



House Finch ©Birdfreak.com

## Birds of Villages of Town Center

by Jade Hems

Have you ever noticed what an abundance of bird life we have in our community? Since moving to Town Center in 2004 I have kept a list of the birds I have seen, either in my garden or when walking or cycling around the neighborhood. So far I have forty-one species and the number grows every year. From Mockingbirds to Hawks to Hummingbirds to Herons, there is always something to see and hear.

Consider the Northern Mockingbird, the lively state bird of Texas. This gray and black song bird is a master musician. Not only does it sing more than one hundred-fifty different songs, it also incorporates new sounds into its song constantly, masterfully mimicking everything from a rival singing from the adjacent roof top, to neighborhood pets. Look for mockingbirds on street lights, tree tops and chimneys. They like to show off their fine voices, by selecting a prominent high perch. If you have any holly bushes in your yard, they will likely visit you often during winter as they love the bright red berries.

When you step out into the street each morning you probably see doves or pigeons of one kind or another pecking the sidewalks. The Mourning Dove, so named because of its mournful call, can be found all over the neighborhood. They have dull red legs and are brown mottled overall. If you see them in flight you will often hear a whistling sound which is not a call but is made by their wings. The Eurasian Collared-Dove has become much more common recently; this is a large gray bird with a black band across the back of its neck. The rock pigeon is taking up residence locally now too; a result of increasing urbanization. The first time I encountered this ubiquitous city bird in our neighborhood was along Town Center Boulevard in February of this year. They are not very common here yet, but for this great opportunist it is only a matter of time. Rock pigeons have an amazing array of colors from pure white to jet black and every mix of colors in between.

Finches and Sparrows are heard chirping from trees, fences and roof tops. The House Sparrow ruled the roost on my street until about two years ago when the House Finches first arrived. These little birds, with their red and brown streaks and cheerful song raised two broods locally this year and I watched the fledglings grow and squabble all summer long. Finches love thistle seeds and sunflower seeds, so if you plant a flower garden they are sure to visit. American Goldfinches will come too, especially if you hang a feeder in your yard. These pretty olive green or yellow finches with black wings and tail, are migratory and winter in the neighborhood. Another colorful bird; the bright red Northern Cardinal loves back yard feeders too. Hummingbirds will visit flower gardens in spring and fall, fueling up for their epic six-hundred mile migration across the Gulf of Mexico.

What about all those black birds that line up on the utility lines at dawn and dusk? Common Grackles are the most numerous of these, but also listen out for American Crows, Great-tailed Grackles, and European starlings.

If you go for a walk on a spring or summer morning, especially after heavy rain, you will probably see quite large white birds, foraging for insects in the grassy drainage ditches around the neighborhood. These are herons, mostly Cattle Egrets and Great Egrets. I recently saw thirty-two Cattle Egrets hunting insects in the grass along Town Center Boulevard. Other herons occasionally visit these grassy areas too. Another bird you will most likely see in the ditches is the Killdeer. This bird runs around on its long spindly legs and has two black bands around its neck. The Killdeer is a shore bird, but it has adapted well to suburban environments and is abundant during the summer months. While sitting on the bank of a drainage ditch watching a Killdeer pair a couple of summers back, I witnessed their famous threat display. When they feel threatened, (in this case probably by my presence) Killdeer will attempt to distract the predator from the nest or chicks by flying some distance away and feigning injury. It is a very dramatic and convincing act.

It is amazing what you can see on your way to the mail box or while mowing the lawn. Sharp-shinned Hawks, Cooper's Hawks, Red-tailed Hawks and Turkey Vultures all hunt in the skies above us. The Turkey Vulture is a large black bird which soars high over open areas while hunting. It has a bald red head and white on the underside of the wings. Sharp-shinned Hawks can often be seen on utility lines. Sharpie has yellow feet and legs and is streaked brown and white underneath. The hawks are not the only predators around either. Loggerhead Shrike, a black and gray predatory song bird, which hunts for insects, lizards, mice and small birds, also frequents my back yard.

I was not a bird watcher before I moved to Villages of Town Center. In fact the bird that got me started; what birders call their "trigger bird" was a Cattle Egret which perched on my back fence as I was unpacking boxes on the day we moved in. Ever since I have marveled at the diversity of bird life we have in our community. Sights like the immense flock of Snow Geese I saw on route to their arctic nesting grounds one spring morning, as I waved to my daughters boarding the school bus, and the beautiful, bright green, Monk Parakeet that visited my yard every day last winter. Will it return this year? I can't wait to find out.

Here is my list of bird sightings. If you have seen other species, or have questions or comments please email me at jadehems@yahoo.com I would love to read about your experiences with birds in our neighborhood.

- Black-bellied Whistling-Duck
- Snow Goose
- Great Egret
- Little Blue Heron
- Cattle Egret
- Yellow-crowned Night-Heron
- White Ibis
- Turkey Vulture
- Swallow-tailed Kite
- Sharp-shinned Hawk
- Cooper's Hawk
- Red-tailed Hawk
- American kestrel
- Killdeer
- Rock Pigeon
- Eurasian Collared-Dove
- White-winged Dove
- Mourning Dove
- Budgerigar
- Monk Parakeet
- Ruby-throated Hummingbird
- Scissor-tailed Flycatcher
- Loggerhead Shrike
- Blue Jay
- American Crow
- Purple Martin
- Barn Swallow
- Blue-Gray Gnatcatcher
- American Robin
- Northern Mockingbird
- European Starling
- Song Sparrow
- Northern Cardinal
- Red-winged Blackbird
- Eastern Meadowlark
- Common Grackle
- Great-tailed Grackle
- Brown-headed Cowbird
- House Finch
- American Goldfinch
- House Sparrow