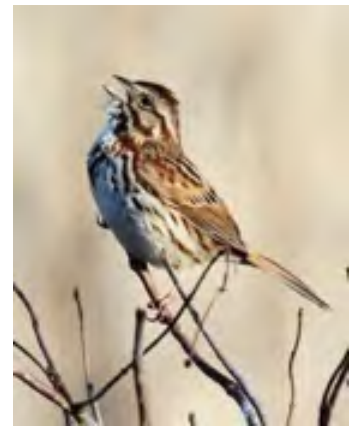
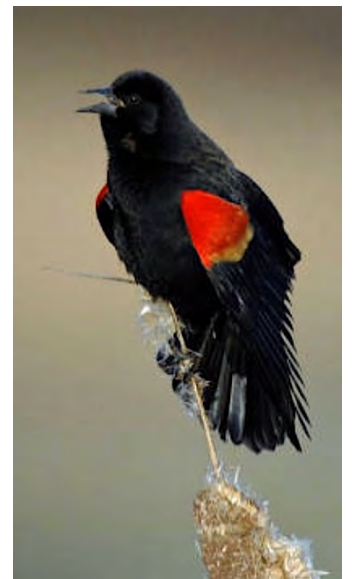
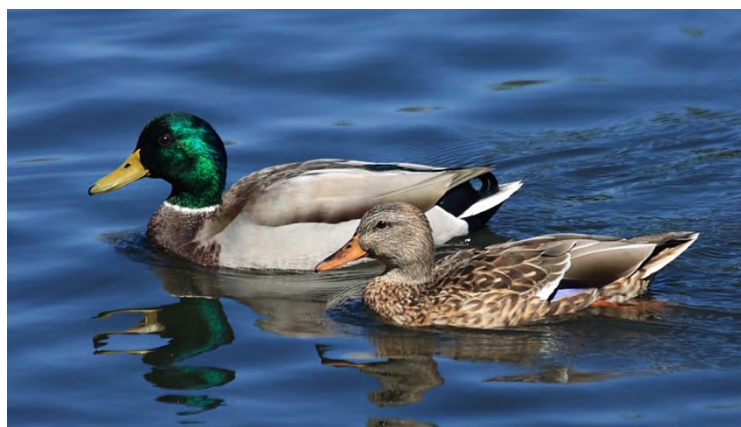
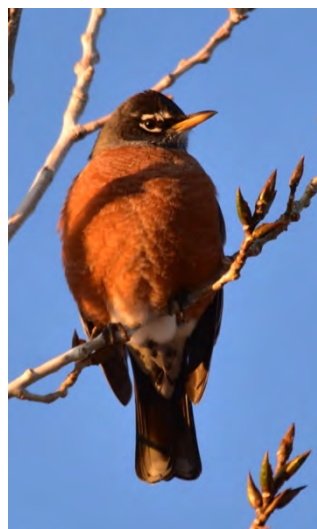




Some Common
Birds
of
Northern
Virginia



Florence S. McBride

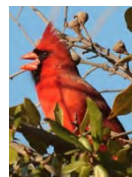
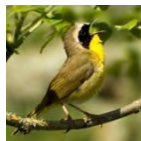
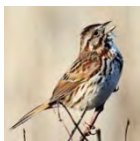


This is a picture book that also includes some brief notes about the birds shown in the pictures. Many of these species live in Northern Virginia all year, while others are here for part of the year. We should be able to find them if we look and listen in appropriate habitats. And of course, there are other species that can be seen and heard here as well.

We can learn more about the birds of our area both by **observing them outdoors** and by using **resources**. Especially helpful is the Audubon Society of Northern Virginia's "Checklist of Birds of Northern Virginia," which shows how likely we are to find each species in each season. There's a link to the checklist at <https://www.audubonva.org/how-to-use-the-nova-bird-checklist>. That page, other ASNV web pages, and links they provide are well worth exploring if we want to learn about our birds.

Many other resources contain information about birds' appearances, behavior (including sounds they make), habitats, and geographic ranges. We can consult field guides and other books, more web pages, apps, audio recordings, and films. Two excellent digital resources available free from the Cornell Laboratory of Ornithology are:

- "All About Birds" web pages. These include a Bird Guide. From its welcome page, <https://www.allaboutbirds.org/guide/>, you can search for any North American species. At the top of each species page there's a "Search" window that you can use to find other species, as well as links to other kinds of pages.
- The "Merlin" app. Downloaded to your cell phone, this can be very useful, especially when you're observing birds outdoors. It can help you identify a bird by leading you through a series of questions and then showing you pictures of birds it might be. For each of these, there are links to more photos of that species, information about identifying it, sounds to listen to, and maps. Merlin can also help you identify birds you photograph with your cell phone and bird sounds you record using the app. Another feature lets you look up species that you want information about. To download Merlin free, go to <https://merlin.allaboutbirds.org/download/>.



