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A Pocket Guide to *Common Kansas Backyard Birds*

By Chuck Otte and Bob Gress

Photos by Bob Gress, Judd Patterson and David Seibel

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American Goldfinches
©Judd Patterson

Cover Photo: American Goldfinch
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Introduction

***K**ansas is blessed with a rich history and diversity of avifauna. As of the publication of this guide, 475 species have been documented in Kansas. Because of this diversity, we have many species of birds that can be routinely seen in our yards, neighborhoods and parks. The species described in this guide are only a fraction of the Kansas bird list, but they are birds commonly seen across much of the state on a regular basis. By providing food, water and appropriate landscaping, and with a minimal amount of time, effort and expense, you and your family can enjoy these common backyard birds.*

When learning to identify birds try to notice everything about the bird. Notice how it looks as well as how it behaves. In addition to its colors and its color patterns, was it eating insects, seeds or berries? How did it fly? Did it walk or hop? Beyond the joy of identifying a bird is the joy of really watching the bird and learning about it as an individual.

Trying to match color and determining size are common pitfalls for beginning birdwatchers, also known as birders. Color variations can be caused by diet, weather, lighting, time of year and natural genetic variation. Rather than spending a lot of time

focusing on whether the orange of a robin's breast matches the photo or illustration in the bird book, look for the general pattern of coloration. If the wings are darker than the back, is that reflected in the illustrations? Are there light and dark wing patches in the proper locations as shown in the guide? Our eyes are powerful instruments and the ability to see rich colors often overwhelms the brain so that we lose focus on the entire bird.

Sizes listed in this guide and other guides are averages. Some species show little variation and all will be close to average. Other species may have large deviations from average. Again, nutrition and genetic variation can impact the size of a bird. Instead of trying to guess if the bird is 5 inches long or 6 inches long, compare to other birds present whenever possible.

Use all of the resources you have available to help identify birds. Sound is useful and sometimes essential for species that look similar. You will often hear birds long before you see them. There are many good sound resources available. The Cornell Lab of Ornithology and Xeno-Canto have wonderful websites with sounds of birds from all over the world. Bird checklists for all 105 Kansas counties are available on line at the Kansas Birds website. These lists are updated regularly and will help you know whether a species has been seen in your county. There are also many good bird books available to help you learn more about birds. Please see the References

section for websites and books that will help you become a better birder.

Backyard feeding stations may be simple and consist of one hanging feeder filled with mixed seed. To attract more birds, we encourage having a diversity of seeds and feeders. A ground feeder with millet will attract many sparrows. A hanging feeder for suet will attract woodpeckers and nuthatches. A tube feeder with thistle seed is favored by goldfinches and siskins. Feeders to provide sugar water are a draw for not only hummingbirds, but orioles as well. Bird baths are a great way to attract many species of birds that aren't seed eaters. Water can be more attractive than food, especially in dry weather or in winter. A bird bath heater can keep the water free of ice. Bath activity can be a delight to watch on a cold winter day.

Landscaping can greatly enhance the attractiveness of your backyard to birds. There are many resources in every community to help select bird friendly landscaping. Contact local nurseries, Master Gardeners or your local County Extension Office for advice on suitable plant material. A series of Backyard Birding Guides is available on the web. They include recommendations for plants suitable for Kansas birds in general as well as those plants which attract hummingbirds (see References section).

There are many individuals and organizations across the state that can provide contact with other birders. The Kansas

Ornithological Society and local Audubon chapters welcome birders of all levels and can be a great resource.

The most important part of birdwatching is to have fun. It doesn't matter if you can't identify every bird as long as you are enjoying them. The purpose of this guide is to help you learn more about some of our wild avian neighbors. Keep this guide handy and enjoy our common backyard birds.

Northern Cardinal *© Bob Gress*

This guide is easy to use. It is arranged in taxonomic order as described by the American Ornithologists' Union. Each page starts with the common name and scientific name of the species. Following that is a listing of the average length (L) and wingspan (WS) of each species. There is a brief description followed by a listing of the occurrence of each species in Kansas, both by season and location. The occurrence information is based on data from Birds of Kansas, 2011, Thompson, et al.

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■ *Turkey Vulture*

Turkey Vulture

Cathartes aura

L: 27″ **WS:** 68″

Description: Adult Turkey Vultures are distinctive. Their plumage is brownish to black and the featherless head is red. They take to the wing whenever wind speeds or thermals allow them effortless soaring flight. In the air, you can see the silvery flight feathers on the undersides of the wings, contrasting with the darker leading edge of the wing and the fairly long, silvery-black tail. Immature birds have black heads until late in the fall or early winter. Vultures frequently gather at night in large, communal roosts. They are also seen in large, soaring groups known as "kettles."

Occurrence: Turkey Vultures are found across the state and are low-density nesters. They feed on carrion and migrate south in the fall, returning in late winter. Once thought to be a bird of open areas, in recent years their numbers have been increasing in many towns across the state.

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■ *Mississippi Kite*

Mississippi Kite

Ictinia mississippiensis

L: 14″ **WS:** 32″

Description: The Mississippi Kite is a crow-sized raptor commonly found in towns. They have an overall gray appearance with the head being lighter gray, the body darker gray and the wing tips and tail appearing black. Adult males have distinctive white wing patches on the trailing edge of the wing. They are skilled aerialists, catching insects in flight, and will become gregarious, especially in late summer before migration.

Occurrence: Mississippi Kites used to be restricted to southwest and central Kansas. In recent decades, they have expanded their range north and east into the state. They are a summer resident and nesting species primarily south of I-70, becoming less common in eastern Kansas and north of I-70.

Sharp-shinned Hawk/ Cooper's Hawk

Accipiter striatus/
Accipiter cooperii

L: 12″/17″ **WS:** 24″/34″

Description: These two closely-related species have similar markings. Both adults have a reddish-barred chest, with a bluish-gray back. The smaller Sharp-shinned Hawk tends to have a more squared-off tail, while the Cooper's Hawk tail is usually rounder and longer. Females are noticeably larger than males in both species. In flight, the head of the Sharp-shinned Hawk is small and barely projects beyond the leading edge of the wings. The Cooper's Hawk head is larger and projects well beyond the leading edge of the wing.

© David Seibel

■ *Sharp-shinned Hawk*

© David Seibel

■ *Cooper's Hawk*

Occurrence: Both hawks are found across the state in the winter. The Cooper's Hawk is a low-density nester in the eastern two-thirds of the state. While they have a preference for woodlands, both can be found in towns during the winter, often snatching smaller birds from bird feeders.

