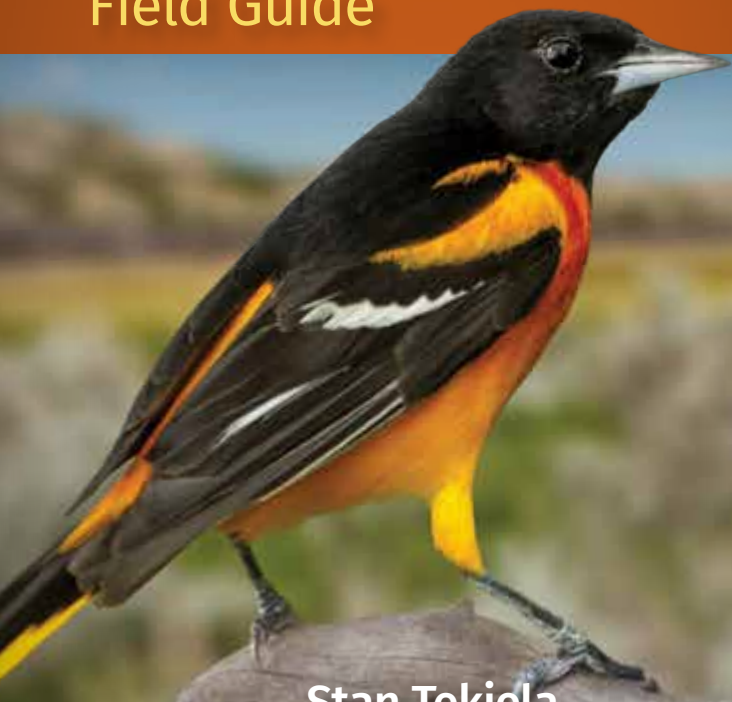


2ND EDITION

# Birds *of the* Dakotas

Field Guide



Stan Tekiela

**Birds that are mostly black** p. 25

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**Birds that are mostly black and white** p. 49

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**Birds that are mostly blue** p. 83

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**Birds that are mostly brown** p. 99

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**Birds that are mostly gray** p. 227

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**Birds that have prominent green** p. 279

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**Birds that have prominent orange** p. 287

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**Birds that have prominent red** p. 293

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**Birds that are mostly white** p. 303

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**Birds that have prominent yellow** p. 317

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2ND EDITION

# Birds *of the* Dakotas

## Field Guide

Stan Tekiela

Adventure Publications  
Cambridge, Minnesota

Edited by Sandy Livoti and Dan Downing

Cover, book design and illustrations by Jonathan Norberg

Range maps produced by Anthony Hartzel

**Cover photo: Baltimore Oriole by Stan Tekiela; background by Gestalt Imagery/Shutterstock**

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To the best of the publisher's knowledge, all photos were of live birds. Some were photographed in a controlled condition.

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## **Birds of the Dakotas Field Guide**

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## WHAT'S NEW?

It is hard to believe that it's been more than 15 years since the debut of *Birds of the Dakotas Field Guide*. This critically acclaimed field guide has helped countless people identify and enjoy the birds that we love. Now, in this expanded second edition, *Birds of the Dakotas Field Guide* has many new and exciting changes and a fresh look, while retaining the same familiar, easy-to-use format.

To help you identify even more birds in the Dakotas, I have added 8 new species and more than 150 new color photographs. All of the range maps have been meticulously reviewed, and many updates have been made to reflect the ever-changing movements of the birds.

Everyone's favorite section, "Stan's Notes," has been expanded to include even more natural history information. "Compare" sections have been updated to help ensure that you correctly identify your bird, and additional feeder information has been added to help with bird feeding. I hope you will enjoy this great new edition as you continue to learn about and appreciate our North and South Dakota birds!

A handwritten signature in black ink, which appears to read "Stan Tekamp". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Stan" written in a larger, more prominent script than the last name "Tekamp".

