



Wildlife Note — 51  
LDR0103

# Gray Catbird, Northern Mockingbird and Brown Thrasher

by Chuck Fergus

These three species are among the most vocal of our birds. All belong to Family Mimidae, the “mimic thrushes,” or “mimids,” and they often imitate the calls of other species, stringing these remembered vocalizations into long, variable songs. Family Mimidae has more than 30 species, which are found only in the New World, with most inhabiting the tropics. The mimids have long tails and short, rounded wings. The three species in the Northeast are solitary (living singly, in pairs and in family groups rather than in flocks), feed mainly on the ground and in shrubs, and generally eat insects in summer and fruits in winter. The sexes look alike. Adults are preyed upon by owls, hawks, foxes and house cats, and their nests may be raided by snakes, blue jays, crows, grackles, raccoons, opossums and squirrels.

**Gray Catbird** (*Dumetella carolinensis*) — The gray catbird is eight to nine inches long, smaller and more slender than a robin, an overall dark gray with a black cap and chestnut around the vent. Individuals often jerk their tails — up, down, and in circles. The species is named for its mewling call, although catbirds also deliver other sounds. They migrate between breeding grounds in the eastern two-thirds of North America and wintering areas in the coastal Southeast and Central America. Gray catbirds are abundant and statewide in Pennsylvania, inhabiting hedgerows, woods undergrowth, regenerating cut-over land, shrubby areas near water, woods edges and suburban plantings. They shun dense forests.

Catbirds eat wild fruits and insects. In summer the diet is around 60 percent fruit, and in spring, 20 percent fruit.

Gray Catbird



Beetles, ants, caterpillars, grasshoppers, crickets and other insects are common foodstuffs. Catbirds often forage on the ground, using their bills to flick aside leaves and twigs while searching for insects.

Although not as talkative as the northern mockingbird, the catbird is still a versatile vocalizer. Its ability comes in part from the structure of its syrinx, or voice box, whose two sides operate independently, letting the bird sing with two voices at the same time. A catbird calls out a rapid string of syllables — more than 100 types in some individuals — including squeaks, chitters, whistles, whines and songs swiped from other birds. The

babble, which lasts up to 10 minutes, is frequently punctuated by the familiar catlike mewl.

Catbirds are monogamous. They nest from May into July and usually raise two broods per year. The nest, substantial and deeply cupped, is placed in a dense thicket, briar patch, vine tangle, or shrubby tree, three to nine feet above the ground. The female lays three to five eggs, which are a dark greenish blue and unmarked. Brown-headed cowbirds often lay their eggs in catbird nests, but catbirds almost always recognize the parasitic eggs (which are pale and dotted with brown) and pitch them out of the nest. Catbirds destroy eggs and nestlings of other species, including wood-pewees, robins and sparrows; biologists don't know whether this behavior represents an attack on competitors or a feeding strategy. Parents feed their own young mainly on insects and spiders. Incubation takes two weeks, and the young leave the nest 10 or 11 days after hatching.