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■ *Red-tailed Hawk*

Red-tailed Hawk

Buteo jamaicensis

L: 20″ **WS:** 49″

Descriptions: The Red-tailed Hawk may be the most common large raptor in Kansas. It can also be one of the most confusing hawks to identify as there are many subspecies and plumage variations. Most nesting birds have the distinctive red tail. They have a generally brownish coloration, frequently with white flecking on the back and a belt of dark spots across the chest. In flight, summer adults show the distinctive red tail. Immature birds show narrow black bands on the tail.

Occurrence: This year-round resident is a nesting species across the state. This hawk is commonly found outside urban areas, but occurs regularly in cities and towns and may be seen soaring over backyards. Winter numbers increase when supplemented by nesting populations from the north.

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■ *Killdeer*

Killdeer

Charadrius vociferus

L: 10.5″ **WS:** 24″

Description: This plover is a well-known resident of not only agricultural fields, but also of large expanses of open areas in cities and towns. It has a white belly, brownish back and distinctive orangish rump in flight. It has two dark bands across the lower throat and upper chest. Its distinctive call often repeats its name *"kill-deer."* Its nest is a small scrape of gravel or pebbles and the fuzzy young are mobile shortly after hatching. If you approach too close to its nest or young, adult Killdeer often feign a broken wing and attempt to draw you away from the nest or young.

Occurrence: Killdeer nest across Kansas. They migrate south short distances and are usually absent from the state from late December through early February. While Killdeer are considered a shorebird, they are often found far from water.

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■ *Rock Pigeon*

Rock Pigeon

Columba livia

L: 12.5″ **WS:** 28″

Description: Rock Pigeons were introduced into Kansas by settlers in the mid-19th century and quickly became feral and established, especially in towns. Rock Pigeons can exhibit a variety of plumages, but often have a grayish back with black bars on the wings, a glossy green neck and throat and a gray head. Mixed plumages in flocks range from dark to almost pure white.

Occurrence: Rock Pigeons are found statewide throughout the year, often in large flocks. They proliferate where there is adequate food including human trash, spilled grain and bird feeders. They can become a nuisance in urban areas or around livestock feeding facilities.

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■ *Eurasian Collared-Dove*

Eurasian Collared-Dove

Streptopelia decaocto

L: 13″ **WS:** 22″

Description: Eurasian Collared-Doves are larger and chunkier than Mourning Doves. They are pale gray with darker wingtips, broad square tails and distinctive black collars on the back of their necks. The ends of their tails have distinctive white markings visible in flight and while landing.

Occurrence: One of our more recent arrivals, Eurasian Collared-Doves were first seen in Kansas in 1996. Since then, they have spread across the state and nest in most counties. They are present year-round, most often in urban areas, but are becoming more common in rural areas near farmsteads.

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■ *Mourning Dove*

Mourning Dove

Zenaida macroura

L: 12″ **WS:** 18″

Description: This slender dove has a long pointed tail. It is generally grayish-brown with black spots on the wings. In flight, the long, tapered tail is edged in white and black. Its cooing call is quickly recognized by most Kansans.

Occurrence: The Mourning Dove breeds in all Kansas counties. It builds a flimsy nest of twigs. Incubation lasts approximately two weeks and young are able to fly at 12 to 14 days old. While it is found throughout the year, it is less common in the winter.

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■ *Yellow-billed Cuckoo*

Yellow-billed Cuckoo

Coccyzus americanus

L: 12″ **WS:** 18″

Description: Yellow-billed Cuckoos are long, slender birds. They are inconspicuous except for their distinctive calls. The head, back and tail are grayish-brown. The wings are a deep rufous color. The throat, breast and belly are white and the underside of the tail has large, white spots. Vocalizations include a strong *"ku-ku-ku-ku-kowl-kowlp"* of varying length, an almost clock-like *"tok-tok-tok"* and simple cooing sounds.

Occurrence: The Yellow-billed Cuckoo was called a "rain crow" by early settlers. It is a summer resident and nesting species across Kansas, but is more common in eastern Kansas. It frequents any area with deep undergrowth including wooded areas and overgrown yards.

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■ *Eastern Screech-Owl*

Eastern Screech-Owl

Megascops asio

L: 8.5″ **WS:** 20″

Description: Our smallest common owl, the Eastern Screech-Owl has two color forms. The more common form has grayish-brown tones with striping on the breast and belly. The other form, called the red morph, has rusty-rufous tones. The short ear tufts on the head can be held erect, or laid down, but have nothing to do with their ears. Their whinnying calls are heard from dusk to dawn. They nest in tree cavities, but can be attracted to backyard nest boxes.

Occurrence: They are found year-round across the state, becoming less common in the west. They frequent wooded areas and are common in urban areas.

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■ *Great Horned Owl*

Great Horned Owl

Bubo virginianus

L: 22´´ **WS:** 44´´

Description: Our largest common owl, Great Horned Owls are bulky, with squared-off heads and large ear tufts. They are mostly brown with dense barring on the breast and belly. The face is buffy orange around large, yellow eyes. At dusk, they are often seen in silhouette perched on trees, roofs, chimneys, utility poles and fence posts. The call is a classic "hoo-hoo-hoo" and is the reason they are locally called hoot owls. They are the most frequently heard owls by Kansans.

Occurrence: They are found year-round across the state. One of our earliest nesting species, Great Horned Owls often lay eggs by late January.

© Judd Patterson

■ *Common Nighthawk*

Common Nighthawk

Chordeiles minor

L: 9.5″ **WS:** 24″

Description: Common Nighthawks are more often seen in flight than perched. They are a cryptic blend of browns, grays and blacks. In their evening flights, they are distinctive with their *"peent"* calls, stuttering wing beats and a white bar near the end of each wing. In late summer, they can sometimes be seen perched on fence posts in the country.

Occurrence: Common Nighthawks are a summer nesting species across Kansas. Their nest is a simple scrape in gravelly areas. They have been known to nest on flat, gravelly roofs of buildings.

Chimney Swift

Chaetura pelagica

© David Seibel

■ *Chimney Swift*

L: 5.25″ **WS:** 14″

Description: The Chimney Swift has been described as a "cigar with wings." They appear black as they are usually silhouetted against the sky, but closer examination reveals dark browns and grays in their plumage. The long, pointed wings, rapid and acrobatic flight and constant chattering vocalizations make this species easily identifiable.