## WHY WATCH BIRDS IN THE DAKOTAS?

Millions of people have discovered bird feeding. It's a simple and enjoyable way to bring the beauty of birds closer to your home. Watching birds at your feeder often leads to a lifetime pursuit of bird identification. The *Birds of the Dakotas Field Guide* is for those who want to identify common birds of North Dakota and South Dakota.

There are over 1,100 species of birds found in North America. In North and South Dakota there have been more than 400 different kinds of birds recorded through the years. These bird sightings were diligently recorded by hundreds of bird watchers and became part of the official state record. From these valuable records, I've chosen 133 of the most common birds of North and South Dakota to include in this field guide.

Bird watching, or birding, is one of the most popular activities in America. Its outstanding appeal in the Dakotas is due, in part, to an unusually rich and abundant birdlife. Why are there so many birds? One reason is open space. North Dakota is over 70,700 square miles (183,800 sq. km) and is the eighteenth-largest state. South Dakota is even larger, covering more than 77,100 square miles (200,400 sq. km), and is the seventeenth-largest state. Combined, these states make up a large portion of the North Central region and provide the majority of nesting habitats for a large number of birds, especially waterfowl, in this area of the U.S.

Vast open spaces in the Dakotas are not the only reason there is such an abundance of birds. It's also the diversity of habitat. The Dakotas can be broken into two distinct regions, each of which supports a different group of birds.

The highest and driest part of the Dakotas is in the western half. Called the Great Plains, this region has major features that are quite unlike its wide-open plains. The Black Hills and



Badlands are highly unique jewels and wonderful places to see birds such as Western Tanagers and Lazuli Buntings. The rest of the region is a relatively flat, open space that was once short grass prairie, but is now mostly agricultural. Horned Larks, Lark Buntings, Western Kingbirds and many other open-country birds can be found here.

The eastern half of the Dakotas is exemplified by the wide, flat, former lake bottom known as Glacial Lake Agassiz. This region, with its many temporary ponds and lakes, is much wetter than its western counterpart. These habitats provide very important breeding grounds for waterfowl such as Gadwalls and Mallards.

Not only do the Dakotas have varying habitats, there are variations in the weather. Since the two states extend over 450 miles (725 km) from north to south, the weather ranges greatly. While summers can be extremely hot and steamy, the high winds and driving snows of winter are legendary.

No matter where you are in the Dakotas there are birds to watch in every season. Whether witnessing a migration of millions of waterfowl in autumn or welcoming back shorebirds in spring, there is variety and excitement in birding as each season turns to the next.

## **OBSERVE WITH A STRATEGY: TIPS FOR IDENTIFYING BIRDS**

Identifying birds isn't as difficult as you might think. By simply following a few basic strategies, you can increase your chances of successfully identifying most birds that you see. One of the first and easiest things to do when you see a new bird is to note **its color**. This field guide is organized by color, so simply turn to the right color section to find it.

Next, note the **size of the bird**. A strategy to quickly estimate size is to compare different birds. Pick a small, a medium and

a large bird. Select an American Robin as the medium bird. Measured from bill tip to tail tip, a robin is 10 inches (25 cm). Now select two other birds, one smaller and one larger. Good choices are a House Sparrow, at about 6 inches (15 cm), and an American Crow, around 18 inches (45 cm). When you see a species you don't know, you can now quickly ask yourself, "Is it larger than a sparrow but smaller than a robin?" When you look in your field guide to identify your bird, you would check the species that are roughly 6–10 inches (15–25 cm). This will help to narrow your choices.

Next, note the **size, shape and color of the bill**. Is it long or short, thick or thin, pointed or blunt, curved or straight? Seed-eating birds, such as Northern Cardinals, have bills that are thick and strong enough to crack even the toughest seeds. Birds that sip nectar, such as Ruby-throated Hummingbirds, need long, thin bills to reach deep into flowers. Hawks and owls tear their prey with very sharp, curving bills. Sometimes, just noting the bill shape can help you decide whether the bird is a woodpecker, finch, grosbeak, blackbird or bird of prey.

