

# Northern Mockingbird

BY TERRY B. JOHNSON • ILLUSTRATION BY ZACKERY ZDINAK

**SCIENTIFIC NAME:** *Mimus polyglottos*. The genus (Latin) means mimic; the specific epithet (Greek) means many tongues. The “northern” (common name) results from closely related species occurring south of the United States.



**DESCRIPTION:** Slim and long-tailed—about 10-inches long. Pale-gray body with dark wings, white wing patches, and white outer tail feathers. Wing patches most prominent in flight, courtship display, and when flashing insects (see below). Juveniles look much like adults, but have mottled (streaked) chest and darker eyes.

**DISTRIBUTION:** Coast-to-coast across the southern United States, but expanding northward in recent years, and south through Mexico and the Caribbean. Casual as far north as Alaska. In Arizona, nests nearly statewide from middle elevations to desertscrub. Winters primarily south of the Mogollon Rim.

**HABITAT:** Well known from urban and suburban environments rangewide, but also common in many open to sparsely

wooded habitats. Occurs in cities, farms, parks, deserts, edge environments (woodland-grassland ecotones), and a wide variety of shrub-studded habitats (e.g., semidesert grassland, juniper woodlands). In Arizona, primarily occurs at elevations below 4,500-5,000 feet.

**BIOLOGY:** The northern mockingbird, a habitat generalist, is probably as well and widely known as any native bird in America. Its penchant for singing highly varied yet repetitious songs in the dead of night (all night in bright moonlight!), and well before the alarm clock rings in the morning, brings considerable notoriety. The mocker typically repeats each call note or song three times. Its liquid notes are clear and penetrating, and nicely capture the calls and songs of myriad species of birds. An ornithologically well-trained ear sometimes can even detect migration patterns and breeding cycles of other birds by the song sequences of this species.

Mockingbirds are primarily insectivorous, especially in spring and summer, but they also take advantage of seasonally plentiful berries (especially in winter). When flushing insects from lawns or shrubs, they spread their wings abruptly and flash their bold, white wing patches. On the ground, they run from place to place, stopping to cock their head and eye to look and listen more closely for flushing bugs and other invertebrates.

Mockers often build their stick nests deep in thick shrubs. With no nest in sight, people are often befuddled by the aggressive adult defending its territory. Mockingbirds are infamous for flying right at people to defend their hidden nest, or newly fledged young. Sometimes they make contact, causing even greater alarm. From

three to six eggs (usually four to five) are laid, typically from March to August. The female incubates for 12 days, and the young fledge about 10-12 days after hatching. A pair of mockingbirds may have two or even three broods in a single breeding season.

Domestic and feral cats are important predators of this species. In urban settings, mockingbird-cat encounters are frequent and fascinating. At times it seems as if the bird were teasing the cat into spectacular leaps that fall just a tad short of the fast-flying bird. Usually. Now and again, a mockingbird misjudges just enough to provide a meal for tabby. Frequent wildlife predators of mockingbirds include snakes and squirrels (eggs and nestlings) and hawks.

**STATUS:** The northern mockingbird is common and conspicuous throughout its broad range of occurrence in the United States. The species is not rare, nor is it federally listed as an endangered, threatened, or candidate species. It is also not among the species that Arizona Game and Fish considers *Wildlife of Special Concern in Arizona*.

**MANAGEMENT NEEDS:** None, not even outreach efforts to inform and educate the public. This is a very well known and widely appreciated species. With pesticides under control, it seems highly likely this is one species that is not likely ever to become imperiled. ♣

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*As a young boy in Oklahoma, Terry Johnson often watched his cat, Midnight, trying to knock mockingbirds from the air. Midnight never got the job done, so Terry and his pals Red Ryder and Daisy Eagle occasionally helped him out. Terry's adult dedication to conservation is probably atonement for his youthful misdeeds.*