

American Robin (*Turdus migratorius*)

Description

The American robin is a songbird and is a member of the thrush family. The genus name *Turdus* comes from the Latin word for thrush, while the species name *migratorius* refers to large seasonal migrations often observed in the Eastern and Midwestern U.S.

Robins are the largest, most widespread and abundant thrush in North America. They are easily recognizable and commonly seen in suburban yards, farmland, and forested area, often nesting in trees near human residences.

Robins are about 10 inches long (25 cm) and weigh about 2.7 ounces (77 grams). Males have deep grayish to dark brown upper parts with blackish heads, rufous (reddish orange) breast and belly, white crescents above and below each eye, white throats with black streaks, and yellow beaks (Figure 1). Females are similar, but paler overall, especially on the head and breast. Juveniles are somewhat similar to adults, but are distinguished by the black spotting on the breast and belly, pale spotting on the upper parts, and entirely white throat.

Figure 1. Male American robin (Karnety, USFWS)



Diet and Feeding Behavior

American robins eat primarily ground invertebrates (e.g., earthworms, insects) and fruit. The proportion of invertebrates and fruit in the diet fluctuates greatly with season and relative abundance. For example, robins consume mostly invertebrates in spring and summer, while consuming mostly fruit in fall and winter.

Robins consume fruit either hanging in trees and shrubs or on the ground, but primarily hunt invertebrates on the ground. They have a characteristic hunting style of running or hopping a few steps, stopping and then jabbing with their beak to grab a worm or insect. When they stop, they often cock their head to one side. While they appear to be listening for prey, studies have shown that they are, in fact, hunting by sight and that they are turning the head so that one eye is looking directly at the ground.

Figure 2. Robin eggs in nest (Lasiovarga)



Reproduction

American robins breed in their first year after hatching and breed annually thereafter. On average they raise two broods of chicks per year, and in some places three. Robins make a cup-style nest in trees and shrubs made of dry grasses, small twigs, and mud from worm castings (Figure 2). First nests of the season usually take 5 to 7 days to construct, though it may take up to two weeks if it is too wet or too dry. Later nest attempts can happen very quickly to take advantage of prime nesting conditions, and a new nest can be built in as little as 2 to 3 days.

Egg laying typically begins in late April or May and may continue through July for subsequent broods. The typical clutch size is 3 or 4 eggs, rarely 5. One egg is laid each day until the clutch is complete. Eggs hatch about 13 days after last egg is laid. Nestlings hatch mostly naked with yellowish translucent skin and eyes closed. They are fed

mostly small insect grubs and pieces of worms by both parents and beg with mouth wide open as parents approach the nest. Eyes open about day 4, and most feathers emerge by the time they fledge (leave the nest). Nestlings fledge when they are approximately 13 days old (range 9-16 days). For the first 10 to 15 days, fledglings are not strong flyers, so they

American Robin (*Turdus migratorius*)

stay in covered in ground vegetation while the parents follow them and provide food. At about 4 weeks of age, robin juveniles are able to live independently.

The rate of failure of nest attempts is high due to predation of eggs or nestlings or nest desertion due to disturbance or bad weather – in most places less than half of nests with eggs ultimately produce at least one fledgling.

Distribution and Habitat

American robins can be found throughout most of North America (Figure 3). While most populations of robins are migratory, some live in a relatively small range (e.g., along the Pacific coast). In the Willamette valley, robins are observed year around however, some individuals winter in California or Mexico while others summer in Alaska and Canada.

Robins are well adapted to living in human-dominated landscapes (e.g., suburban lawns, gardens, farmland), but during breeding season use a wide variety of forest, woodland, and riparian ecosystems. They hunt for ground invertebrates in lawns, gardens, pastures, and open marshlands and mudflats. They use similar ecosystems in winter, though they congregate in areas rich in fruiting trees and shrubs. At TRNWR, robins are most often found in the riparian zones along Rock Creek, Chicken Creek, the Tualatin River, and throughout the Riparian Forest area.