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More Information About This Book

- Many of the birds shown in this book live here **all year**.
There are **no symbols** next to their names.



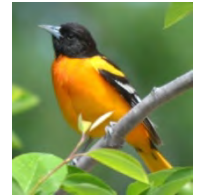
Carolina Chickadee

Other birds are here for **part of the year**.

In this book, these symbols show you when they're here:

☼ = Migrants that are here in **spring, summer, and fall**

❄ = Migrants that are here in **fall, winter, and spring**.



Baltimore Oriole ☼

- **Males and females** of many of the species in the book look similar.

European Starling



Eastern Phoebe

For the others, you'll see
"**male**" or "**female**"
next to their pictures.

Northern Cardinal



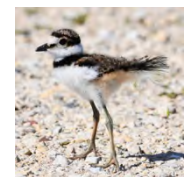
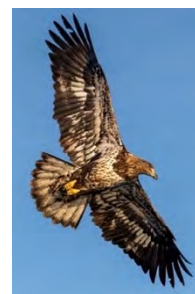
Female



Male

On a few pages there are pictures of
birds that don't yet have their adult feathers.
They are labeled "**Immature,**"
"**Juvenile,**" or "**Chick.**"

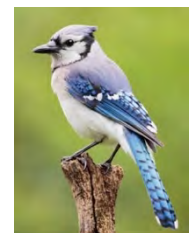
Immature Bald Eagle



Killdeer chick

- Except for the birds of prey, which are on pages 38-43,
the **Land Birds** are arranged by **color**
 - **the main colors** of their bodies, or
 - **colors of parts** of their bodies.

Blue Jay



- About the birds' **lengths**: A bird can look longer or shorter depending on the position it's in. In this book, the **length** noted for each bird is from the **tip of its bill** to the **end of its tail** when its bill and tail are stretched straight out.

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Length: 8 ½ inches

In many North American songbird species, only males sing. But both male and female cardinals have several rich, beautiful songs. One of these sounds like "Cheer! Cheer! Cheer!" another like "Weet-weet-weet-weet-weet!"

We may even hear cardinals singing in winter, when most other songbirds are calling, but not singing.

Male



Female

American Robin

Length: 10 inches



Male

In general, males are more brightly colored than females.



In winter robins eat berries and other fruits.

Robins nest in many different kinds of places -- most often on branches of trees or shrubs, sometimes even on buildings or other structures built by people.





Male



Female

House Finch

7

Length: 5 - 5 ½ inches



"Courtship Feeding" -- Male feeding female

Male House Finches feed females when they're getting together in pairs and during the nesting season.



Scarlet Tanager  Length: 7 inches

Male above, female below

Males of this woodland species look different at different times of year. Their wings and tails are always black, but the brilliant red feathers that we see in spring and summer are replaced with dull-colored ones for fall and winter, when the males look more like the females. Tanagers spend the winter in South America, so we don't see them here in that season.

This picture was painted by Louis Agassiz Fuertes. Many people consider him to be our country's greatest painter of birds.



Blue Jays make many kinds of calls in addition to their familiar "Jay!" One sounds like a squeaky clothesline pulley or a rusty gate. Their loud alarm calls can alert other birds to danger, and their imitations of hawks can be so good that people who hear them are sometimes fooled, at least at first. We're probably less likely to notice the quiet sounds they make.



Eastern Bluebird

Length: 7 inches

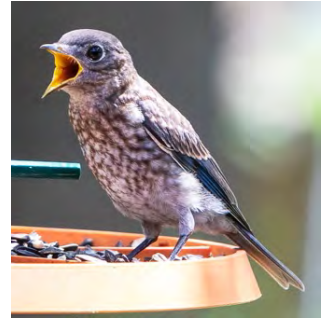
10



Male



Female



Juvenile

Like the American Robin, our bluebird is a thrush. Young bluebirds (like young robins) are spotted.

Bluebirds nest in natural cavities they find, like old woodpecker holes, and in nest boxes made especially for bluebirds that people put up for them.