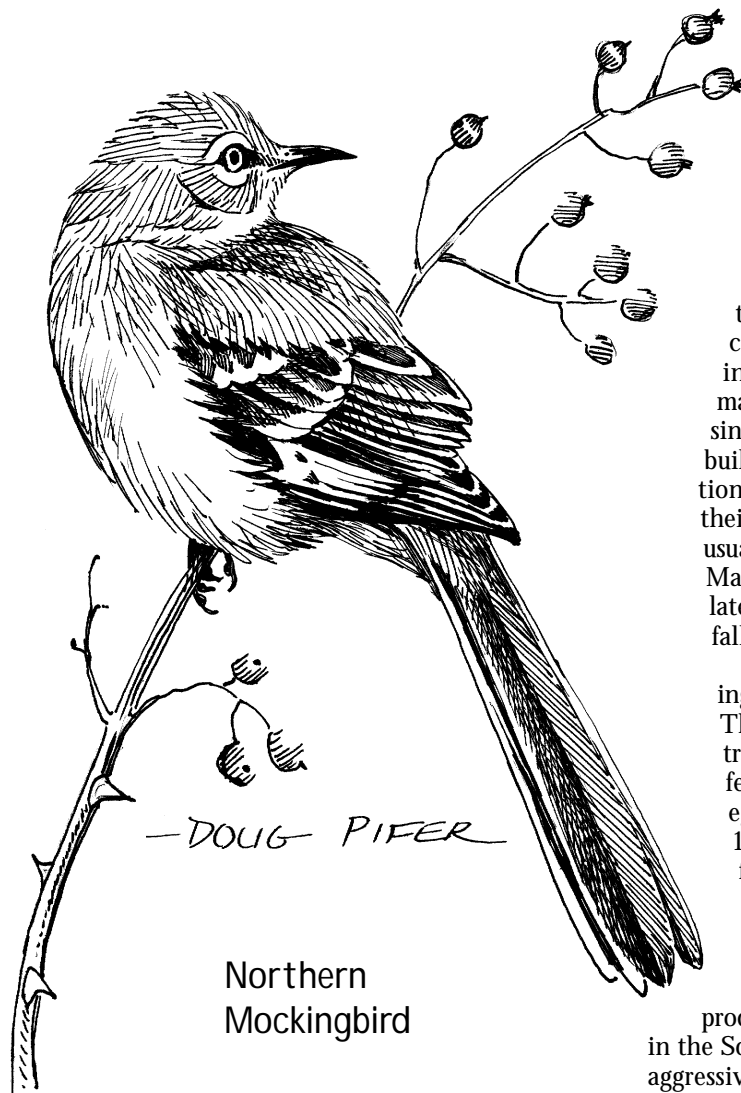
**Northern Mockingbird** (*Mimus polyglottos*) — The slender, robin-size northern mockingbird has a gray back, a pale breast and conspicuous white patches on the tail and wings: when foraging, a mockingbird will often stop and flick

its wings, opening them to expose the white patches. The species lives year-round on its range, which overlays most of the lower 48 states and includes southern Canada, the Caribbean islands and Mexico. Mockingbirds live in towns and cities, where they often forage on lawns and in thickets, road margins, woods edges, cut-over lands and farms. They like a mix of low shrubs and open terrain. In Pennsylvania mockingbirds are most common in the southeast, the southcentral (although not in the mountains) and the southwestern regions.

About half of the diet consists of insects and half of native and cultivated fruits. When hunting for insects, a mockingbird will run along on the ground in short grass, stopping and lunging for its prey: beetles, ants, bees, wasps, grasshoppers and others. Mockingbirds also eat spiders, earthworms, snails and sowbugs. In fall and winter berries and fruits make up most of the diet, including grapes, apples, barberries, hawthorn, elderberries and (a particular favorite) multiflora rose hips. Mockingbirds sometimes drive off cedar waxwings and other birds, with whom they compete for fruit. In winter mockingbirds may visit feeding stations for seeds and suet, pugnaciously chasing other birds away.

