

Common Birds of Sewanee

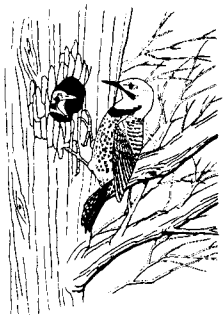
We are fortunate to live in an area that still retains much suitable breeding habitat for birds. This leaflet provides an introduction to the rich birdlife of Sewanee. It has been written to cover a selection of Sewanee's more common birds and therefore omits many species. *Eastern Birds* by J. Coe and the *Eastern Bird Guide* in the Peterson series are excellent field guides for beginning bird-watchers.

The first bird described in each paragraph is shown in the accompanying picture.

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An evening walk in the forests near Sewanee will frequently be accompanied by the sound of owls. The **Great-horned Owl** and the **Barred Owl** are the two common large owls. Both owls give hooting calls: the Great-horned says, "Whooo's-awake? Meee Tooo" (5 hoots, often repeated), whereas the Barred says, "Who-cooks-for-you? Who-cooks-for youuu all?" (8 or 9 hoots). Great-horned owls have two feather tufts on their heads; Barred owls have smooth, rounded heads. All owls have special feathers which allow them to glide silently through the night without mice and other juicy owl-food hearing the approach of impending doom.



Sewanee has many large trees and, consequently, we have many woodpeckers. The **Northern Flicker** is unusual because it has taken on the role of a flying anteater! Flickers can often be seen on the ground picking up ants with their long tongues. They haven't entirely abandoned their woodpecking roots and

also peck at trees to pick insects from the bark. Flickers have a black stripe across the top of their chests and a conspicuous white rump which flashes as they fly away. The **Downy Woodpecker** and **Hairy Woodpecker** are the terrible twins of the woodpecker world. Both are black and white birds distinguished by the long white stripe down their backs. Males of both species have a red patch on the back of the head. Downy woodpeckers are smaller than Hairys, but unless you have a ruler placed next to your bird feeder this is not much help. Downys have proportionately smaller bills than Hairys: the Hairy's beak is as long as its head is wide, the Downy has a more stubby beak. Don't despair if you can't tell them apart: Downys are more common, so tell your companions, "It was a Downy" in a knowing voice and you'll be right most of the time! The red belly of the **Red-bellied Woodpecker** is very faint and not usually visible, but this bird is easy to identify: it has a bright red neck (and cap, in the male) and its back is horizontally striped with black and white. Unlike the Red-bellied, the **Red-headed Woodpecker** does live up to its name and is our only woodpecker with an entirely red head. The **Pileated Woodpecker** is a large black bird with a dramatic red crest and, when it flies, large white patches are visible on its wings. Last, the **Yellow-bellied Sapsucker** is present in Sewanee only during the winter months. Its belly and sides are washed with yellow, it has a red forehead and chin, and a distinct white patch on its wing. Sapsuckers make rows of small holes in trees. The holes are very regular and often run in parallel lines. They then eat the sap that weeps from the tree and the insects that become trapped in the sap.



American Kestrels are usually seen sitting on roadside fences and wires. Kestrels are relatively small, graceful birds of prey with very pointed wings. The male is rich red-brown with gray wings, the female is all red-brown. Both have black face markings. Two other common, much larger birds of prey are the **Red-shouldered Hawk** and the **Turkey Vulture**. The hawk has rounded wings and a black and white striped tail. These birds are often seen circling above Sewanee calling "Keer-keer-keer-keer". They sound almost like gulls at the sea-side. Turkey vultures are masters of soaring: they hold their large wings out and tip slightly from side to side as they catch updrafts. From their aerial vantage points vultures look, and smell, for dead animals on which to feast. Vultures have rather messy eating habits, hence to avoid matting their feathers they have naked heads. This feature is shared by other carrion (and fruit) eating birds worldwide.



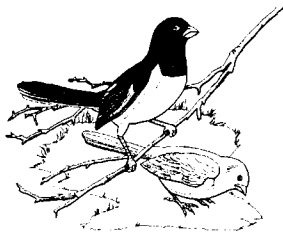
The **American Robin** is often seen probing the ground for earthworms in yards and grassy areas. This bird is present in Sewanee all year, although the spring and fall see an influx of migratory Robins. Males have gray backs and brick-red breasts, females are similar but more muted, and immature birds have distinctly spotty breasts. This "spotty-breasted" characteristic is shared by the immature birds of another member of the thrush family, the **Eastern Bluebird**. Bluebird males are blue on their heads, backs and tails and have light red breasts. Females also have reddish breasts and blue tails, but their heads and backs are gray-brown. These birds are found in open areas and can be seen hunting for insects or sitting on roadside fences and telephone wires. They nest in cavities and will take readily to nest boxes.