Next, take a look around and note the **habitat** in which you see the bird. Is it wading in a saltwater marsh? Walking along a riverbank or on the beach? Soaring in the sky? Is it perched high in the trees or hopping along the forest floor? Because of diet and habitat preferences, you'll often see robins hopping on the ground but not usually eating seeds at a feeder. Or you'll see a Blue Jay sitting on a tree branch but not climbing headfirst down the trunk, like a Red-breasted Nuthatch would.

Noticing **what the bird is eating** will give you another clue to help you identify the species. Feeding is a big part of any bird's life. Fully one-third of all bird activity revolves around searching for food, catching prey and eating. While birds don't always follow all the rules of their diet, you can make some general assumptions. Northern Flickers, for instance, feed on ants and

other insects, so you wouldn't expect to see them visiting a seed feeder. Other birds, such as Barn and Cliff Swallows, eat flying insects and spend hours swooping and diving to catch a meal.

Sometimes you can identify a bird by **the way it perches**. Body posture can help you differentiate between an American Crow and a Red-tailed Hawk, for example. Crows lean forward over their feet on a branch, while hawks perch in a vertical position. Consider posture the next time you see an unidentified large bird in a tree.

Birds in flight are harder to identify, but noting the **wing size and shape** will help. Wing size is in direct proportion to body size, weight and type of flight. Wing shape determines whether the bird flies fast and with precision, or slowly and less precisely. Barn Swallows, for instance, have short, pointed wings that slice through the air, enabling swift, accurate flight. Turkey Vultures have long, broad wings for soaring on warm updrafts. House Finches have short, rounded wings, helping them to flit through thick tangles of branches.

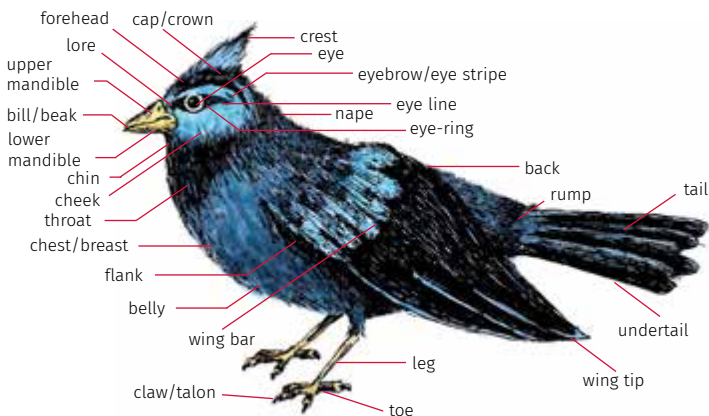
Some bird species have a unique **pattern of flight** that can help in identification. American Goldfinches fly in a distinctive undulating pattern that makes it look like they're riding a roller coaster.

While it's not easy to make all of these observations in the short time you often have to watch a "mystery" bird, practicing these identification methods will greatly expand your birding skills. To further improve your skills, seek the guidance of a more experienced birder who can answer your questions on the spot.

## BIRD BASICS

It's easier to identify birds and communicate about them if you know the names of the different parts of a bird. For instance, it's more effective to use the word "crest" to indicate the set of extra-long feathers on top of a Northern Cardinal's head than to try to describe it.

The following illustration points out the basic parts of a bird. Because it is a composite of many birds, it shouldn't be confused with any actual bird.



## Bird Color Variables

No other animal has a color palette like a bird's. Brilliant blues, lemon yellows, showy reds and iridescent greens are common in the bird world. In general, male birds are more colorful than their female counterparts. This helps males attract a mate, essentially saying, "Hey, look at me!" Color calls attention to a male's health as well. The better the condition of his feathers, the better his food source, territory and potential for mating.

Male and female birds that don't look like each other are called sexually dimorphic, meaning "two forms." Dimorphic females often have a nondescript dull color, as seen in Lazuli Buntings. Muted tones help females hide during the weeks of motionless incubation and draw less attention to them when they're out feeding or taking a break from the rigors of raising the young.

The males of some species, such as the Downy Woodpecker, Blue Jay and Bald Eagle, look nearly identical to the females. In woodpeckers, the sexes are differentiated by only a red mark, or sometimes a yellow mark. Depending on the species, the mark may be on top of the head, on the face or nape of neck, or just behind the bill.