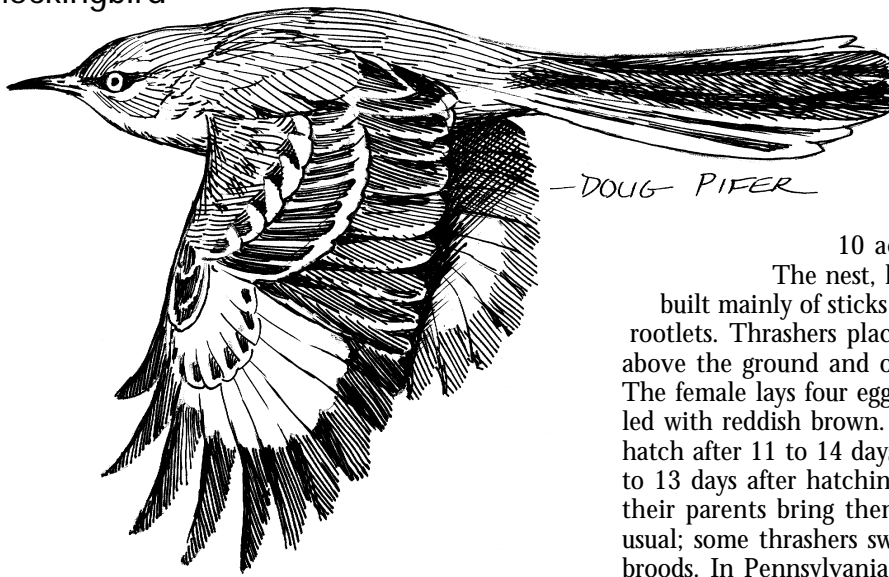
Both male and female mockingbirds sing, but the males are the true virtuosos. They mimic snatches of other birds' songs, calls of crickets and frogs, dogs barking and even mechanical noises such as squeaky hinges and squealing tires. A male's repertoire increases as the bird ages and may ultimately include more than 150 distinct song types. Usually an individual repeats one sound or song three to six or more times, then switches to another song, and so on, singing for minutes on end. (Brown thrashers usually repeat each song once, while catbirds do not repeat.) In the spring, male mockingbirds sing to establish territories and attract mates, starting around an hour before sunrise. They sing in flight, on the ground, from perches, when building nest foundations, during and after copulation, while foraging — even with food clutched in their bills. Unmated males may sing during the night, usually from a hidden perch. Mockingbirds sing from March to August (the breeding season) and from late September into November (while establishing fall and winter feeding territories).

Mockingbirds are mainly monogamous. Courting males and females chase each other in flight. The nest is a bulky cup built in a dense shrub or a tree, usually 3 to 10 feet above the ground. The female lays three or four greenish to bluish gray eggs, blotched with brown. She incubates them 12 to 13 days. Both sexes feed the young, which fledge after 12 days, although they're not strong fliers for another week. At fledging, the male may continue to feed the young while the female lays and begins incubating the next clutch. This division of labor lets mockingbirds produce two and sometimes three broods (up to four in the South) during each breeding season. Mockingbirds aggressively defend their nests, driving away predators and attacking humans who venture too close.



Northern  
Mockingbird

## Northern Mockingbird



Some mockingbirds spend the whole year as a pair on a single territory, while others, particularly in the northern part of the range, use different breeding and wintering territories. In the north, some individuals may migrate south in winter. Young disperse up to 200 miles from where they hatched. Ornithologists believe the spread of multiflora rose (an invasive species once planted widely for wildlife habitat) and the planting of ornamental shrubs (especially *Pyracantha*, or firethorn) provided key winter food and shelter, aiding the mockingbird in a northward population expansion that has gone on for close to a century.

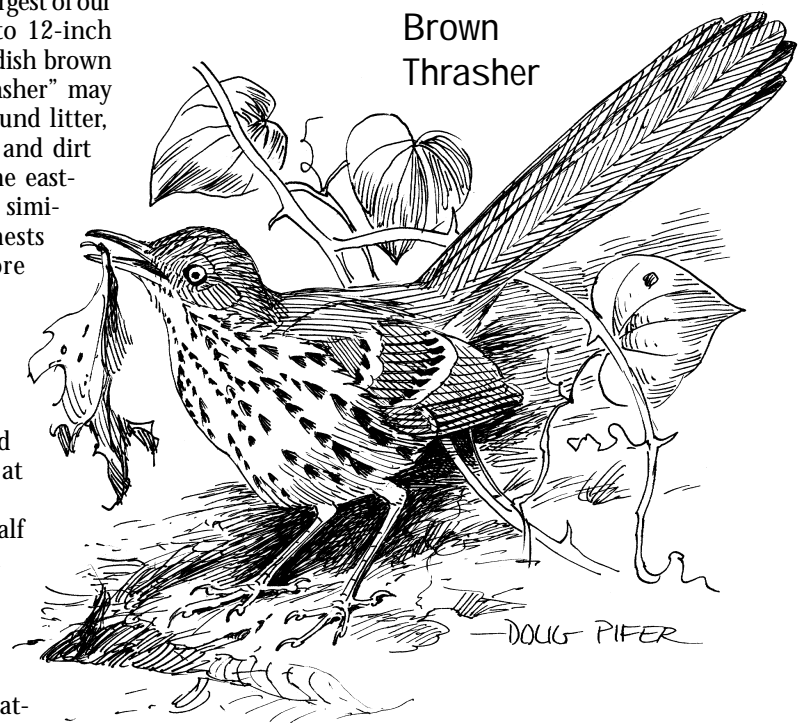
**Brown Thrasher** (*Toxostoma rufum*) — The largest of our three mimics, the brown thrasher has an 11- to 12-inch length, half of which is tail. Plumage is rich reddish brown above, heavily streaked below. The name “thrasher” may come from the bird’s habit of thrashing the ground litter, using its long, curved bill to sling aside leaves and dirt while foraging. Brown thrashers breed across the eastern two-thirds of North America, with a range similar to that of the gray catbird. The species nests statewide in Pennsylvania, although it’s more common in the southern than the northern counties. Brown thrashers prefer brushy, thorny places, including hedgerows, thickets, forest margins and clearings and old fields overgrown with shrubs. Shyer than catbirds and mockingbirds, they are less likely to live around people, and they often flee into escape cover at the sight of a human.