Our summertime skies are enlivened by the insect-catching antics of **Barn Swallows** and **Chimney Swifts**. Both birds have very short beaks, but their mouths can open very wide: they are flying insect scoops! Barn Swallows have long, pointed wings and streamers on their tails. They have black-blue backs, buffy underparts and rusty chins. They congregate around old buildings and barns where they construct their mud nests on rafters or overhangs. Chimney Swifts have even longer, narrower wings. In contrast to the fluttering flight of swallows, swifts appear to beat their wings without bending them. Swifts build their nests inside hollow trees and, when living close to humans, in chimneys. They build their nests by using extra-sticky saliva to glue small sticks to the vertical walls of tree hollows or chimneys.



The **Northern Cardinal** is one of America's favorite birds. Images of these crested birds festoon greeting cards and, in a fit of originality, seven states have adopted this common bird as "their" state bird! The Cardinal gets its name from the rich red color of the male (the color of the robes worn by Roman Catholic cardinals). The ring of black around the beak of the male is the only non-red part of the bird. Even the large conical beak is red. The female also has a bright red beak and black patch at the base of the beak. The rest of the female is brown-orange with some red on the tail and wings. Male Cardinals are pugnacious birds in the breeding season and will spend hours fighting their rivals or even fighting their own reflection in car mirrors. In the winter, however, Cardinals become more sociable and can be seen traveling in large, colorful flocks.



Eastern Towhees (formerly called Rufous-sided) are colorful birds of scrubby areas and yards. They are more often heard than seen and their ringing “drink your tee-ee-ee-ee” can be heard year-round. The fe-

male has a brown head, back and tail with rufous sides and a white belly. Males are the same, except that they are black where the females are brown. If you get very close you will see that both sexes have beautiful red eyes. Towhees feed by scratching noisily in dead leaves. Another noisy leaf-scratcher is the **Brown Thrasher**. Thrashers are rich red-brown on their backs and tails, streaked below, with long curved beaks and long tails.



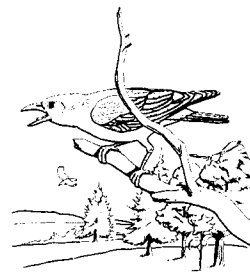
American Goldfinches can be seen all year. The male has a black cap and black wings. In the summer the rest of the male is bright yellow, but changes to olive-yellow in the winter. Females look like winter-males all year. Goldfinches eat mostly seeds and are among the few birds to

feed seeds to their young (most nestlings eat insects). This seed-eating habit means that Goldfinches breed at summer’s end when seeds are most abundant.



Carolina Chickadees are small, acrobatic birds that can be found in the forest and wherever people provide feeders. They look like little rubber balls bouncing from branch to branch. Females and males are identical with gray backs, white bellies and distinctive black caps and bibs.

Chickadees live in groups for much of the year. A group contains several pairs and their “extended families.” Groups dissolve during the breeding season, but reform in the late summer. The **Tufted Titmouse** is related to chickadees and also commonly visits feeders. Titmice are gray, slightly larger than chickadees and have a distinct crest on their heads.



The **American Crow** is the large, caw-ing, black bird of yards, fields and forests. Crows have unusual and fascinating family lives. Young birds often remain with their parents for several years before setting up their own territories. The “stay-at-home” youngsters help their parents

defend the territory and raise each year’s nestlings. Within their family groups, crows recognize each other and have complex social bonds. **Common Grackles** and **European Starlings** are Sewanee’s other common black birds. Grackles are most often seen in noisy flocks. These birds are smaller than crows and have long tails that are often fanned outwards. When seen on a sunny day, grackles are incredibly iridescent and shine with purples and greens. Starlings also live in noisy groups, but can be distinguished from grackles and crows by their thin, pointed beaks and their triangular wings. Seen close, starlings are speckled with many white “stars,” hence their name. Starlings were introduced to North America by a strange group of New Yorkers who believed that America should be blessed with every bird ever mentioned by Shakespeare. Their first attempts at introducing the starling were unsuccessful, but the Bard-lovers eventually succeeded and North America now has millions of these birds. Unfortunately, starlings are aggressive and often drive native cavity-nesting birds (woodpeckers, bluebirds) from their holes.

The Biodiversity on the Mountain series is produced by the Biology Department of the University of the South. This guide was written by David Haskell. Also available is a more comprehensive listing of about 240 bird species recorded in Sewanee, together with notes on their abundance and seasonality. To obtain this list, or if you have questions or comments, please call 931 598 1918, or email dhaskell@sewanee.edu.

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