During the first year, juvenile birds often look like their mothers. Since brightly colored feathers are used mainly for attracting a mate, young non-breeding males don't have a need for colorful plumage. It's not until the first spring molt (or several years later, depending on the species) that young males obtain their breeding colors.

Both breeding and winter plumages are the result of molting. Molting is the process of dropping old, worn feathers and replacing them with new ones. All birds molt, typically twice a year, with the spring molt usually occurring in late winter. At this time, most birds produce their brighter breeding plumage, which lasts throughout the summer.

Winter plumage is the result of the late summer molt, which serves a couple of important functions. First, it adds feathers for warmth in the coming winter season. Second, in some species it produces feathers that tend to be drab in color, which helps to camouflage the birds and hide them from predators. The winter plumage of the male American Goldfinch, for example, is olive-brown, unlike its canary-yellow breeding color during

summer. Luckily for us, some birds, such as the male Northern Cardinal, retain their bright summer colors all year long.

## Bird Nests

Bird nests are a true feat of engineering. Imagine constructing a home that's strong enough to weather storms, large enough to hold your entire family, insulated enough to shelter them from cold and heat, and waterproof enough to keep out rain. Think about building it without blueprints or directions and using mainly your feet. Birds do this!

Before building, birds must select an appropriate site. In some species, such as the House Wren, the male picks out several potential sites and assembles small twigs in each. The “extra” nests, called dummy nests, discourage other birds from using any nearby cavities for their nests. The male takes the female around and shows her the choices. After choosing her favorite, she finishes the construction.

In other species, such as the Baltimore Oriole, the female selects the site and builds the nest, while the male offers an occasional suggestion. Each bird species has its own nest-building routine that is strictly followed.

As you can see in these illustrations, birds build a wide variety of nest types.



**ground  
nest**



**platform  
nest**



**cup  
nest**



**pendulous  
nest**



**cavity  
nest**

Nesting material often consists of natural items found in the immediate area. Most nests consist of plant fibers (such as bark from grapevines), sticks, mud, dried grass, feathers, fur, or soft, fuzzy tufts from thistle. Some birds, including Ruby-throated Hummingbirds, use spiderwebs to glue nest materials together.

Transportation of nesting material is limited to the amount a bird can hold or carry. Birds must make many trips afield to gather enough material to complete a nest. Most nests take four days or more, and hundreds, if not thousands, of trips to build.

A **ground nest** can be a mound of vegetation on the ground or in the water. It can also be just a simple, shallow depression scraped out in earth, stones or sand. Killdeer and Horned Larks scrape out ground nests without adding any nesting material.

The **platform nest** represents a much more complex type of construction. Typically built with twigs or sticks and branches, this nest forms a platform and has a depression in the center to nestle the eggs. Platform nests can be in trees; on balconies, cliffs, bridges, or man-made platforms; and even in flowerpots. They often provide space for the adventurous young and function as a landing platform for the parents.

Mourning Doves and herons don't anchor their platform nests to trees, so these can tumble from branches during high winds and storms. Hawks, eagles, ospreys and other birds construct sturdier platform nests with large sticks and branches.

Other platform nests are constructed on the ground with mud, grass and other vegetation from the area. Many waterfowl build platform nests on the ground near or in water. A **floating platform nest** moves with the water level, preventing the nest, eggs and birds from being flooded.

Three-quarters of all songbirds construct a **cup nest**, which is a modified platform nest. The supporting platform is built first

and attached firmly to a tree, shrub, or rock ledge or the ground. Next, the sides are constructed with grass, small twigs, bark or leaves, which are woven together and often glued with mud for added strength. The inner cup can be lined with down feathers, animal fur or hair, or soft plant materials and is contoured last.

The **pendulous nest** is an unusual nest that looks like a sock hanging from a branch. Attached to the end of small branches of trees, this unique nest is inaccessible to most predators and often waves wildly in a breeze.