© Bob Gress

Occurrence: Chimney Swifts are found across Kansas in the summer and early fall, nesting wherever they find suitable chimneys or an occasional hollow tree, cave or constructed nesting site. During fall migration, Chimney Swifts gather in large communal roosts in large chimneys. Swifts at these roosts can number in the hundreds. It's a spectacular sight to watch them spiral down into chimneys at sunset.

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■ *Ruby-throated Hummingbird*

Ruby-throated Hummingbird

Archilochus colubris

L: 3.75″ **WS:** 4.5″

Description: The Ruby-throated Hummingbird is the hummingbird most Kansans encounter. Males and females have metallic-green plumage on the back and top of the head. The female's throat is white, occasionally with fine, dark streaking. The male's throat, or gorget, often appears black unless it catches the sunlight showing the brilliant scarlet coloring. Both male and female can have varying amounts of dark or buffy coloration on the belly and sides. Immature males resemble adult females.

Occurrence: The Ruby-throated Hummingbird is a summer resident and nesting species in the eastern half of the state. It is a common to rare migrant, both spring and late summer, in the rest of the state. Populations peak in August and September when southbound migrants join the breeding population.

© Judd Patterson

■ *Red-headed Woodpecker*

Red-headed Woodpecker

Melanerpes erythrocephalus

L: 9.25: **WS:** 17″

Description: The Red-headed Woodpecker has a red head, white belly, black upper back, white lower back and large, white wing patches. It is difficult to confuse with any other species. Males and females are identical, but immature birds have a brownish head until their second year.

Occurrence: Red-headed Woodpeckers nest across the state and are commonly seen in open, rural areas flying from utility pole to utility pole. They are primarily a summer resident in the west where they feed on insects. They can be found year-round in the east if there is a good acorn supply. If the acorn crop is small, they move out of Kansas for the winter.

© Judd Patterson

■ *Red-bellied Woodpecker*

© Judd Patterson

Red-bellied Woodpecker

Melanerpes carolinus

L: 9.25″ **WS:** 16″

Description: The Red-bellied Woodpecker is a chunky woodpecker with a distinctive black and white striped back. The back and top of the male's head is red. The female's head is buffy and the nape is red. The throat and belly are buffy and if close examination is possible, the name-sake reddish cast of the belly can be seen.

Occurrence: The Red-bellied Woodpecker is found year-round in all but the extreme southwest corner of the state. It's a regular nesting species in wooded areas of the eastern two-thirds of the state. This woodpecker is a regular visitor to backyard bird feeders, especially in the winter.

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Downy Woodpecker/ Hairy Woodpecker

Picoides pubescens/
Picoides villosus

© Judd Patterson

■ *Downy Woodpecker*

L: 6.75″/9.25″ **WS:** 12″/15″

Description: Downy and Hairy woodpeckers are nearly identical in plumage, differing in overall size and bill size. The upper back is white, the lower back and wings are black and white striped and the belly is white. The male has a small red spot on the back of the head, while the female does not. The bill of the Downy is small, while the Hairy has a much larger, more typical woodpecker bill.

© David Seibel

■ *Hairy Woodpecker*

Occurrence: Both species are found year-round across the state. The more numerous Downy is a regular breeder across most of the state and is often seen feeding in weedy patches with wintering sparrows. The Hairy, preferring denser stands of timber, is a regular breeder in the eastern half of the state and in western Kansas in mature stands of timber. The Downy is more likely to visit bird feeders.

Northern Flicker

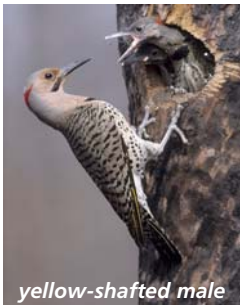
Colaptes auratus

© Bob Gress

■ *Northern Flicker*

L: 12.5″ **WS:** 20″

Description: The Northern Flicker has a brown and black striped back, a white belly with black spotting and a distinctive black crescent at the top of the chest. Two forms of this woodpecker exist. The yellow-shafted form is found in the east and the red-shafted form in the west. The yellow-shafted form has a brown face. The red-shafted has a gray face. Both have a gray nape. In flight, the underwing flight feathers are yellowish for the yellow-shafted and reddish for the red-shafted. Male yellow-shafteds have a black moustache stripe, but it is red in the red-shafted race. Hybridization is common between the races leading to individuals that are a combination between the two.



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Occurrence: This large woodpecker is found year-round and nests statewide. It is often seen feeding on the ground on ants. Like most woodpeckers, it also feeds on a variety of vegetable material.

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■ *Eastern Phoebe*

Eastern Phoebe

Sayornis phoebe

L: 7″ **WS:** 10.5″

Description: This small, unobtrusive flycatcher is easily overlooked. It has a grayish-black head, back and tail with a whitish belly and light gray breast. Juveniles and fall adults can have a distinctive yellowish wash on their belly. The perched bird has a distinctive habitat of flicking its tail downward. With its *"fee-be"* call it is often heard before seen.

Occurrence: The Eastern Phoebe is a nesting species across the eastern two-thirds of Kansas, becoming less common in the western third. Its mud nest is often located under bridges or under the eaves of buildings. It's one of our first flycatchers to arrive in early spring and one of the last to leave in the fall.

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■ *Western Kingbird*

Western Kingbird

Tyrannus verticalis

L: 8.75″ **WS:** 15″

Description: This distinctive flycatcher perches on wires and small limbs and then darts out in pursuit of flying insects. The Western Kingbird has a gray head and back, yellowish belly, black tail and white throat. It is extremely chatty and scolding, especially if you approach close to its nest or young.

Occurrence: The Western Kingbird is a summer resident across the state, nesting in all but a few southeastern counties. It seems to prefer electrical wires for feeding perches. It sometimes feeds around the lights at sports complexes and nests around electrical transformers.

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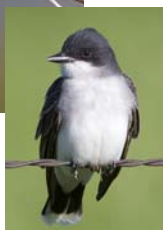

© David Seibel

■ *Eastern Kingbird*

Eastern Kingbird

Tyrannus tyrannus

L: 8.5″ **WS**: 15″

Description: Nearly identical in size to the Western Kingbird, the Eastern Kingbird has a black head, dark gray back and tail and white breast and belly. The upper breast often has a light gray appearance. The black tail has a distinctive, white tip.

Occurrence: The Eastern Kingbird nests across most of the state, although less commonly in western Kansas. Like the Western Kingbird, the Eastern Kingbird swoops from perches after flying insects. It can often be found foraging over crop fields. In late summer, the Eastern Kingbird starts to consume more berries, showing a strong preference for pokeberry and rough-leaved dogwood fruit. In August, large flocks can be found feeding in brushy thickets.

