

Blue-gray Gnatcatcher

Polioptila caerulea



The Blue-gray Gnatcatcher is a tiny, slender, long-tailed bird, blue-gray above and white below, with white eye ring and broad white borders on a black tail. It looks like a miniature mockingbird.

The Blue-gray Gnatcatcher is the northernmost occurring species of gnatcatcher and the only truly migratory one. In winter, our resident population of gnatcatchers is joined by large flocks of others migrating south.

The increased winter population will even “swarm” on some days with hundreds of them collecting and feeding in oak and cabbage palm hammocks and in the willows, myrtles and other growth typical in wetlands.

The gnatcatcher is an extremely active little bird with its tail always flicking up and down or side to side. It forages among trees and shrubs in search of insects, and it will take prey while perched, while hovering, or by flycatching insects in mid-air.

Usually, it feeds near tips of branches, constantly moving through the foliage. Flicking its white-edged tail from side to side may serve to scare up hiding insects.

Because of its fondness for some of the insects most harmful to man’s interests, it is considered a beneficial species with its diet of a variety of small insects such as leaf beetles, leaf miners, treehoppers, moths, and flies. It will also eat insect larvae and spiders.

If the prey is too large to swallow whole, the gnatcatcher removes the wings of larger insects and beats large prey on a perch before eating.

Its song is a thin, musical warble, and its call note is a distinctive, whining zeeee with a slight nasal quality. The soft, rambling song usually contains some mimicked songs of other bird species.

The gnatcatcher breeds in variety of deciduous wooded habitats from shrub

land to mature forest, especially near water. Its nest is an open cup with high walls, made of spider webbing or caterpillar silk, covered with lichens or bark flakes. The nest is lined with grass stems, bark strips, plant down, hair, feathers, or other fine fibers and is placed on tree limbs far out from the trunk.

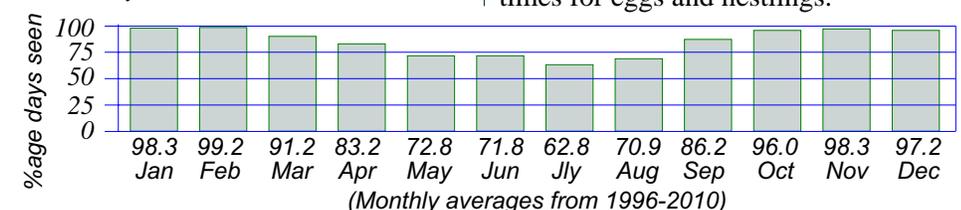
It has a habit of tearing up a completed or partly built nest and reusing the materials to build a new nest a short distance away. The original nests may be abandoned because of a change

of conditions that render the first site untenable or at least no longer desirable, usually due to the presence of larger nesting birds nearby or due to human disturbance.

The abandoned nest immediately becomes the most convenient source of material for another structure. This use of an existing nest is all the more readily



A Blue-gray Gnatcatcher sits on its lichen-covered nest, above. The graph below shows the percentage of days the gnatcatcher was seen on the boardwalk by volunteers.



understandable because of the seasonal nature of desirable nesting material.

Four to five eggs are in a typical brood, and gnatcatchers in South Florida may have two broods a year. Eggs are incubated for about 13 days, and the nestlings fledge in 10-12 days. At some nests, only the female broods while at others both parents share the task.

The gnatcatcher associates freely with other insect eaters including wintering warblers such as the palm, yellow-rumped, yellow-throated, prairie, parula, black-and-white, and black-throated green; with the white-eyed and blue-headed vireos; and with the ruby-crowned kinglet. Woodpeckers, wrens, and cardinals are frequently found in the same clump of trees. In fact, its call note is often the guide to a good *bird tree*.

Probably the greatest enemy of the Gnatcatcher is the Florida Blue Jay, *Cyanocitta cristata florincola*, which may raid the smaller bird’s nest many times for eggs and nestlings.