Indigo Bunting

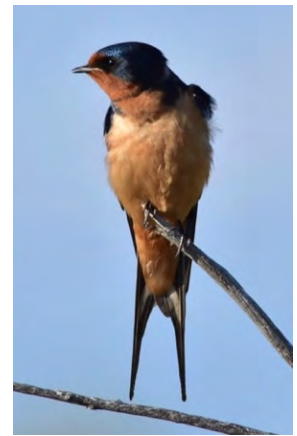
Length:
5 inches

Male
in June

Female

Buntings are not closely related to bluebirds. They are in the scientific family *Cardinalidae*, which includes cardinals.





Barn Swallow 🌸 Length: 6 - 7 ½ inches

Barn Swallows build nest cups of mud that they often mix with grass stems. Then they line the cups with grass and feathers.



Tree Swallow 🌸

Length: 5 - 6 inches

Tree Swallows are cavity nesters.
This one is at a nest box.



Swallows catch flying insects.

American Goldfinch

Length: 5 inches

Male - summer



Male molting in early spring



In winter, the males have dull-colored body feathers, and look more like the females. When they're molting into their bright summer plumage, they look patchy.




Like other finches, goldfinches have cone-shaped bills that are good for cracking seeds.

Notice how different their bills are from the bills of the warblers that you can see on the next page. Warblers catch insects with their thin, sharply-pointed bills.

Female



Common Yellowthroat 
(a warbler)

Length: 5 inches



The females don't have the black mask.

Male

Yellow Warbler 

Length: 5 inches

Male

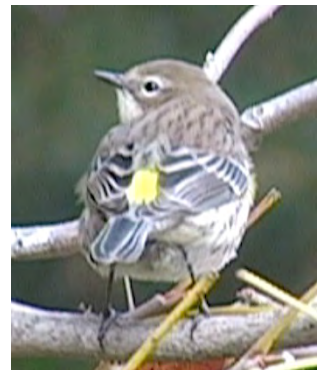


Female Yellow Warblers are not streaked underneath.

Yellow-rumped Warbler 

Length: 5 1/2 inches

Females, and adult and young birds in fall and winter, look similar to spring males, but are duller-colored.



Fall



Male in spring

Ruby-throated Hummingbird

Length: 3 ½ inches

In their migration, these tiny creatures fly 500 miles across the Gulf of Mexico without stopping.



Female



Male



Male

Baltimore Oriole

Length: 7 - 8 inches

The female oriole builds a bag-shaped nest, weaving together plant fibers, and then lining it with softer material. She incubates the eggs, and both parents tend the young.



Male at the nest



Female looking for nesting material



These very intelligent birds are entirely black -- even their eyes, bills, and legs are black. Their loud calls are familiar, but many people don't know that they're quiet when they're nesting, and that a pair may have one or more of their young from previous years helping them. Crows eat many kinds of foods, even carrion.

There's another species of crow here too, the Fish Crow. Fish Crows look a lot like American Crows, but are just a little smaller. In general, the easiest way to tell the two crows apart is to listen to their calls. The American Crow's most common calls sound like "Caw" or "Aw."

The Fish Crow's calls sound more nasal, and often have two connected notes.

In fall and winter, it's fascinating to watch crows flying to their nighttime roosts. The roosts sometimes hold thousands of birds and can include members of both species.



European Starling

Length: 8 ½ inches

16



Adult: Spring and summer plumage

Starlings were brought to the U.S. from Europe by people who wanted all the birds mentioned in the plays of William Shakespeare to live here. This species has been very successful, and there are now many millions of starlings in North America.



Notice the way these starlings are spacing themselves on the wires before flying to the places where they'll roost for the night.



Adult: Fall and winter plumage



Juvenile

Red-winged Blackbird

Length: 7 – 9 inches

17



Male

Female



Immature Male or Adult Female

Of all our common songbirds, this is the species in which males and females look the most different. They are different in color, pattern, and even size.

Especially near bird feeders, the females are sometimes mistaken for sparrows. But they're larger than sparrows, have a different bill shape, and unlike most sparrows, typically walk instead of hopping.

Common Grackle

Length: 11 – 13 inches

18



Male left, Female right. This blackbird has a long tail, yellow eyes, and iridescent feathers, which are especially bright on the male's head, neck, and breast.



Above: Male Below: Female



Brown-headed Cowbird

Length: 7 ½ - 8 ½ inches



Cowbirds lay their eggs in other birds' nests. This cowbird chick is exercising its wings just before leaving the phoebe nest where it hatched and was fed by the phoebe "parents."

Downy Woodpecker

Length: 6 ½ inches



← Male



Female →

The Hairy Woodpecker is larger than the Downy, but it's not always easy to tell the size of a bird when it's far away, or not near other birds whose sizes we know. If we're trying to figure out which of these two woodpeckers we're looking at, the bill can be an especially helpful clue. As you can see in these pictures, the Hairy's bill looks stronger than the Downy's and is much longer -- almost as long as its head.