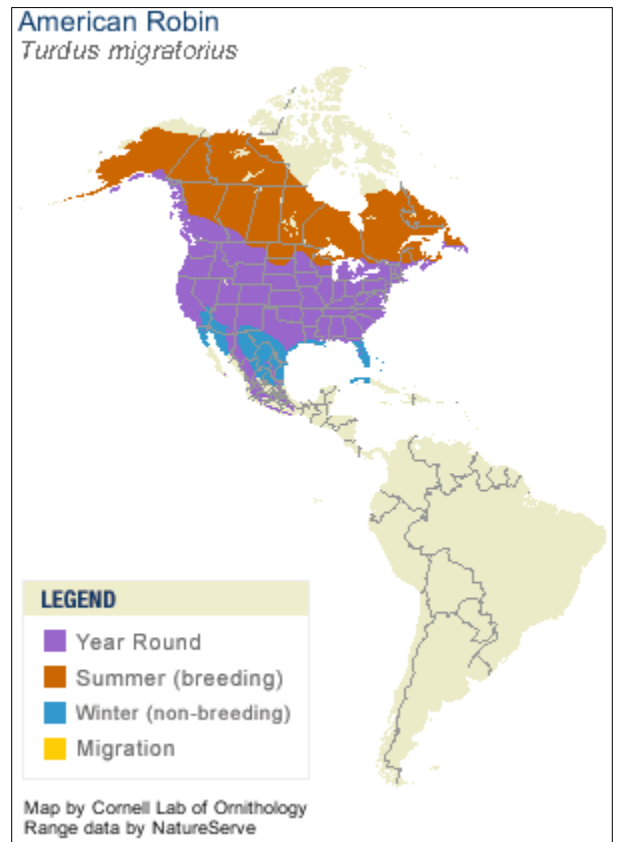
Conservation

The highest densities of breeding robins are found in the Pacific Northwest, Great Lakes region, New England, and the Canadian Maritime Provinces (Figure 4). During the Christmas Bird Count (a nationwide bird count during the week of Christmas), the highest densities of robins are found in Oregon, northern California and the southeastern U.S. Based on Breeding Bird Survey population trends, American robin populations are steady or increasing over most of their range, but populations in the Willamette valley have been slowly decreasing. The reasons are not clear. Because robins feed on ground invertebrates in lawns, gardens, and farmland, they can come in contact with pesticides used to control insects. There are many documented cases of sick and dead robins due to pesticide exposure. Pesticide exposure can also be a problem for robins in vineyards and orchards, where these birds can be a significant economic problem in fruit crops. Although deforestation, urbanization, and agricultural intensification can be major problems for many species, breeding habitat for robins is often created, rather than degraded, by these activities.

Fun Facts

- The American robin is the state bird of Connecticut, Michigan, and Wisconsin.
- To raise one brood of robins to fledging, the parents need to bring a total of about 3.2 pounds (1.45 kilograms) of invertebrate food to the nestlings over the approximately two week period in the nest.
- The longest-living banded wild robin survived 13 years and 11 months.
- Each robin has about 2900 feathers.
- When robins consume large amounts of fermented berries, they can appear drunk and wobbly on their feet.

Figure 3. American Robin range map



American Robin (*Turdus migratorius*)

Resources

Ehrlich, P. R., D. S. Dobkin, and D. Wheye. 1988. *The Birder's Handbook: A Field Guide to the Natural History of North American Birds*. Simon and Schuster, Inc., New York, NY.

Gough, G.A., Sauer, J.R., Iliff, M. *Patuxent Bird Identification Infocenter*. 1998. Version 97.1. Patuxent Wildlife Research Center, Laurel, MD. <http://www.mbr-pwrc.usgs.gov/id/framlst/infocenter.html>.

Gruson, E. S. 1972. *Words for Birds: A Lexicon of North American Birds with Biological Notes*. Quadrangle Books, Inc., New York, NY.

Sallabanks, R. and F. C. James. 1999. American Robin (*Turdus migratorius*). In *The Birds of North America*, No. 462 (A. Poole and F. Gill, eds.) The Birds of North America, Inc., Philadelphia, PA.

Robin facts by Annenberg Learner at http://www.learner.org/jnorth/tm/robin/fact_page.html.

Sauer, J. R., J. E. Hines, J. E. Fallon, K. L. Pardieck, D. J. Ziolkowski, Jr., and W. A. Link. 2014. *The North American Breeding Bird Survey, Results and Analysis 1966 - 2013. Version 01.30.2015* USGS Patuxent Wildlife Research Center, Laurel, MD.