Woven tightly with plant fibers, the pendulous nest is strong and watertight and takes up to a week to build. A small opening at the top or on the side allows parents access to the grass-lined interior. More commonly used by tropical birds, this complex nest has also been mastered by orioles and kinglets. It must be one heck of a ride to be inside one of these nests during a windy spring thunderstorm!

The **cavity nest** is used by many species of birds, most notably woodpeckers and Eastern Bluebirds. A cavity nest is often excavated from a branch or tree trunk and offers shelter from storms, sun, cold and predators. A small entrance hole in a tree can lead to a nest chamber that is up to a safe 10 inches (25 cm) deep.

Typically made by woodpeckers, cavity nests are usually used only once by the builder. Nest cavities can be used for many subsequent years by such inhabitants as Wood Ducks, Tree Swallows and bluebirds. Kingfishers, on the other hand, can dig a tunnel up to 4 feet (about 1 m) long in a riverbank. The nest chamber at the end of the tunnel is already well insulated, so it's usually only sparsely lined.

One of the most clever of all nests is the **no nest**, or daycare nest. Parasitic birds, such as Brown-headed Cowbirds, don't build their own nests. Instead, the egg-laden female searches



out the nest of another bird and sneaks in to lay an egg while the host mother isn't looking.

A mother cowbird wastes no energy building a nest only to have it raided by a predator. Laying her eggs in the nests of other birds transfers the responsibility of raising her young to the host. When she lays her eggs in several nests, the chances increase that at least one of her babies will live to maturity.

## Who Builds the Nest?

Generally, the female bird constructs the nest. She gathers the materials and does the building, with an occasional visit from her mate to check on progress. In some species, both parents contribute equally to nest building. The male may forage for sticks, grass or mud, but it is the female that often fashions the nest. Only rarely does a male build a nest by himself.

## Fledging

Fledging is the time between hatching and flight, or leaving the nest. Some species of birds are **precocial**, meaning they leave the nest within hours of hatching, though it may be weeks before they can fly. This is common in waterfowl and shorebirds.

Baby birds that hatch naked and blind need to stay in the nest for a few weeks (these birds are **altricial**). Baby birds that are still in the nest are **nestlings**. Until birds start to fly, they are called **fledglings**.

## Why Birds Migrate

Why do so many species of birds migrate? The short answer is simple: food. Birds migrate to locations with abundant food, as it is easier to breed where there is food than where food is scarce. Western Tanagers, for instance, are **complete migrators** that fly from the tropics of South America to nest in the forests

of North America, where billions of newly hatched insects are available to feed to their young.

Other migrators, such as some birds of prey, migrate back to northern regions in spring. In these locations, they hunt mice, voles and other small rodents that are beginning to breed.

Complete migrators have a set time and pattern of migration. Every year at nearly the same time, they head to a specific wintering ground. Complete migrators may travel great distances, sometimes 15,000 miles (24,100 km) or more in one year.

Complete migration doesn't necessarily imply flying from the cold, frozen northland to a tropical destination. The Dark-eyed Junco, for example, is a complete migrator that flies from the far reaches of Canada to spend the winter right here in the Dakotas. This trip is still considered complete migration.

Complete migrators have many interesting aspects. In spring, males often leave a few weeks before the females, arriving early to scope out possibilities for nesting sites and food sources, and to begin to defend territories. The females arrive several weeks later. In many species, the females and their young leave earlier in the fall, often up to four weeks before the adult males.

Other species, such as the American Goldfinch, are **partial migrators**. These birds usually wait until their food supplies dwindle before flying south. Unlike complete migrators, partial migrators move only far enough south, or sometimes east and west, to find abundant food. In some years it might be only a few hundred miles, while in other years it can be as much as a thousand. This kind of migration, dependent on weather and the availability of food, is sometimes called seasonal movement.

Unlike the predictable complete migrators or partial migrators, **irruptive migrators** can move every third to fifth year or, in some cases, in consecutive years. These migrations are triggered when times are tough and food is scarce. Red-breasted Nuthatches are irruptive migrators. They leave their normal northern range in search of more food or in response to overpopulation.

