

# The Mockingbird:

## Arkansas's State Bird

by Jim Spencer



**T**he northern mockingbird (*Mimus polyglottos*) is a common year-round resident of Arkansas. It's one of the most widely distributed songbirds in the Americas, with a range extending from California to the West Indies and from Wyoming to southern Mexico.

### Description and Distribution

Despite the wacky claims of some Arkansans, the state bird of Arkansas isn't the mosquito but the mockingbird. The bird is found across the state, but "mockers" are more common in lowlands than highlands. Arkansas's mockingbird populations are larger during winter than in summer because of an influx of individuals fleeing colder winters in more northern states.

Mockingbirds are about the size of robins, but considerably slimmer. Like most members of the mimic-thrush family, the sexes look alike. Adults are about 11 inches long and are mostly a blend of muted grays above and dull white below. The long tail is black with white outer feathers. In flight, large white patches are visible on the upper surface of the gray and black wings.

### Habitat

Mockingbirds and suburbia seem made for each other. Their favorite nesting habitat is dense, low shrubbery adjacent short-grass areas where they

can catch the insects that make up most of their summer diet.

They are also common birds in farming areas, where they often set up housekeeping in fencerows, on pasture edges or around thickets surrounded by open fields. Mockingbirds have benefited from man's settlement and are rare or absent in heavily forested areas. There are many more mockingbirds in Arkansas now than when DeSoto became the first European to see this land in 1541.

### **Habits**

The mockingbird is aptly named. Literally translated, its scientific name means "mimic of many tongues." Although it has a song of its own, that song is most often lost in a welter of notes adopted from other birds and spewed forth almost non-stop from the male mocker, perched on a utility pole or television antenna, telling other mockingbirds in the area this little piece of the world belongs to him. Mockingbirds sometimes sing all night during the nesting season, especially when the moon is shining.

In addition to mimicking other songbirds, mockers are known to imitate other sounds as well—dogs barking, pigs squealing, bells ringing. Mockingbirds in farming areas often imitate roosters, ducks and even peacocks. This ability to mimic made mockingbirds popular cage birds on Southern plantation homes during the 1800s.

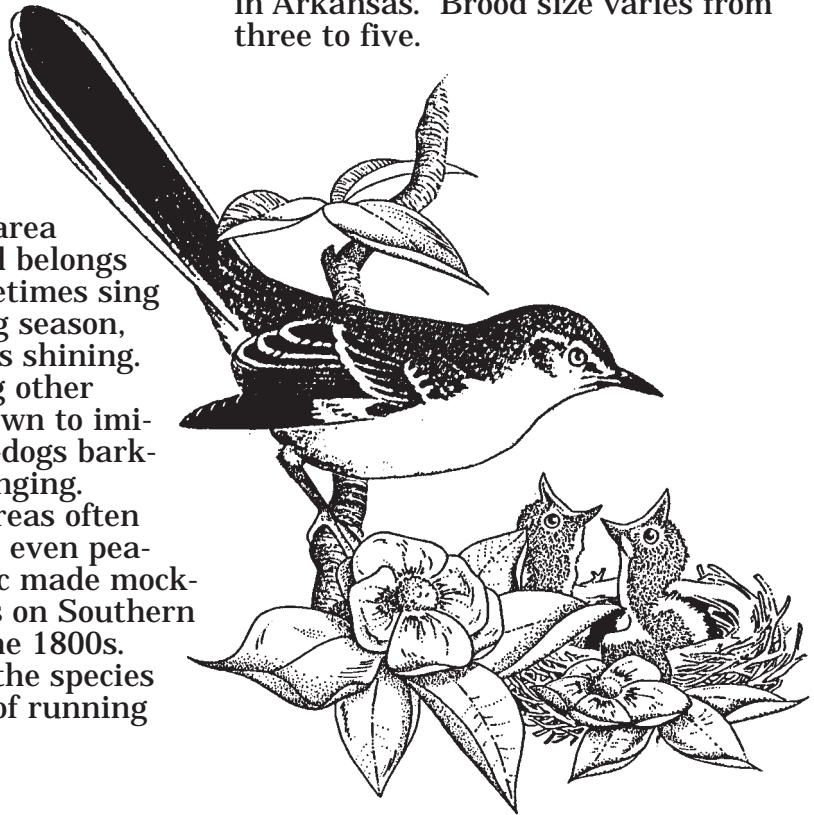
Another trait unique to the species is the mockingbird's habit of running

across a lawn, stopping every few feet and raising its wings in a herky-jerky fashion, flashing its white wing patches. Scientists are unsure of the purpose of this behavior, but most agree it has some advantageous function. Some ornithologists claim this is done to startle insects into moving, making them easy prey.

Insects are an important part of the mockingbird's diet, but fruits and seeds are also heavily used. Sliced apples and oranges, suet and raisins will attract mockingbirds to winter feeders.

### **Reproduction**

Mockers are prolific birds, raising two and occasionally three broods annually in Arkansas. Brood size varies from three to five.



Nesting begins as early as late March and lasts through July. The nest, constructed of small sticks and roots, is lined with grasses and other soft materials. It's usually built from three to five feet off the ground in dense shrubbery. The eggs are greenish-blue spotted with rusty red.

When eggs or young are in the nest, a pair of mockingbirds will vigorously defend their territory against all intruders, including dogs, cats and humans.

### **Management**

The mockingbird has benefited greatly from man's clearing and settling of forested America. Fortunately, landscaping and beautification efforts done by property owners create mockingbird habitat. It almost never

involves sacrifice to improve your yard for mockingbirds.

If you want a pair of mockers on your property, all that's necessary is to plant a few thick-foliaged ornamentals such as holly or privet, and keep your yard mowed.

### **Importance**

Humans tend to judge wildlife species in terms of their economic or recreational significance. Measured in these terms, the mockingbird doesn't rank very high.

But anyone who has heard a mockingbird go through his repertoire of calls on a soft summer night, or has been fearlessly attacked when coming too close to a mockingbird's nest, would never agree that the mockingbird has nothing to contribute to the quality of our lives.



### **Arkansas Game & Fish Commission**

2 Natural Resources Drive  
Little Rock, Arkansas 72205

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