Warbling Vireo

Vireo gilvus

© David Seibel

■ *Warbling Vireo*

L: 5.5″ **WS:** 8.5″

Description: Small, rather unimpressive looking birds, Warbling Vireos are more often heard than seen. The bird is grayish to olive gray and the wings are somewhat darker. Its throat, breast and belly are whitish. It has a white stripe running from the base of the beak through the eye. As its name implies, Warbling Vireos sing with a long, melodious run-on warble. They often sing from the top of large trees making them difficult to observe. They sing even on the hottest days of summer.

Occurrence: Warbling Vireos are a summertime species across the state, nesting wherever adequate large trees are found. They are fond of large cottonwood trees for singing perches and nesting sites.

© David Seibel

■ *Red-eyed Vireo*

Red-eyed Vireo

Vireo olivaceus

L: 6″ **WS:** 10″

Description: The Red-eyed Vireo is a small bird found in the tops of large trees. The generally olive bird has a distinctively marked head with a blue-gray crown. The white stripe through the upper part of the eye is bordered top and bottom by thin black stripes. When agitated, the feathers on the crown can be held up in crest-like fashion. The call of the Red-eyed Vireo is a series of short, robin-like phrases.

Occurrence: The Red-eyed Vireo is found statewide during migration. It nests in the eastern half of the state in mature woodlands and wooded urban areas.

© Judd Patterson

■ *Blue Jay*

Blue Jay

Cyanocitta cristata

L: 11″ **WS:** 16″

Description: Blue Jays are distinctive and well known. The crest, back, wings and tail are blue with white patches on the wings and tail. The breast, belly and throat are pale gray to white. A black necklace separates the throat from the breast. Their call is a distinctive, strong *"jay–jay–jay"* or sometimes just a long, screechy *"jaaaaay."*

Occurrence: Blue Jays nest in most counties and are most numerous in the eastern part of the state. While present year-round, large flocks of Blue Jays migrate through the state every spring and fall.

© Bob Gress

■ *American Crow*

American Crow

Corvus brachyrhyncos

L: 17.5″ **WS:** 39″

Description: The large, black American Crow is well known to most Kansans. It has solid black plumage and a long heavy bill. Its call is the typical *"caw–caw-caw."*

Occurrence: The American Crow is a year-round resident across the state. It nests in most counties, but is less common in western Kansas. American Crows will gather in large winter communal roosts sometimes numbering into the tens of thousands of birds. If these roosts occur around urban areas they can be troublesome.

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■ *Purple Martin*

Purple Martin

Progne subis

L: 8″ **WS:** 18″

Description: The largest member of the swallow family in Kansas, the adult male Purple Martin is entirely glossy purplish-blue. Females and juveniles are dark above, grayish below. They have a strong flight with short glides and rapid wing beats.

Occurrence: Purple Martins are common summer residents and nesting species in eastern Kansas. They become less common in western Kansas and are absent from extreme west central Kansas. Purple Martins are colonial and rely almost entirely on man-made nest structures. Purple Martins prefer open areas and require unobstructed approaches to their houses. While often cited as a good control for mosquitoes, contrary to popular belief, Purple Martins actually eat few of them.

© Bob Gress

■ *Barn Swallow*

Barn Swallow

Hirundo rustica

L: 6.75″ **WS:** 15″

Description: A long, deeply-forked tail distinguishes the Barn Swallow from other Kansas swallow species. Both sexes have a blue-black back and head with a rusty throat. Males have rusty-orange bellies while females have a buffy, white belly.

Occurrence: Barn Swallows are summer residents across the state and nest in every county. They are associated with humans and nearly always nest on manmade structures. Their well-known mud nests, found on the side of a building, often over outdoor lights or doorways, are frequently considered a nuisance. They are beneficial birds and eat many insects.

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■ *Black-capped Chickadee*

© David Seibel

■ *Carolina Chickadee*

Black-capped Chickadee/Carolina Chickadee

Poecile atricapilla / Poecile carolinensis

L: 4.75″/5.25″ **WS:** 7.5″/8″

Description: These two closely-related and nearly identical species are well known to backyard birders. Both have a black cap and throat, white face, gray back and tail and a grayish-white breast and belly. The edges of the secondaries (wing feathers) are bright white on the Black-capped Chickadee, but a subdued gray on the Carolina. The best way to separate these two species is by call. The *"chickadee–dee–dee-dee"* call of the Carolina is higher and faster. The pure whistled song of the Carolina is *"fee-bee fee-bay"* while the Black-capped is a simpler *"feebee."*

Occurrence: Carolinas are restricted to the southern tier or two of counties in central and southeastern Kansas. The Black-capped occurs over most of the rest of the state. There is a slight overlap zone. They are year-round, nesting residents.

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■ *Tufted Titmouse*

Tufted Titmouse

Baeolophus bicolor

L: 6.5″ **WS:** 9.5″

Description: The Tufted Titmouse is a small, gray bird with a distinctive crest. The face is pale gray to white. The throat, breast and belly are white with pale orange flanks. The black eye stands out against the white face. Its common call is a clear, whistled *"peter-peter-peter."*

Occurrence: The Tufted Titmouse is a year-round resident in the eastern half of the state, nesting across much of its range. In recent years, its range appears to be slowly expanding westward as mature riparian timber develops across the state. It is often seen at backyard bird feeders.

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White-breasted Nuthatch

Sitta carolinensis

© Bob Gress

■ *White-breasted Nuthatch*

L: 5.75″ **WS:** 11″

Description: This is a small, chunky bird closely associated with trees. It has a dark gray to black cap and nape. The face and throat are white. The back and wings are dark gray and the belly is a lighter gray. They have a rusty lower belly. Nuthatches commonly spend time foraging for insects on the trunks of trees while spiraling downward, headfirst, probing in the bark for morsels of food. They make a distinctive nasal "honking" sound as they move about.

Occurrence: White-breasted Nuthatches are year-round residents in mature timber across most of Kansas. They primarily nest in the eastern three-fourths of the state. While principally insect feeders, they are frequent visitors to backyard feeders enjoying suet and sunflower seeds.

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■ Carolina Wren

Carolina Wren

Thryothorus ludovicianus

L: 5.5″ **WS:** 7.5″

Description: The Carolina Wren is a large, chunky wren. It is rusty-brown on the head, back and tail with a buffy color on the breast and belly. The throat is white and it has a broad, white eye line. Its song is variable and often includes a long, buzzy chatter.

