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American Robin

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Inside:

The Thrush Family

Songbirds

Dr. Robin

American Robin

If you made a list of popular birds, the American robin would be at the top. This familiar backyard bird is found all over the country. It has adapted to using many kinds of habitats. Here in Idaho, you can find robins in your backyard, your school playground, your neighborhood park or up in the mountains. They are everywhere!

The American robin was named for its distant relative, the European robin. When the United States was first settled by Europeans, it was a very unfamiliar place. Giving similar-looking animals the same names helped make this new place seem more like home. Our robin has the same orange-colored breast and stomach as the European robin, but is 10 inches long instead of five. This bright orange goes well with the dark gray back and wings, and black head and tail. If you look closely, you will see white marks around a robin's eyes.

Robins eat small animals like worms, snails, slugs and insects. They also love fruit. One study found that robins seem to choose fruit that has bugs on it! Robins eat fruit more often in the fall, winter and early spring. Robins hunt by sight. They carefully watch as they hop across the ground. When they see something, they stop and tip their head from side to side to get

a better view. Then, they quickly grab their prey in their beak. A robin's beak is long and slender but not sharply pointed. This is an adaptation for eating soft food.

Robins are one of the first birds to start singing in the spring. The males sing from the treetops and sound like they are saying "cheerily, cheer, cheer-up, cheer-up." This tells other male robins to stay away. The singing also attracts female robins. Nest building is done by the female. She often chooses a spot on a horizontal branch near thick leaves. The six to eight inch cup nest is formed out of grasses, twigs, paper, feathers and moss. Once the cup is finished, the female adds mud to the outside of the nest to make it sturdy. Robins lay three to five beautiful blue eggs. Most robins raise two broods of babies each summer.

Robins often stay in the same area all year. During the winter, they spend a lot of time roosting out-of-sight in the shelter of trees. Some winter roosts are huge! One robin roost provided nighttime shelter to almost 250,000 robins. During the day, they move through the trees, searching for fruit. When it starts warming up, the robins return to your yard looking for worms, reminding you that spring is here.



The Thrush Family



Hermit Thrush



Varied Thrush

American robins belong to a bird family called thrushes. Scientists think that about 330 kinds of thrush live all over the world. Eight different kinds of thrush are found in Idaho, including our state bird, the mountain bluebird.

Thrushes live in woodlands and along the edges between woodlands and meadows. They are small to medium-sized songbirds that feed mainly on the ground. Thrushes eat a wide variety of foods including worms, snails, slugs, spiders, caterpillars, adult insects and fruits. Their fruit-eating habits make thrushes important for spreading seeds. When a thrush eats a fruit like a serviceberry, it digests the fleshy part, but not the seeds. The seeds get pooped out and new plants can grow. It may sound gross, but it's a perfect way for spreading seeds to new places. In Idaho, thrushes spread the seeds of juniper, chokecherry, serviceberry and mountain ash.

With the exception of the mountain and western bluebirds, Idaho thrushes are not brightly colored. They are usually brown or gray and have some spotting on their chests. This helps them blend in with their forest habitat. They may not be brightly colored, but thrushes have some of the most beautiful songs of all the birds.

Some thrush songs are described as flute-like. Other songs are described as long and warbling. These complex songs are helpful for birds that live in forests. Trees and other plants absorb sound. This could make it hard for a male thrush to attract a mate if she cannot hear him singing. Having a complex song allows the sound to travel better in the forest.

Thrushes build open cup-shaped nests made of grasses, moss, pine needles and other plant fiber. Bluebirds are unique because they put their nest in a cavity. Old woodpecker nests, holes in fence posts and special bluebird boxes are all bluebird nest sites. Thrush eggs are always blue. Some species have spotted eggs while others don't. You will always, however, see spots on young thrushes. Baby thrushes that have left their nest will have spots on their chests. Later this spring, watch for robin families in your yard. The ones with the spots on their chests are this year's youngsters.



Songbirds

Robins and other thrushes are called songbirds. This group makes up about 60 percent of all the birds in the world. If your class of 30 students were birds, 18 of you would be songbirds. This is a very large group with many different kinds of birds.