← Male

Female →

The outer tail feathers of Hairy Woodpeckers are plain white, with no spots.



Hairy Woodpecker

Length: 7 - 10 inches

Pileated Woodpecker

Length: 16 - 19 inches

20

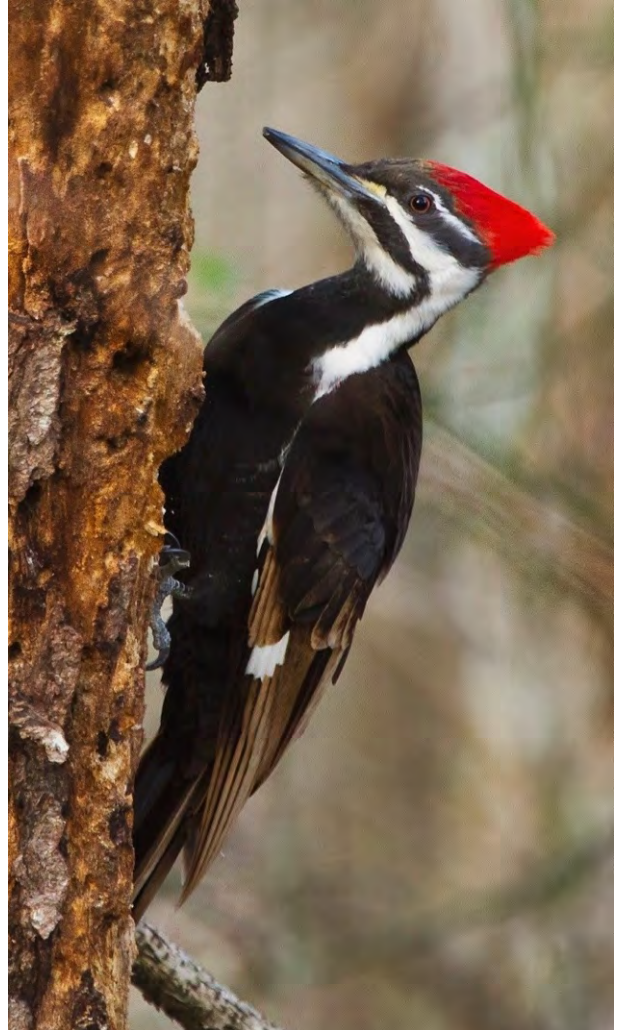
This woodpecker is as large as a crow.

Male



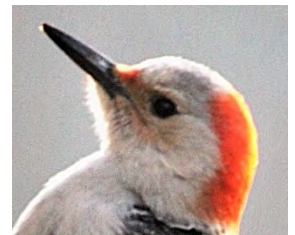
Photo © 2020 John M. McBride

Female



Red-bellied Woodpecker

Length: 9 - 9 ½ inches



Male

Female

The female looks almost the same as the male. But the feathers on the top of her head are not red.

Black-and-white Warbler

Length: 4 ½ - 5 inches

21



Male left
Female right

We commonly see Black-and-white Warblers moving head-first down tree trunks and branches.

Painting by Louis Agassiz Fuertes

American Redstart (a warbler)

Length: 4 ½ - 5 ¼ inches



Male



Female

Redstarts are especially active warblers. They flutter about searching for insects, often displaying their colorful tail and wing patches. It's believed that this behavior can startle their prey, making it easier to find and catch.



Male

The towhee is named for its "Tow-ee" call.

Some people think its song sounds as though the bird is saying "Drink your tea!"



We can watch the way towhees find food in leaf litter on the ground.

They jump back and forth scratching, to uncover insects and other small invertebrates.

Female



Rock Pigeons come in many colors. European settlers brought them to North America in the early 1600s, and they're common in cities here and all over the world. We often see them in flocks, foraging, flying, or roosting.





Carolina Chickadee

Length:
4 ½ inches

Chickadees are named for their "Chickadee-dee-dee" calls. One of this species' songs is a four-note whistled "Fee-bee-fee-bee."

A familiar song of the titmouse is its clear, repeated "Peter-peter-peter."



Tufted Titmouse

Length: 6 inches



Nuthatches are our only year-round birds that move head-first down tree trunks.

White-breasted Nuthatch

Length: 5 - 6 inches

Dark-eyed Junco ❄️

Length: 6 inches

Sometimes called "snowbirds," these gray-and-white sparrows are winter visitors that can often be seen at bird feeding stations, usually on the ground or on platform feeders.