Occurrence: Carolina Wrens can be found across much of the state, but regularly occur in the eastern two-thirds and nests in the eastern half. While generally considered a year-round resident, populations can be low in harsh winters. It is usually associated with denser stands of timber than House Wrens. This species seems to be slowly expanding its range west in Kansas.

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■ *House Wren*

House Wren

Troglodytes aedon

L: 4.75″ **WS:** 6″

Description: This small, brown bird has fine, black barring on the wings and tail. House Wrens are busy little birds, never sitting still long and frequently holding their tails cocked up. Their song is a commonly heard series of rolling rattles and trills in backyards across the state.

Occurrence: House Wrens are summer residents, probably nesting in all Kansas counties. They readily use human-provided houses, but also nest in bizarre and unpredictable locations of accumulated human belongings.

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■ *Eastern Bluebird*

Eastern Bluebird

Sialia sialis

L: 7″ **WS:** 13″

Description: The male is distinctive with its deep blue head, back and wings, deep orange throat, sides of neck and flanks and white belly. Females are similar but drabber with the deep blue replaced by grayish blue. Juveniles often have little to no blue coloration and brown spotting on the breast.

Occurrence: Eastern Bluebirds are found year-round statewide except in the northwestern corner of the state where they are generally considered a summer resident only. They nest statewide wherever they find suitable cavities, either in abandoned woodpecker nesting sites or manmade bird houses. They prefer open areas with a mix of grass or croplands and trees.

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■ *American Robin*

American Robin

Turdus migratorius

L: 10″ **WS:** 17″

Description: The American Robin is the classic lawn bird of Kansas. It has an orange breast, grayish-black back and a black head and throat. It has an incomplete white eye ring. Females are slightly paler and juveniles are similar with heavy spotting in the chest and belly. Those seen during winter have nested in Canada or the northern parts of the U.S.

Occurrence: The American Robin is a year-round resident across the state, becoming less common in the west in the winter. They sometimes form large winter flocks in thick stands of junipers.

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■ *Gray Catbird*

Gray Catbird

Dumetella carolinensis

L: 8.5″ **WS:** 11″

Description: Gray Catbirds are slightly smaller and more slender than a robin. Overall, they are a uniform gray with a black cap, black tail and deep rufous under the tail. One of three common ″mimics″ in Kansas (along with the Northern Mockingbird and Brown Thrasher), their call can be an ever-changing series of notes. They also have a distinctive catlike *″mew″* call.

Occurrence: Catbirds are migrants in the western one-fourth of the state and a nesting species in the rest of the state. They can be found in thickets along streams and woodland edges. They are fairly common around farmsteads and urban residences. They skulk around low, dense shrubbery where they forage on insects and small fruits.

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■ *Northern Mockingbird*

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Northern Mockingbird

Mimus polyglottos

L: 10″ **WS:** 14″

Description: The Northern Mockingbird is a gray bird with a long tail and a yellow eye. In flight, it has distinctive white wing patches. A well-documented mimic, mockingbirds will copy other bird calls as well as mechanical and electronic sounds. With extensive repertoires, mockingbirds repeat a phrase at length before switching to another call. They often sing from the tops of shrubs and trees and on moonlit nights.

Occurrence: Northern Mockingbirds are found year-round across most of the state except in the northwest corner where they are primarily found in the summer. They nest statewide, but more regularly in the eastern half of the state.

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■ *Brown Thrasher*

Brown Thrasher

Toxostoma rufum

L: 11.5″ **WS:** 13″

Description: Brown Thrashers are a rich brown from the top of the head down the back to the wings and tail. The underside of the bird is boldly striped with brown to black stripes. The largest of our mimics, Brown Thrashers tend to repeat a variety of phrases twice with pauses between phrases. They often feed on the ground and can be heard scratching in the leaves under bushes and trees looking for food.

Occurrence: Brown Thrashers are a common summer resident and nesting species across the state. Like catbirds and mockingbirds, they prefer thickets and bushes and are regularly found in parks and residential yards.

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■ *European Starling*

European Starling

Sturnus vulgaris

L: 8.5″ **WS:** 16″

Description: European Starlings are short-bodied birds with a square tail and stubby triangular wings. Their plumage is complex. Adults in breeding plumage are an iridescent greenish-black with a yellow bill. In non-breeding plumage, they are heavily and intricately spotted and usually have a black bill. Juveniles are a drab, gray-brown overall. Their call can include imitations of many other birds, sliding whistle calls and even mechanical sounds.

Occurrence: European Starlings are year-round residents across the state and nest in every county. They are not native to North America and weren't part of our avifauna until the mid- to late-1930s.

Cedar Waxwing

Bombycilla cedrorum

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■ *Cedar Waxwing*

L: 7.25″ **WS:** 12″

Description: Cedar Waxwings have a smooth, sleek appearance. Most of the body is tannish-brown. They have a distinctive crest and a black mask. The wings and tail are gray and the tip of the tail is a bright yellow. Cedar Waxwings are social birds and form winter flocks. Primarily fruit and seed eaters, they also catch flying insects in the summer.

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Occurrence: Cedar Waxwings are found statewide. They are primarily a winter resident in the western half of the state and year-round in the eastern half. Because nesting birds are quiet it was once thought this bird was a rare nester in Kansas. In the past few decades it has been found to nest more regularly than once thought.

Yellow Warbler

Setophaga petechia

L: 5″ **WS:** 8″

Description: Yellow Warblers are bright yellow birds with the back, wings and tail darker with hints of greenish-black. Females have unmarked breasts while males have varying degrees of red striping on the breast. The bill is short, sharp and black and the black eye stands out boldly on the yellow face.

Occurrence: Yellow Warblers are found in migration across the state. They nest in the east and less commonly in the west. Nests are built in many species of trees, but prefer willows near small streams.

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■ *Yellow Warbler*

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■ *Yellow-rumped Warbler*

Yellow-rumped Warbler

Setophaga coronata

L: 5.5″ **WS:** 9.25″

Description: Yellow-rumped Warblers were once separated into two species: Myrtle Warbler and Audubon's Warbler. They are well-marked with browns and blacks (winter) or grays and blacks (summer). The breast is streaked and there is usually a yellow mark under the wing and a distinctive yellow rump. The Myrtle Warbler of the east has a white throat while the Audubon's of the west has a yellow throat.

Occurrence: This is the most abundant warbler in Kansas during migration and remains as a winter resident in the east. It can be abundant in any habitat with trees and shrubs. It may visit bird baths and suet feeders in the winter or be found feeding on berries and leaf buds. The berries of eastern red cedars are a favorite winter food.