Songbirds get their name because they sing. Singing helps birds defend a territory and attract a mate during the breeding season. Bird song is also one of the reasons that people enjoy birds. Not only is it beautiful but it is also amazing. Birds can sing because of a structure called the syrinx (SEER-inks). It is like your voice box and is found in the trachea (TRA-ke-a). This is the tube that brings air to the lungs. The syrinx of a songbird is more complex than that of other birds. While other birds might have one or two pairs of syrinx muscles, songbirds have eight or nine pairs of syrinx muscles. These muscles control the vocal membranes. This allows a bird to make two sounds at the same time! A bird may also sing one part of its song instead of the whole song. Amazing!

Songbirds do a lot of singing, especially in the spring. The robin is usually the first bird to start singing in the morning. They are also often the last bird to stop singing at night. The champion singer is the red-eyed vireo. This small bird sings its “see me, here I am” song all day from the treetops. Most birds sing 1,000 to 2,500 songs each day during the breeding season. Scientists recorded a red-eyed vireo that sang over 22,000 songs in ten hours. Imagine singing that much in music class!



Red-eyed Vireo

Photo by John Benson CC BY 2.0

Listen to a Robin Song at:

[http://www.allaboutbirds.org/guide/
American_Robin/sounds](http://www.allaboutbirds.org/guide/American_Robin/sounds)

Listen to a Red-eyed Vireo at:

[http://www.allaboutbirds.org/guide/
Red-eyed_Vireo/sounds](http://www.allaboutbirds.org/guide/Red-eyed_Vireo/sounds)

For bird songs and more, check out
All About Birds website at:

www.allaboutbirds.org

Helping Hands



Western Bluebird

Photo by © Catherine Zimsky



Photo by © Catherine Zimsky

Mountain Bluebird

people. Idaho's own bluebirds have also benefited from nest boxes.

Here in Idaho many people volunteer their time to help wildlife. They plant trees, build nest boxes, collect seeds, improve habitats, spawn fish, monitor wildlife, and much more. These caring people want to give back to the wildlife that has given them so much pleasure. From hunters and anglers to bird watchers and school students, Idaho's wildlife has many helping hands.

You can be a wildlife helper, too. Your family can start by making your yard a wildlife-friendly place. Put up some bird houses, bird feeders and a bird bath. Work together and build a wildlife garden of native plants to provide food and shelter. Avoid using chemical fertilizers and pesticides in your yard. Compost your vegetable scraps and use this rich soil on your lawn. It may take some work, but you will be amazed at how quickly wildlife will call your yard, home.

What would you do to help wildlife? Would you put up a bird house? That is exactly what a dedicated group of people did to save the eastern bluebird. This beautiful blue thrush used to be found all over the eastern half of the United States. Then, between 1920 and 1970, bluebirds started disappearing. People noticed that the bluebirds were gone and wondered why. Scientists discovered that bluebird habitat was disappearing. They also found that non-native house sparrows and European starlings were taking the natural nest cavities that the bluebirds needed.

In 1978, the North American Bluebird Society was formed. Its members began to build and put up nest boxes for bluebirds. They encouraged landowners to put up nest boxes. They held bluebird nest box building events. Bluebird nest box trails were established and monitored. They worked to preserve bluebird habitat. Soon, the number of eastern bluebirds increased. People were once again seeing bluebirds. Today, the eastern bluebird is doing well thanks to