Gray Catbird  Length: 8 ½ - 9 inches



Picture © 2011 Florence S. McBride



The catbird was named for its mewling call.



Northern Mockingbird

Length: 9 - 10 inches

Mockingbirds imitate the sounds of other birds really well.

Painting by Louis Agassiz Fuertes, reproduced on a trading card



Photo © 2014 Neal Lewis



Eastern Phoebe

Length: 6 ½ - 7 inches

The phoebe is a flycatcher. It is named for its song:

"Fee-bee! Fee-bee!"

The way phoebes wag their tails down and up when they're perching can help us identify them.

Phoebes hunt from perches, flying out to snatch insects from the air and then perching again, watching for more insects to catch. Swifts fly around swiftly hunting their insect prey. In fact, we only see them flying.



Painting by Bob Hines, from the USFWS book
Fifty Birds of Town and City



Chimney Swift

Length: 5 - 5 ½ inches

Chimney Swifts nest and roost in chimneys.

Golden-crowned - Length: 3 ½ inches

Female -- The male has orange as well as yellow on his crown.



Ruby-crowned - Length: 4 inches

Male -- We can't always see his red crown, which the female lacks.



Notice that the Golden-crowned Kinglet has stripes on its head, while the Ruby-crowned Kinglet has a pale broken eye ring. These little birds flick their wings almost constantly, a behavior that helps us recognize them.

Red-eyed Vireo 🌸

Length: 5 ½ inches



The Red-eyed Vireo's song is a common sound in our spring and summer woodlands.

Given many times a minute, the song's short, rising and falling phrases sound to some listeners as though the bird is asking and answering questions.

Unlike most of our songbirds, these vireos sing throughout the day, even in hot weather.



The Mourning Dove was named for its cooing calls, which sound sad to some people. These calls are sometimes mistaken for an owl's hooting.

Listen, too, for the whistling sounds these doves' wings make when they take off.

Both Mourning Dove parents incubate the eggs and care for the young.

This painting of two pairs of Mourning Doves is by John James Audubon.

One of the doves is preening its mate.





Length: 12 ½ inches

Female

Flickers forage on the ground, probing for ants and other insects. In late fall and winter we can see them eating berries and seeds.

Like other woodpeckers, flickers drum loudly to attract mates and to defend their territories. Both the males and the females drum.



Male



Song Sparrow

Length: 5 – 6 ½ inches



The Song Sparrow is our most common native sparrow, found in many habitats. We can often hear its beautiful song when we can't see the bird that's singing.

House Sparrows, which are not closely related to our native sparrows, were brought to North America from Europe in the 19th century. They have long been a familiar sight in cities and towns. A tip: If you hear a lot of birds chirping inside a bush or a shrub, they're likely to be House Sparrows.



Female

Male



House Sparrow

Length: 6 inches



White-throated Sparrow ❄️

Length: 6 ¾ inches

Some people use the phrase "Old . . Sam . . . Peabody, Peabody, Peabody" to help them remember this bird's beautiful, whistled song.



Chipping Sparrow

Length: 5 ¼ inches

Photo © 2020 John M. McBride

This sparrow's song is a long, dry trill, a common sound of spring and summer.

Carolina Wren

Length: 5 ½ inches



The songs of these two wrens are easy to hear when they're around. The Carolina Wren sings a loud, resonant "Teakettle-teakettle-teakettle!" The bubbly, insistent songs of House Wrens are hard to miss as these little birds return from their winter homes, set up territories for nesting, get together in pairs, nest, and feed their young.

House Wren

Length:
4 ½ - 5 inches





Wood Thrush 🌸

Length:
7 ½ - 8
inches

This thrush has a beautiful flute-like song.

Ovenbird



(a warbler)

Length:
5 ½ inches

It's named for the shape of its nest, which it builds on the ground.

Its song sounds like "Teacher-Teacher-Teacher," or "Teach-Teach-Teach."



Great Crested Flycatcher



Length:
7 - 8 ½
inches

This flycatcher lives in the woods. One of its loud calls sounds like "Wreep!"



Cedar Waxwing

Length:
7 inches

This is our only bird that has a yellow band at the end of its tail.

The waxwing is named for the waxy red tips on its secondary wing feathers, and the fact that it eats cedar berries.



Left: Adult

Below: Chick

You can see that the chick looks like a small, fuzzy version of the adult, but with very long legs and just one breast band.



Named for one of their loud calls, Killdeers are found in flat places, sometimes near water, but often on fields with short grass, or in vacant lots.

Sometimes they even nest on flat roofs!