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■ *Spotted Towhee*

Spotted Towhee/ Eastern Towhee

Pipilo maculatus/
Pipilo erythrophthalmus

© David Seibel

■ *Eastern Towhee*

L: 8.5″/8.5″ **WS:** 10.5″/10.5″

Description: These two species were formerly known, collectively, as the Rufous-sided Towhee. Both birds have a black head and throat (brown for females) and a black (or brown) back and tail. Their belly is white and the flank is rufous. The Spotted Towhee has white spots on the back and wings. The Eastern generally does not have spots, but has a small, white bar on the end of the wing. They will hybridize.

Occurrence: The Spotted Towhee is found statewide during migration and in winter, but rarely as a nesting species in extreme northwestern Kansas. The Eastern Towhee nests in the eastern third of the state and is a year-round resident in east and southeastern Kansas.

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■ *American Tree Sparrow*

American Tree Sparrow

Spizella arborea

L: 6.25″ **WS:** 9.5″

Description: American Tree Sparrows have brown and black coloration on the wings and back. The gray nape leads to a rufous-brown crown and usually a similar colored eye line. Two distinctive features include a single dark spot in the middle of the plain breast and a bicolored bill. The lower mandible is yellowish and the upper mandible is dark.

Occurrence: American Tree Sparrows are migrants and winter residents across Kansas. They are one of the last sparrows to arrive in the fall and one of the first to leave in the spring. They eat seeds and can be found at backyard bird feeders and almost any area that has weedy plants.

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■ *Chipping Sparrow*

Chipping Sparrow

Spizella passerina

L: 5.5″ **WS:** 8.5″

Description: This medium-sized sparrow has a plain gray breast and belly and brownish-black wings and back. The crown is brown with a white stripe above the eye and a black stripe through the eye. The throat is white to light gray. The song is a simple long trill.

Occurrence: Chipping Sparrows are abundant migrants in the western half of the state and a nesting species in the east. They nest in conifers in urban areas. In the spring, they may be seen collecting nesting material from lawns or feeding on seeds and insects. Nests are often lined with hair.

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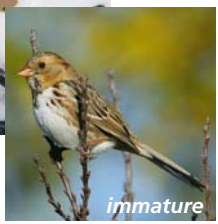

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■ *Harris's Sparrow*

Harris's Sparrow

Zonotrichia querula

L: 7.5″ **WS:** 10.5″

Description: This large sparrow has brown, black and gray striped markings on the back wings and tail. Adults have a black face, black crown and brown on the side of the head in winter, which becomes gray just prior to migration. The belly is white, sometimes with fine streaking on the flanks. Immature birds lack the black face and crown.

Occurrence: Harris's Sparrows are found statewide in migration and during the winter. The highest concentrations are found in south central Kansas, especially in snowier winters. They generally arrive in the first half of October and remain until early May. They are common visitors to backyard bird feeders.

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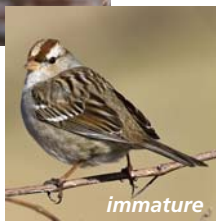

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■ *White-crowned Sparrow*

White-crowned Sparrow

Zonotrichia leucophrys

L: 7″ **WS:** 9.5″

Description: White-crowned Sparrows are large and well-named. The head is distinctly marked with bold, white and black stripes. The nape, throat, breast and belly are gray. The brown wings and back are striped with black and the rump is pale grayish-brown. The bill is pinkish-orange. Immature birds have a reddish-brown and gray striped head.

Occurrence: White-crowned Sparrows are found statewide during migration and winter. They are more common in the west and central part of the state. They can be rare in the east. While they frequent backyard bird feeders, they are more commonly found in weedy patches in the country.

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■ *Dark-eyed Junco*

Dark-eyed Junco

Junco hyemalis

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L: 6.25″ **WS:** 9.25″

Description: Once separated into several species, the different forms are now lumped together as Dark-eyed Junco. The Slate-colored form is the most common and is gray with a white belly. Females may have some brown in the wings. The Oregon form is more commonly found in western Kansas and has a distinct gray, almost black, head, with reddish-brown back, wings and flanks. Intensity of this brown color is variable. All forms have a pink bill.

Occurrence: Juncos are common visitors to Kansas bird feeders. They are found statewide in migration and through the winter and are sometimes called "Snowbirds." Like most sparrows, the Dark-eyed Junco prefers weedy, brushy areas where it can scratch on the ground looking for seeds. They arrive in October and usually depart by late April.

Northern Cardinal

Cardinalis cardinalis

© Judd Patterson

■ *Northern Cardinal*

L: 8.75″ **WS:** 12″

Description: Few birds are as instantly recognizable as the Northern Cardinal. Males are an intense scarlet, with a bold crest, black around the large, bright red bill and a slight graying in the wings. Females are more subdued with grayish browns replacing much of the red of the male, but still with a red tail, wings and tip of the crest. The female's bill is reddish-orange. Young birds have black bills.

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Occurrence: Northern Cardinals are permanent residents throughout most of Kansas. They are common nesters in the eastern two-thirds of the state.

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■ *Rose-breasted Grosbeak*

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Rose-breasted Grosbeak

Pheucticus ludovicianus

L: 8″ **WS:** 12.5″

Description: Male Rose-breasted Grosbeaks have a black head and throat, black back and tail, white rump and belly and a rosy bib on the breast. In flight, white wing patches are visible on the top and bottom of the wings. Females have fine, brown streaking on a white breast, a bold white line over the eye and a brown cheek. The back and wings are brown with faint white markings. They have large, stout bills and eat fruits, seeds and insects.

Occurrence: Rose-breasted Grosbeaks are found statewide in migration and nest in the eastern half of the state. They become rarer further west in the state. They prefer woodland areas.

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■ *Indigo Bunting*

Indigo Bunting

Passerina cyanea

L: 5.5″ **WS:** 8″

Description: Male Indigo Buntings are an intense, deep blue. Depending on the angle of the viewing light, they can appear iridescent or black. Females are plain brown, often with fine, faint streaks on the breast. Their song is rich and melodic with phrases usually repeated twice.

Occurrence: Indigo Buntings are found statewide in migration and commonly nest in the eastern half of the state. They prefer woodland edge habitat. They will come to bird baths in the summer and visit feeders soon after their arrival in the spring. They often sing from overhead utility lines next to shrubby wooded areas.