Brown thrashers feed on insects (more than half the annual diet), berries, small fruits, seeds and nuts, including many acorns. Occasionally they take crayfish, lizards and small frogs. The best time to observe brown thrashers is in April, before nest building has commenced, when males sing from high, exposed perches to at-

tract mates. The song is full of improvisation and mimicry of other species, including flickers, titmice, cardinals and thrushes; observers have reported more than 3,000 song types, the largest repertoire of any North American bird species. The alarm call is a crackling note that may sound like a loud, smacking kiss. After mating, males continue to sing but in a quieter tone. Territories are 2 to 10 acres.

The nest, hidden in dense, tangled cover, is built mainly of sticks and twigs and lined with cleaned rootlets. Thrashers place their nests from 1½ to 20 feet above the ground and occasionally on the ground itself. The female lays four eggs, which are pale blue and freckled with reddish brown. Both parents incubate. The eggs hatch after 11 to 14 days, and the young leave the nest 9 to 13 days after hatching. They stay in the vicinity, and their parents bring them food. Two broods per year are usual; some thrashers switch mates between same-season broods. In Pennsylvania, nesting runs from early May to the end of July.

Brown thrashers in southern areas are permanent residents, but most of those breeding in the Northeast leave the region in September and October and take up residence in thickets in the Gulf states. Statewide, the brown thrasher population seems to have decreased by about four percent a year since the mid-1960s, perhaps because of cowbird parasitism, nest predation and the growth of old fields into mature woodlands.



Brown Thrasher

# Wildlife Notes

Allegheny Woodrat  
Bats  
Beaver  
Black Bear  
Blackbirds, Orioles, Cowbird and Starling  
Blue Jay  
Bobcat  
Bobwhite Quail  
Canada Goose  
Chickadees, Nuthatches, Titmouse and Brown Creeper  
Chimney Swift, Purple Martin and Swallows  
Chipmunk  
Common Nighthawk and Whip-Poor-Will  
Cottontail Rabbit  
Coyote  
Crows and Ravens  
Diving Ducks  
Doves  
Eagles and Ospreys  
Elk  
Finches and House Sparrow  
Fisher  
Flycatchers  
Foxes (Red & Gray)  
Gray Catbird, Northern Mockingbird and Brown Thrasher  
Herons  
Kingfisher  
Mallard  
Mice and Voles  
Minks & Muskrats  
Northern Cardinal, Grosbeaks, Indigo Bunting and Dickcissel  
Opossum  
Otter  
Owls  
Porcupine  
Puddle Ducks  
Raccoon  
Rails, Moorhen and Coot  
Raptors  
Ring-necked Pheasant  
Ruby-throated Hummingbird  
Ruffed Grouse  
Shrews  
Snowshoe Hare  
Sparrows and Towhee  
Squirrels  
Striped Skunk  
Tanagers  
Thrushes  
Vireos  
Vultures  
Weasels  
White-tailed Deer  
Wild Turkey  
Woodchuck  
Woodcock  
Wood Duck  
Woodpecker  
Wood Warblers  
Wrens

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