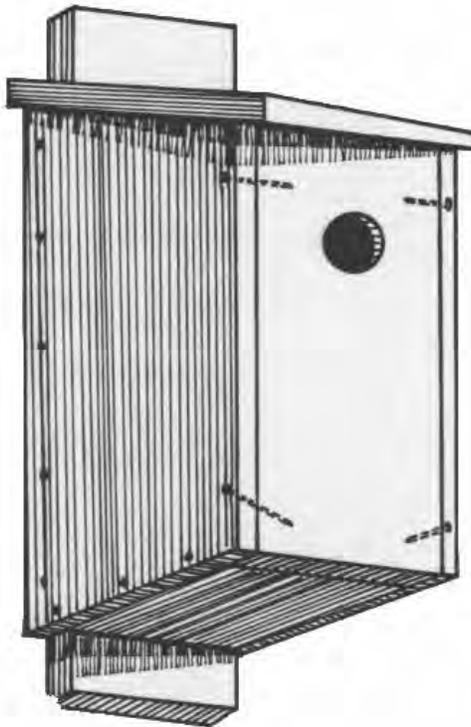


Photo by William H. Majoros, CC BY-SA 3.0

Eastern Bluebird



Dr. Robin—Rex Sallabanks

Here at the Idaho Department of Fish and Game, we have a lot of scientists that study wildlife. They study elk, deer, ground squirrels, wolverines, salmon, trout, sage grouse, songbirds, wolves, bears, reptiles, amphibians, pacific lamprey and more. One of our scientists, Rex Sallabanks, has studied robins. The information he learned was published as a booklet for the *Birds of North America*. This series is a valuable resource that scientists and birdwatchers use to learn about birds. *Wildlife Express* talked to Rex to find out what he had to say about robins.

WE: *Why did you decide to study robins?*

Rex: “I grew up in England and loved the European robin. When I came to America, I was excited to see a bird like our robin back home. The fact that it acted like another of my favorite European birds, the blackbird, was another plus.”

“Robins were also a perfect animal for me to study at the University of Oregon. I found a really nice woodland area near the university. One day, I went bird watching there and saw a bunch of robins eating hawthorn berries. It seemed like the perfect place for a study of robins and their food.”

WE: *What do you think is the most fascinating thing about robins?*

Rex: “There are a lot of cool things about robins. I guess what I find most fascinating is that they can live in so many places. Very few other birds can be found in as many places as robins. If you go to the shoreline, you will find robins. If you go up into the mountains, you will find robins. You

can even see them living in the Arctic tundra. They really live everywhere and that is amazing.”

WE: *What was the most surprising thing you learned about robins?*

Rex: “They are very hard to catch! I had to catch robins to band them. They are really smart. I would see them flying right toward the mist net and, suddenly, they would zip right over or around the net.”

WE: *How did you finally catch them?*

Rex: “I figured out that it might be easiest to catch them right before dark. This is when they were coming back to their roost for the night. In the winter when I was studying them, robins would start eating a huge amount of fruit about two hours before dark. They needed all this food to have enough energy to stay warm all night. I thought that by setting up mist nets right by the roost, I could catch them right before it got dark. Guess what? It was still hard! As I remember this, I still cannot believe how hard it was to catch those robins!”

WE: *If you had not studied robins, what other bird were you interested in studying?*

Rex: “Definitely the pied currawong in Australia. It’s kind of like a big magpie and is a really cool bird. I also thought going to such an exotic place would be wonderful.”

WE: *What advice do you have for young scientists like our readers?*

Rex: “Get outside and look around. Ask lots of questions about what you see. Why is it there? What does it eat? Where does it live? Be curious and observant.”



FINDING THEIR WAY

It is spring and bird migration is underway. Exactly how birds and other animals migrate is a great puzzle. Long ago, people had some strange ideas about migration. Some thought that birds spent the winter under the mud of lakes. Other ancient scientists thought that birds changed into different birds in the winter. Today, these explanations sound pretty silly. While we have not uncovered all the secrets of how animals find their way, we have some pretty good ideas:

☀ Sun Compass

Some migrating animals use the movement of the sun across the sky to find their way. The sun changes position as the Earth rotates. Because of this, animals need to be able to make adjustments to their travel direction so they don't just follow the sun. This is called time compensation. Experiments with birds showed that this is what happens. Animals that migrate during the day are likely to use a sun compass.

★ Star Compass

The star compass is like a nighttime version of the sun compass. So far, it has only been found in birds. Scientists discovered that young birds learn to find north by observing the pattern of stars around the North Star. This pattern includes the Big Dipper, Little Dipper, and other stars. As these constellations rotate around the North Star, they stay in the same position from each other. This allows birds to find north. Many songbirds and shorebirds migrate at night using a star compass.

◆ Magnetic Compass

Earth has two magnetic poles, the South Pole and the North Pole. These two poles turn the Earth into a big magnet. Between the two poles are invisible magnetic lines of force. They make up the Earth's magnetic field. This is what makes your compass work. The magnetic field is stronger at the poles and weaker at the magnetic equator. At some points, the magnetic field touches the earth at an angle called the dip angle. Birds and other animals like sea turtles can find north and south because they can detect these magnetic lines of force. Scientists believe that birds can also detect the dip angles. This would help them know how far to the north or south they have moved.