Both the birds and their eggs are camouflaged.

Parent birds do distraction displays, acting as though they have broken wings, showing their rusty rumps, and calling loudly, to lead predators and other intruders away from their nests or young.



Remember: Some of the **brown birds** we see are

- **females** of species in which the males are more colorful, and
- **young birds** that will look different when they have their adult feathers.

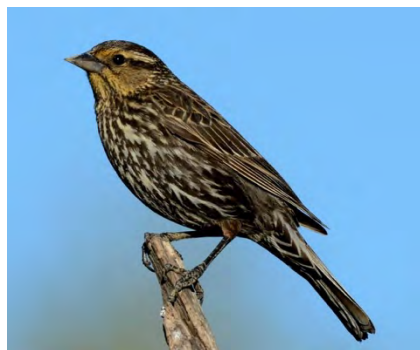
(The page numbers next to the birds' names here tell you where to find more pictures and information about these species in this book.)



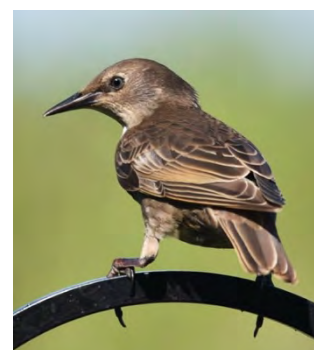
Female Northern Cardinal (p. 5)



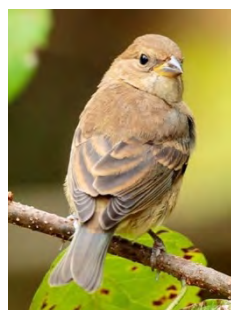
Female House Finch (p. 7)



Female Red-winged Blackbird (p. 17)



Juvenile
European Starling (p. 16)



Female
Indigo Bunting (p. 10)



Female Brown-headed Cowbird (p. 18)



Immature



Adult



Adult

Length: 18 - 25 inches

Wingspan: 48 inches

The Red-tailed Hawk is a member of the group of hawks that are called "buteos."

Hawks, eagles, falcons, Ospreys, and vultures hunt in the daytime. They are *diurnal* birds of prey.

Red-shouldered Hawk -- Another Buteo

Length: 17 - 24 inches Wingspan: 40 inches

Adults



Immature



Red-shouldered Hawks have crescent-shaped translucent patches near the tips of their wings.

Cooper's Hawk Length: 14 - 18 inches Wingspan: 24 ½ - 35 inches

It's in the group of hawks called "accipiters." Accipiters catch birds.



Left:
Adult

Right:
Immature



Another accipiter, the Sharp-shinned Hawk, looks a lot like the Cooper's Hawk, but is smaller.

Bald Eagle

Length: 28 - 38 inches

Wingspan: 80 inches



Photo © 2020 John M. McBride

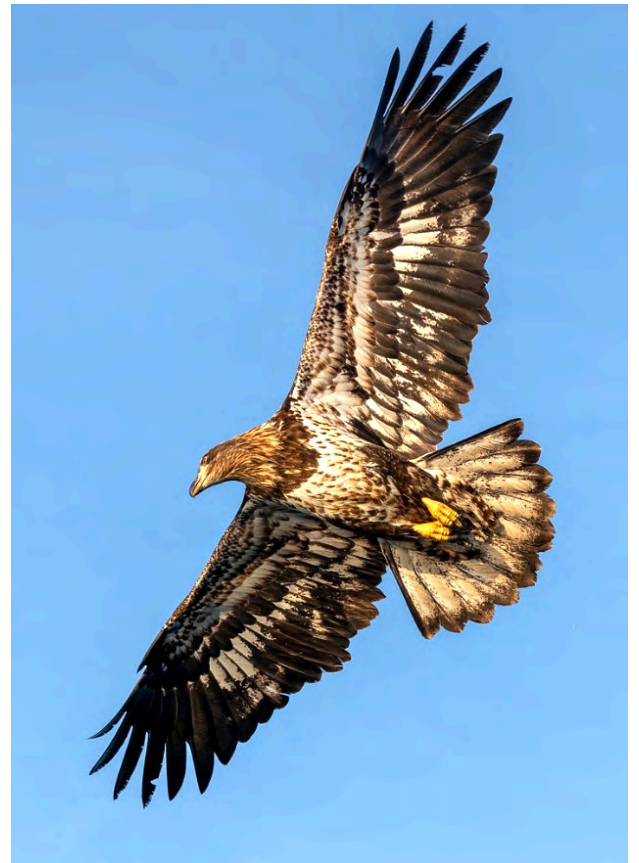
Adult

Immature

A Conservation Success Story

For many years, the pesticide DDT was widely used, and it was absorbed into the bodies of the prey animals that eagles and other raptors like Ospreys and Peregrine Falcons were eating. DDT caused the shells of birds' eggs to be too thin and breakable. This problem and others, including habitat loss and shooting, caused a serious decline in populations of Bald Eagles.

