Crowned Sparrow

Zonotrichia leucophrys

L 6-7"

Plump, plucky, and striking in its appearance, the white-crowned sparrow is a common visitor to residential seed feeders and a year-round resident in the Bay Area. The bold black and white crown stripes, the yellow-orange or pink bill, and the solid gray breast are key diagnostic markings for this species. At least four sub-species of this bird are found in Northern California. Often feeding on the ground, look for white-crowns energetically scratch-kicking through leaf-litter for seeds as you hike parkland trails.



Song Sparrow

Melospiza melodia

L 5-7"

At first glance the song sparrow seems a rather unassuming "little brown bird." Its most distinctive field marks are the dark spot centered on the streaked brown breast and dark "whisker" marks on either side of the throat. However, when the male of this species belts out his sweet, rich, and highly complex springtime song, he lays legitimate claim to the title "songbird." When flushed from the cover of grassy hillside, chaparral scrub or marshland this sparrow pumps its tail vigorously as it flies low and zips back into hiding. Coyote Hills Regional Park and other shoreline parks along San Francisco Bay provide critical habitat for a special race of this species, the Alameda salt marsh song sparrow. This song sparrow is listed by the state as a "species of special concern."



Black-Headed Grosbeak

Pheucticus melanocephalus

L 7-8"

A major celebrity of the songbird world, the black-headed grosbeak has it all: spectacular color, robust size, and a rich and beautiful song. From April to July the striking orange and black male grosbeak chooses a somewhat concealed perch within the leaf canopy. Here he establishes his territory with a deep, rich, joyful, warbling song which carols along for many seconds only to be repeated moments later. Black-headed grosbeaks are most common in oak woodlands, riparian or streamside habitats, and among groves of conifers. Consuming both insects and seeds, grosbeaks sometimes appear at backyard feeding stations where they dash in to snatch a seed before shyly disappearing into nearby vegetation.



Northern Mockingbird

Mimus polyglottos

L 8-10"

A neighborhood and parkland favorite, the mockingbird is the quintessential songbird. With literally hundreds of songs in its repertoire, this bird lives up to its scientific name which means "many tongued mimic." In addition to composing his own varied and brilliant vocal productions, the male mockingbird imitates birds and other animals, car alarms, whistling tea kettles, and a host of other inanimate noise makers. Expressing his springtime passion with wild abandon, the male often sings at night, especially during a full moon. Sleekly elegant in gray plumage with white wing patches, mockingbirds eat insects and berries and can be easily attracted to backyard feeders.

Chestnut-Backed Chickadee

Poecile rufescens

L 4-4½"

Naturalist Aldo Leopold once called the chickadee a "small bundle of large enthusiasms." Partial to treetops, especially conifers, these lively birds dangle fearlessly like tiny acrobats as they work to extract insects, their eggs, and larvae. Look for a tiny bird with a black cap and bib, and rust-colored back and sides. Chickadees are quite vocal birds, calling to one another often as they forage with a cheerful raspy (*chickadee-dee*). Both male and female care for the young. Sunflower seeds and suet attract them to backyard feeders.

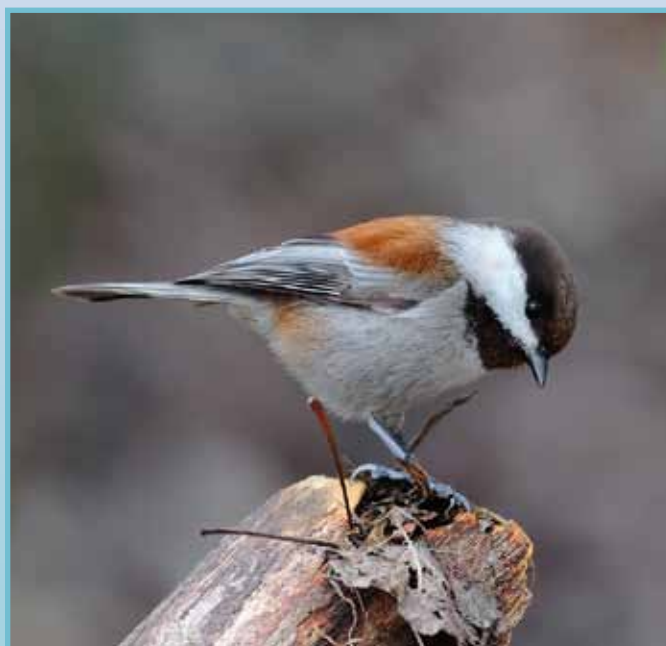


Yellow-Rumped Warbler

Dendroica coronata

L 5-6"

In all plumages this warbler sports a bright yellow rump-patch which makes it one of the easier warblers to identify. One of the most abundant of all wood warbler species, the male "butter butt," in breeding plumage, is also one of the most striking. He has bright yellow on the sides, rump, throat, and crown as well as black (sometimes dark blue-gray) on the breast and cheeks. White tail-spots, wing patches, and eye-rings complete the striking picture of this diminutive but dazzling bird. Look for yellow-rumps foraging for insects in willow, pine or oak woodlands.



Spotted Towhee

Pipilo maculatus

L 7-8½"

This large colorful sparrow is not the premier songster. A call note like an annoying door-bell buzzer echoing from within a dense thicket of poison oak or blackberry may be your first introduction to this shy bird. Spending much of its time feeding on the ground, among dense undergrowth, the towhee noisily scratch-kicks dry leaf litter to uncover hidden seeds. You will usually hear it long before you see it and you may think you're hearing a much larger critter. When the spotted towhee finally hops into view, the sleek black, rust-red, and crisp white coloring and its sparkling red eyes will dazzle and delight. This bird is definitely worth the wait.

