

# Critters in Our Midst: Northern Mockingbird

by Carol Ellis



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I love the change of seasons in Florida. There's a freshness in the breeze, accompanying a slightly lower level of temperature and humidity. It's lovely when you can go outside in the evening without hearing the whir of the mosquito fog truck. It's healthy to leave the TV, the couch and the air-conditioning and venture outside to lie in the hammock to be entertained by mockingbird melodies from the wire above.

The Northern Mockingbird (*Mimus polyglottos*) is a fixture in my yard. I recognize one in particular by unusual growths above its beak and beside its right claw. My friendly greeting of "What's the matter birdie... how are you today? Are you finding the food you need? Are you happy? You're a pretty bird." accompanies my arrival. The mockingbird sits calmly on its perch observing, allowing me to get close with my camera. (The bird must be thinking "get a life.")

Northern Mockingbirds are common in backyards, but they don't often visit feeders. I see them

hopping around on the ground stopping every few feet to partly spread their wings. They can be found high on a strangler fig branch, or among the branches of my mango or papaya trees, probing for ripening fruit. Though by necessity I must be more vigilant and pick the fruit before it becomes riddled with their peck marks, the mockingbird is helpful in my



American beautyberry is an excellent food source for birds.



Wild coffee berries are also a favorite food.

yard because it usually feeds on insects such as grasshoppers, crickets, chinch bugs and caterpillars, as well as weed seeds.

Native plants like Simpson's stopper, American beautyberry, wild coffee, and including fruit-bearing passion flower, wax myrtle and seagrape are excellent food sources for birds. Florida's state tree, the Sabal palm, is a favorite source of fruit for mockingbirds, as are the fruits of the Washingtonian palm.

From prior encounters, the mockingbird knows I am a regular in the yard, and I pose no threat to it or its nest. University of Florida researchers have found that mockingbirds can recognize individuals after only two 30-second encounters. On the large university campus researchers observed mockingbirds rapidly learning to assess the level of threat posed by different humans, further enabling the bird to pick out the same individual even in a crowd. Pretty amazing!

Mockingbirds have been known to dive-bomb humans who may have ventured too close to a nest, particularly during the spring. Joggers and dog-walkers beware of hit-and-run attacks to the back of the head as mockingbirds warn you to get away from their nest.

Both male and female mockingbirds sing. They begin singing at dawn and continue throughout the day and into evening. The males can be quite loud while singing to attract a mate, and possess impressive aerobic skills, often leaping a few feet in the air and flapping their wings while singing.



A high perch in a wild tamarind tree.

Thomas Jefferson's favorite bird was the mockingbird because of its intelligence and ability to mimic. Jefferson kept a pet mockingbird named Dick in the White House, and boasted in his "Notes on the State of Virginia" that Great Britain's birdlife had nothing to compare with this bird's vocal abilities. From the mimic thrush family, their Latin name translates to "many-tongued thrush." They mimic the songs of other

## Northern Mockingbird... CONTINUED



Photos by Carol Ellis

Mockingbird perch on overhead power lines.



A mockingbird feasting on Washingtonian Palm berries and insects.

birds, as well as different animals like frogs and squirrels, and devices such as car alarms and horns, while they repeat phrases three times per sequence.

The mockingbird is widely distributed throughout Florida year 'round, and is one of the best-known birds, found in urban areas, suburban areas, and parklands. For the casual observer the mockingbird is just another unremarkable bird with feathers in varying

shades of white to grey. It has a long tail and slender bill, and when in flight a broad white patch is visible on its darker grey wings. There is little coloration difference between males, females, juveniles or while mating.

The Florida Federation of Women's Clubs requested Florida schoolchildren to select a state bird; they chose the mockingbird and on April 23, 1927 the Florida legislature designated the



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CAROL ELLIS has lived in South Florida her entire life and Key Largo for 37 years.

Currently a Master Gardener volunteer, Carol has a degree in Journalism from the University of Florida and is the resident photographer /artist at Ocean Reef Club.



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mockingbird as the state bird, giving it protected status. According to Senate Concurrent Resolution No. 3, the "melody of its music has delighted the hearts of residents and visitors to Florida from the days of the rugged pioneers to the present comers."

Some argue that Florida should not share a state bird with other states. The mockingbird is also the state bird of Arkansas, Mississippi, Tennessee, and Texas. Suggestions for a new state bird are all over the map, but four main contenders have emerged: the Florida scrub jay, flamingo, osprey and roseate spoonbill. May I "mockingly" suggest Florida's state bird should be the construction crane?