In 1978 the Endangered Species Act gave our national bird protection in all the lower 48 states. With the help of this protection and the banning of DDT in the United States in 1972, the Bald Eagle has made a spectacular comeback, and it was taken off the endangered and threatened species list in 2007.



Osprey

Length: 22 - 23 inches

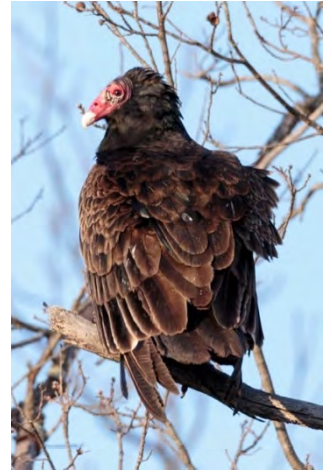
Wingspan: 59 - 70 inches



Ospreys catch fish with their strong toes, which have rough scales and talons. They always carry fish head-first, facing forward.

They often nest on platforms that people put up for them.

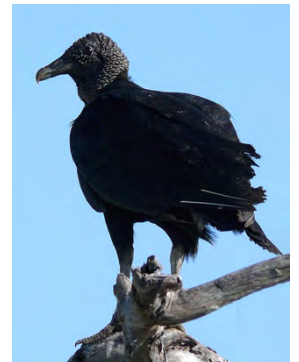




Turkey Vulture

Length: 26 - 31 inches

Wingspan: 67 - 70 inches



Black Vulture

Length: 23 - 26 inches Wingspan: 54 - 59 inches

Compared to the Turkey Vulture: The Black Vulture is a little smaller and has a shorter tail. It has white patches at the ends of the wings, and its wingbeats are stiffer and choppier than the Turkey Vulture's.

Vultures are scavengers. They don't usually catch live prey.



Great Horned Owl

Length:

18 - 25 inches

The tufts that many owls have on the tops of their heads are not ears, but feathers. Owls' ear openings are at the sides of their heads, under the feathers of their facial discs, which help direct sounds to the ears.



Barred Owl

Length:

17 - 20 inches

Both these species of owls are *nocturnal* birds of prey, active mostly at night.

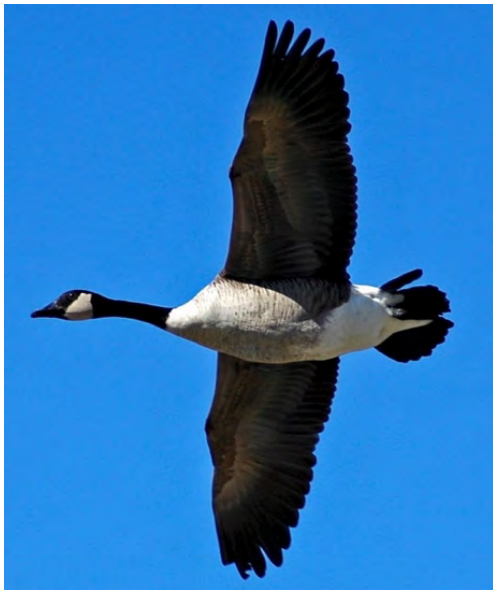
Listening to recordings of their calls can prepare us to identify them when we can't see them.

Canada Goose

Length: 30 - 43 inches

Wingspan: 50 - 65 inches

44



Canada Geese migrate both in the daytime and at night. Even in the dark, we may hear them honking as they fly overhead.

Mallard -- our most common duck

Length: 20 - 25 inches

45

Left: Male

Right: Female

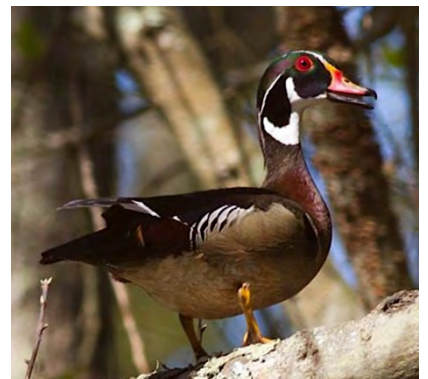


Female with ducklings

Wood Ducks are shy.
We can watch them from a distance.
They nest in holes that they find in trees
and will sometimes use nest boxes.