~ Polarized Light

Polarized light comes from special kinds of light waves. It creates a special pattern in the sky. This pattern stays the same as the sun moves across the sky. Even if the sky is cloudy, animals can still detect the polarized light pattern. This tells them the position of the sun. Insects, amphibians, fish, and birds use polarized light to migrate.

🌲 Landscape Maps

How do you find your way to school? Do you turn right at a certain block by a specific house? These are examples of landscape clues you use to navigate. Scientists think that some animals use landscape maps when they migrate. Things like mountain ranges, rivers, or coastlines can be part of a landscape map.

Migration is still mysterious. We don't understand all the ways migrating animals find their way. One thing we do know is that these amazing migratory animals understand exactly how to get where they are going!





Yay, summer is almost here! How do you plan to spend your summer? Why not spend your time outside this summer? Being outside can be just as exciting or even more exciting, than watching TV or playing a computer game. The only thing that limits what you can do outside is your own imagination. Not feeling very creative? Well, check out the list of ideas on the right and then check with your parents to see what they think. Together you should be able to come up with some fun ideas. Make this a summer to remember—outside!



BE OUTSIDE!



Climb a tree

Ride your bike

Go camping

Watch the birds

Plant a garden

Have a picnic

Watch the clouds

Play tag

Go fishing

Go swimming

Look for frogs

Have a backyard camp-out

Look for bugs

Build a fort

Read under a tree

Play catch

Make mud pies

Have a water fight

Build a bird feeder

Have a foot race

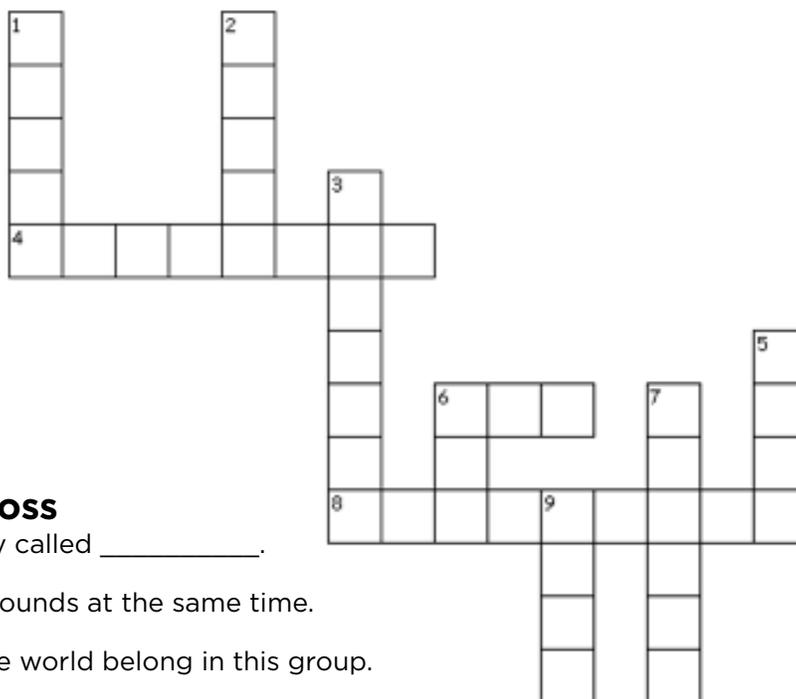
Build a cardboard city

Plant a tree

Play ball

Make flower or leaf prints

American Robin Puzzle



Across

4. Robins belong to a bird family called _____.
6. Birds can make _____ sounds at the same time.
8. Sixty percent of all birds in the world belong in this group.

Down

1. Robins eat small animals and _____.
2. _____ sing to attract mates.
3. Nests are built by _____.
5. Robins use their _____ to find food.
6. The American robin is about _____ inches long.
7. The structure that allows birds to sing.
9. The color of robin eggs.

WORDS

- Blue
- Eyes
- Females
- Fruit
- Males
- Songbirds
- Syrinx
- Ten
- Thrushes
- Two

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WE WOULD LIKE TO HEAR FROM YOU!

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