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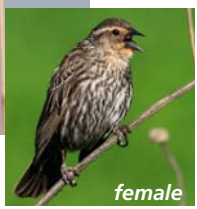

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■ *Red-winged Blackbird*

Red-winged Blackbird

Agelaius phoeniceus

L: 8.75″ **WS:** 13″

Description: Red-winged Blackbirds are aptly named. Males are black with red wing patches (shoulders) bordered with yellow. They are able to vary the amount of color they show. Females are heavily streaked in brown, rust and white, with a dark line across the side of the face through the eye.

Occurrence: Red-winged Blackbirds are found year-round across the state. They nest statewide, commonly in cattails, but also in rural weedy areas. In winter, they form large flocks. They commonly visit bird feeders especially during spring and fall migration.

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■ *Eastern Meadowlark*

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■ *Western Meadowlark*

Eastern Meadowlark/ Western Meadowlark

Sturnella magna/Sturnella neglecta

L: 9.5″/9.5″ **WS:** 14″/14.5″

Description: These two closely related species are difficult to tell apart and are best separated by call. These chunky birds have long bills, striped heads, yellow throats, a bold black V on the upper breast, yellow bellies and striped flanks. The song of the Western Meadowlark is a rich, full, descending melody often ending with a gurgling sound. The Eastern Meadowlark's song is much simpler and shorter. Both species have a variety of rattles and call notes. The Western Meadowlark is the Kansas state bird.

Occurrence: Both species are year-round residents nearly statewide. Westerns are more common in the west, nesting east to the Flint Hills. Easterns are found nesting primarily in the eastern two-thirds of the state.

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■ *Common Grackle*

Common Grackle

Quiscalus quiscula

L: 12.5″ **WS:** 17″

Description: Common Grackles are entirely dark and at a distance seem black. On closer examination, birds show a bluish iridescence to the head and a bronze iridescence on the rest of the body. They have a long, black bill, black legs and a pale, usually yellow eye.

Occurrence: Common Grackles nest statewide. They are present year-round across much of the state, becoming local in winter in the west. In colder winters, they withdraw from the northern part of the state. Common Grackles are found in a variety of habitats including yards, parks and open areas. They can be found congregating at cattle feed lots in fall and winter.

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■ *Great-tailed Grackle*

Great-tailed Grackle

Quiscalus mexicanus

L: 18″ **WS:** 23″ (females smaller)

Description: This large blackbird has a noticeably long tail. Male Great-tailed Grackles have iridescence on their body and pale eyes. Females and juveniles are brownish, and their wings, back and tail are darker than their head, throat and belly. Their song can be rather loud and harsh, often sounding more mechanical or electronic than bird-like.

Occurrence: Great-tailed Grackles have moved into the state over the past 50 years, nest statewide and are still increasing. They withdraw from the northern half of the state in the winter, but are year-round residents in the southern half. In breeding season, males can be seen strutting on grassy areas displaying their large, showy tails. They breed in loose colonies. Look for them in urban parking lots feeding on insects and food scraps.

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■ *Brown-headed Cowbird*

Brown-headed Cowbird

Molothrus ater

L: 7.5″ **WS:** 12″

Description: Male Brown-headed Cowbirds have a brown head and black body. Females are a dull, gray-brown. Both sexes have dark eyes and short, stout bills. Cowbirds have shorter tails than grackles. Cowbirds are nest parasites and lay their eggs in other species' nests, allowing the host species to raise their young. They are social birds and once the young fledge, they leave their host and join flocks of other cowbirds.

Occurrence: Brown-headed Cowbirds breed statewide. They are rare in the northern half of the state in the winter. Flocks of blackbirds often include many cowbirds.

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■ *Orchard Oriole*

Orchard Oriole

Icterus spurius

L: 7.25″ **WS:** 9.5″

Description: The male Orchard Oriole has a deep chestnut-brown body with black head, throat, back and tail. The wings are a mix of chestnut, black and white. The female is greenish-yellow with dark wings and white wingbars. Second-year males look similar to adult females, but have a black throat patch. Orchard Orioles have a loud song consisting of a burst of rapid whistled notes.

Occurrence: Orchard Orioles are a common migrant and summer nesting species statewide. As their name implies, they prefer open areas with scattered trees. Orchard Orioles are more often found in prairie areas than other oriole species. Many Orchard Orioles can be found feeding on insects in alfalfa fields in spring and late summer.

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■ *Baltimore Oriole*

Baltimore Oriole

Icterus galbula

L: 8.75″ **WS:** 11.5″

Description: Baltimore Orioles have a similar plumage pattern to Orchard Orioles except the breast, belly, rump and tail are a bright orange. Females are yellowish-orange and the head is mottled, brownish-black instead of the solid black head of the male. Both sexes have distinct wing bars.

Occurrence: Baltimore Orioles are common migrants statewide and regularly nest in all but the far western counties. Baltimore Orioles are known to feed on nectar at hummingbird and oriole feeders. They also take fruit, especially oranges, and grape jelly when provided. Their nest is a distinctive, sock-like, pendulous construction, more noticeable in the fall after leaves drop.

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■ *House Finch*

House Finch

Haemorhous mexicanus

L: 6″ **WS:** 9.5″

Description: The plump, sparrow-like, male House Finch has a reddish forehead and breast, strong brown streaking on the flanks and a streaky brownish back. Females have a grayish-brown appearance. The female's head is plain and the breast and belly are heavily streaked. The bill is short and thick.

Occurrence: House Finches are found year-round statewide, probably nesting in all counties. They seem to be more commonly found in urban areas in close proximity to people. House Finches are not native to Kansas, but moved into the state from the east and the west in the mid-20th century. They are common visitors to backyard feeders.

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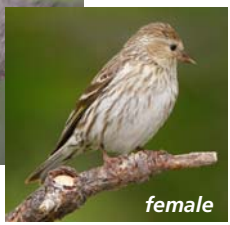

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■ *Pine Siskin*

Pine Siskin

Spinus pinus

L: 5″ **WS:** 9″

Description: The Pine Siskin is a small, delicate finch with brown streaks on a white belly, black streaks on a brown back and a thin, pointed bill. Males have yellow wing bars and yellow wing stripes. Females have a smaller yellow wing stripe. The slender nature of this bird and the fine bill separate this species from other finches.

Occurrence: Pine Siskins are irregular visitors to Kansas. Primarily a winter resident, they may be abundant one winter and virtually absent from the state the next. Occasionally, a few pairs stay in Kansas to nest. They are often found in weedy patches in open areas as well as at backyard feeders. They often join flocks of American Goldfinches.

