

# Gray Catbird

*Dumetella carolinensis*



Gray Catbirds are relatives of mockingbirds and thrashers, sharing the group's vocal abilities of copying the sounds of other species and stringing them together to make their own song. For this reason, all three are referred to as "mimic thrushes."

The catbird will sing a series of musical whistles and catlike meows mixed with the imitations of other birds' songs. It may start singing before dawn and may continue until after dusk, being one of the last birds to settle in for the night.

The catbird is well suited to twilight activity with a body that is uniformly dark gray with the exceptions of a chestnut brown patch under the tail and a black crown, tail, bill, eyes and legs. No other North American bird has a uniform dark gray plumage.

Unlike almost all neotropical migratory songbirds, the catbird has adapted well to the widespread urban and suburban habitats created by people. They live amid dense shrubs, vine tangles, and thickets of young trees in both summer and winter. Human disturbance and development often create these habitats in the form of clearings, roadsides, fencerows, abandoned farmland, and residential areas. On tropical wintering grounds catbirds spend more time in

wet, densely vegetated forests than they would during their nesting season.

Gray Catbirds flock together in groups of 10 to 15 during migration and remain in those migratory groups. In the fall at Corkscrew, there will be no catbirds one day and the swamp will be filled with them the next day. The opposite is true in the spring — there are rarely stragglers either coming or going. People will not observe single catbirds.

Gray Catbirds tend to fly low and for short distances from perch to perch, even when migrating. They prefer not to fly over wide, open spaces. They will hop through low vegetation or fly short distances at a time, just above the surrounding vegetation.

Male catbirds are territorial during spring and summer, singing from prominent perches and chasing away intruders, including other species of birds. Males and females defend their own territories during winter, a time when territoriality is uncommon in many species. In altercations, catbirds may fluff up the breast and rump feathers, spread their tail, and open their bill toward the sky.

Like all other thrushes, catbirds are very fond of bathing, rolling themselves in dust or sand by roadsides or fields. Several are frequently seen together on the borders of small ponds, splashing the water all over themselves and then going to the nearest bush or tree. They are also quite fond of bird baths and whole families will communally bathe.

Many songbirds rely heavily on insects for food, but catbirds are less particular. Even in the breeding season, when most songbirds exclusively eat insects, catbirds get as much as 20 percent of their diet from fruit, especially berries and fruit. They will winter in the tropics of Mexico and Central America where fruit is quite abundant where 80% of the winter diet is composed of fruit.

To find insects necessary for the growth of baby catbirds during the sum-

mer nesting season, foraging is done in a range of niches. Many songbirds are restricted to a particular foraging area, but catbirds will forage on the ground, on lawn edges, in shrubs, and even in the treetops to find ants, beetles, caterpillars, grasshoppers, and spiders.

By eating a variety of food from a variety of places, catbirds are not as specialized as many other songbirds and are better suited to finding food in habitats that have been disturbed by people.

In addition, catbirds are one of the few songbirds that will use bird feeders. Although their bills are too thin to crack open seeds, they will eat halved oranges, raisins, peanut butter, and fruit-flavored suet.

## Catbird Capsules

- The Gray Catbird's long song may last for up to 10 minutes.
- The Gray Catbird is in the genus *Dumetella*, which means "small thicket," which is where they are most often found.
- Gray Catbirds recognize their own eggs, making them less susceptible to brood parasites such as cowbirds.
- A group of catbirds are collectively known as a *mewing* or a *seat*.
- Formerly known as just *Catbird*, the name became Gray Catbird because there is a separate, all-black species in southern Mexico, the Black Catbird (*Melanoptila glabrirostris*).