Wood Duck

Length:
18 ½ - 21 inches



Male

Great Blue Heron Length: 39 - 53 inches Wingspan: 66 - 79 inches 46

Our largest and most common heron



This egret is preening its feathers.



Great Egret 🌸

Length: 37 - 40 inches

Wingspan: 52 - 57 inches

Egrets and other American birds used to be hunted for their beautiful feathers. Then in 1918 the Migratory Bird Treaty Act was passed, making it illegal to kill, capture, or possess our native migratory birds, or to possess their eggs, nests, or feathers, "except as permitted by regulations." To protect our birds, the United States needs to preserve the rules this law set up.



Laughing Gull 🌸

Length: 16 inches

Wingspan: 40 inches

Except in winter, we can see these gulls here, but they nest near the coast. They only have black heads in spring and summer, when they're in breeding plumage.



Ring-billed Gull

Length: 17 inches

Wingspan: 44 inches

This is the most common gull in Northern Virginia. It is abundant in winter, and there are fewer of them here in summer than at other times of year.

Double-crested Cormorant

Length: 28 - 35 inches

48



You can see the feathery crests in this picture.

Cormorants hold their wings out to dry.



They swim and dive to catch fish.



We find kingfishers near fresh or salt water, often hearing their rattling calls before we see the birds.



Above: Male

Right: Two Females

Kingfishers perch by water, or hover over it, looking for fish -- and then plunge down to catch their prey with their strong bills.

This is our only common species in which the females are more colorful than the males. Females have rust-colored feathers as well as grayish-blue and white ones.



I am deeply grateful to the photographers and painters whose pictures appear in this book, and for the access to images that are identified as in the public domain, or free of known copyright restrictions, that government agencies and some websites provide. Special thanks to Neal Lewis and John McBride for permission to use their copyrighted photographs; in the book there are also many beautiful public domain photographs by Lewis that come from the Shenandoah National Park's Flickr web pages. Credits for all the pictures are on pp. 51-54.

I also want to thank Bill Burton, Greg Butcher, and Tony Bogar, all of whom made extremely helpful suggestions as the book was being developed. The Audubon Society of Northern Virginia's *Checklist of Birds of Northern Virginia* has been an invaluable source of information about the abundance and seasonal occurrence of the species included in the book.

Florence McBride
Fall, 2021

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This book is a labor of love. The birds shown in it occur in many parts of the U.S. (in some cases, throughout our country), and I would like educators and others to be able to adapt the book to fit their own situations* and to share their versions on a non-profit basis. So in addition to the permission to share this book under the conditions noted on page 2, permission is granted for making and sharing **derivative versions** of it, if the following conditions are met:

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* For example, I have already made a new page 24 that's appropriate for the northeastern US, replacing the Carolina Chickadee with the Black-capped Chickadee.

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- 22. Eastern Towhee:** Male - USFWS / Bill Thompson (PDFFiles).
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37. **Brown Females and Young Birds:** See species pages.
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41. **Osprey:** Flying with spotted sea trout - USFWS / Mike Weimer.
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42. **Turkey Vulture** Flying - NPS / Brad Sutton (F). Perched - NPS / Neal Lewis (F).
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55. **Index:** Yellow Warbler Nest - USFWS / Kristine Sowl.

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Nest of a
Yellow Warbler



About the Author

For almost 40 years Connecticut educator and birder Florence McBride has been working to support bird conservation efforts and help others learn about birds and enjoy watching them. She has participated actively in two Connecticut bird atlas projects and for decades has been an area captain for the New Haven Bird Club's annual bird counts, has led many field trips, and has made and presented natural history films.



Since 1990, Florence has worked with teachers and their classes in the Hamden, CT, public schools to develop an interdisciplinary outdoor-indoor science program focused on birds, creating a large collection of *Take Flight!* materials, many of which have been widely shared with educators in Connecticut and beyond. For this work she has received awards from local, state, and national organizations.

In 2019-20, after learning that Yale's Peabody Museum of Natural History would not remount its iconic Birds of Connecticut exhibit after the museum's 3-year renovation, Florence photographed the exhibit's more than 300 species and documented them in two books, *Birds of Connecticut* and *More Birds of Connecticut*. Copies of these are in the museum's archives and Yale's Ornithology Library, as well as in the hands of many admirers of the exhibit and its superb taxidermy by David H. Parsons. Excerpts from the books can be found at https://celeryfarm.typepad.com/files/bsofct_bookselection_forj.wright_smfile.pdf.

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