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■ *American Goldfinch*

American Goldfinch

Spinus tristis

L: 5″ **WS:** 9″

Description: The American Goldfinch male in breeding plumage is unmistakable with its lemon-yellow feathers, black forehead, wings and tail. Nonbreeding males and females are more reserved in their plumage with browns and grays replacing much of the bright yellow of the breeding male. In breeding plumage, both sexes have pink bills. In nonbreeding plumage, they are dark. The belly and flanks never have streaking, helping to separate the goldfinch from other common Kansas finches.

Occurrence: American Goldfinches are year-round residents and nest statewide. They are one of our latest nesting species, more commonly in the eastern portion of Kansas. They frequent weed patches in open areas as well as backyard feeding stations year-round where they favor thistle seed.

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■ *House Sparrow*

House Sparrow

Passer domesticus

L: 6.25″ **WS:** 9.5″

Description: While not a true sparrow, House Sparrows have similar plumage characteristics to our native sparrows. Their plumage is marked with shades of grays, browns and blacks. Males have a black throat and upper breast.

Occurrence: A native of Eurasia, House Sparrows are not closely related to our native sparrows. They associate with humans wherever they live. Nests are big and bulky, in eaves and trees and frequently dislodged by winds. They are permanent residents, found nesting in urban areas and farmsteads statewide wherever there is adequate food. They are regular at backyard feeders. The first House Sparrows in Kansas arrived in the late 19th century as intentional introductions on the misguided hope they would help control insects. Unfortunately, insects make up little of their diet.

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List of Suggested Books:

Birds of Kansas, Thompson, et al. University Press of Kansas, 2011

The Guide to Kansas Birds and Birding Hotspots, Gress, B., & Janzen, P., University Press of Kansas, 2008

Kaufman Field Guide to Birds of North America, Kaufman, K., Houghton Mifflin, 2005

National Geographic Field Guide to Birds of North America, Dunn, J., & Alderfer, J., National Geographic, 2011

Peterson Field Guide to Birds of North America, Peterson, R. T., & Peterson, L. T., Houghton Mifflin, 2008

The Sibley Guide to Birds, Sibley, D. Alfred A. Knopf, 2000

List of Internet Resources:

Backyard Birding Guides
www.gearycountyextension.com/NRMW

Bird Photographs
www.BirdsInFocus.com

Bird Sounds
www.xeno-canto.org

Cornell Lab of Ornithology
www.allaboutbirds.org

Kansas Audubon Chapters
www.audubonofkansas.org

Kansas Birds
www.ksbirds.org

Kansas Ornithological Society
www.ksbirds.org/kos/KOSindex

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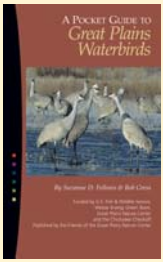
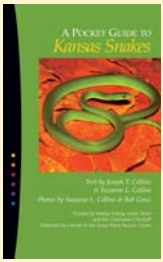
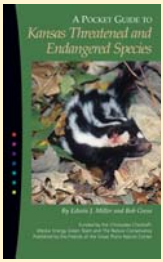
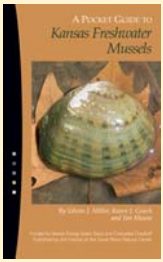
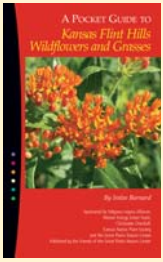
Bob Gress, Editor

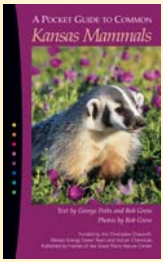


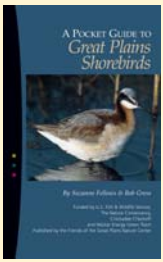


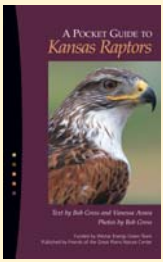


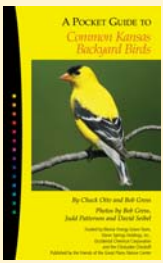












Single copies of these Pocket Guides may be picked up free at the Great Plains Nature Center. Copies can be mailed for $3.00 each by sending your check, payable to GPNC, to: Pocket Guides, Great Plains Nature Center, 6232 East 29th Street North, Wichita, KS 67220.

Westar Energy Green Team

Westar Energy, Inc. is the largest utility in Kansas serving nearly 681,000 customers with about 35,000 miles of transmission and distribution lines. Since 1989, their employees have operated an environmental team. The Green Team members volunteer hours to improve wildlife habitat through wetland creation and restoration and native grass and tree planting. They build bridges and trails and work to protect and reintroduce sensitive plant and animal species. The Green Team can be contacted at 785-575-8115 or brad_loveless@wr.com.

Chickadee Checkoff

The Chickadee Checkoff is a voluntary donation program for nongame projects sponsored by the Kansas Department of Wildlife, Parks & Tourism. Kansas taxpayers are able to contribute by assigning any amount they wish on the appropriate line on their individual state income tax form. Since 1980, the Chickadee Checkoff has distributed over $4 million to projects that help endangered species, assist in reintroduction efforts of sensitive species, support the popular Outdoor Wildlife Learning Sites program at schools and hundreds of other nongame conservation projects.

Glenn Springs Holdings, Inc. / Occidental Chemical Corporation

Glenn Springs Holdings, Inc. (GSHI) manages environmental restoration projects for Occidental Petroleum Corporation. Our scientists, engineers and managers are dedicated to preserving the environment. Lands once degraded by industrial activities are remediated to restore natural habitat and nourish wildlife.

Occidental Chemical Corporation (OxyChem), a subsidiary of Occidental Petroleum Corporation, manufactures vinyls and specialty chemical products, plus chlorine and caustic soda – the building blocks of pharmaceuticals, water disinfectants and detergents. OxyChem endeavors to safeguard the environment, protect the safety and health of employees and neighboring communities.

Oxy's Wichita Plant has a 440-acre Prairie Wetland Conservation Area consisting of wetlands and native grasses. The site is home to numerous wildlife and is certified as a Wildlife at Work site and as a Corporate Lands for Learning site by the Wildlife Habitat Council.

Great Plains Nature Center

The Great Plains Nature Center is a cooperative project between the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Kansas Department of Wildlife, Parks & Tourism and the City of Wichita Department of Park and Recreation. The Nature Center features the Koch Habitat Hall, Owl's Nest Gift Shop, Coleman Auditorium and 2 miles of Chisholm Creek Park nature trails. For more information visit the Great Plains Nature Center web site at www.gpnc.org. Please visit or contact us at: Great Plains Nature Center, 6232 East 29th Street North, Wichita, KS 67220. Phone: 316-683-5499.

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