Many other birds don't migrate at all. Black-capped Chickadees, for example, are **non-migrators** that remain in their habitat all year long and just move around as necessary to find food.

## How Do Birds Migrate?

One of the many secrets of migration is fat. While most people are fighting the ongoing battle of the bulge, birds intentionally gorge themselves to gain as much fat as possible without losing the ability to fly. Fat provides the greatest amount of energy per unit of weight. In the same way that your car needs gas, birds are propelled by fat and stall without it.

During long migratory flights, fat deposits are used up quickly, and birds need to stop to refuel. This is when backyard bird feeding stations and undeveloped, natural spaces around our towns and cities are especially important. Some birds require up to 2–3 days of constant feeding to build their fat reserves before continuing their seasonal trip.

Many birds, such as most eagles, hawks, ospreys, falcons and vultures, migrate during the day. Larger birds can hold more body fat, go longer without eating and take longer to migrate. These birds glide along on rising columns of warm air, called thermals, that hold them aloft while they slowly make their way north or south. They generally rest at night and hunt early in the morning before the sun has a chance to warm the land and create good soaring conditions. Daytime migrators use a combination of landforms, rivers, and the rising and setting sun to guide them in the right direction.

The majority of small birds, called **passerines**, migrate at night. Studies show that some use the stars to navigate. Others use the setting sun, and still others, such as doves, use Earth's magnetic field to guide them north or south.

While flying at night may not seem like a good idea, it's actually safer. First, there are fewer avian predators hunting for birds at night. Second, night travel allows time during the day to find food in unfamiliar surroundings. Third, wind patterns at night tend to be flat, or laminar. Flat winds don't have the turbulence of daytime winds and can help push the smaller birds along.

## HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE

To help you quickly and easily identify birds, this field guide is organized by color. Refer to the color key on the first page, note the color of the bird, and turn to that section. For example, the male Rose-breasted Grosbeak is black and white with a red patch on its chest. Because the bird is mostly black-and-white, it will be found in the black-and-white section.

Each color section is also arranged by size, generally with the smaller birds first. Sections may also incorporate the average size in a range, which in some cases reflects size differences between male and female birds. Flip through the pages in the color section to find the bird. If you already know the name of the bird, check the index for the page number.

In some species, the male and female are very different in color. In others, the breeding and winter plumage colors differ. These species will have an inset photograph with a page reference and will be found in two color sections.

You will find a variety of information in the bird description sections. To learn more, turn to the sample on pp. 22–23.

## Range Maps

Range maps are included for each bird. Colored areas indicate where the bird is frequently found. The colors represent the presence of a species during a specific season, not the density, or amount, of birds in the area. Green is used for summer, blue for winter, red for year-round and yellow for migration.

While every effort has been made to depict accurate ranges, these are constantly in flux due to a variety of factors. Changing weather, habitat, species abundance and availability of vital resources, such as food and water, can affect the migration and movement of local populations, causing birds to be found in areas that are atypical for the species. So please use the maps as intended—as general guides only.



male



female  
p. 327

# Common Name



YEAR-ROUND  
SUMMER  
MIGRATION  
WINTER

Range Map

Scientific name

Color Indicator

**Size:** measurement is from head to tip of tail; wingspan may be listed as well

**Male:** brief description of the male bird; may include breeding, winter or other plumages

**Female:** brief description of the female bird, which is sometimes different from the male

**Juvenile:** brief description of the juvenile bird, which often looks like the adult female

**Nest:** kind of nest the bird builds to raise its young; who builds it; number of broods per year

**Eggs:** number of eggs you might expect to see in a nest; color and marking

**Incubation:** average days the parents spend incubating the eggs; who does the incubation

**Fledging:** average days the young spend in the nest after hatching but before they leave the nest; who does the most “childcare” and feeding

**Migration:** type of migrator: complete (seasonal, consistent), partial (seasonal, destination varies), irruptive (unpredictable, depends on the food supply) or non-migrator

**Food:** what the bird eats most of the time (e.g., seeds, insects, fruit, nectar, small mammals, fish) and whether it typically comes to a bird feeder

**Compare:** notes about other birds that look similar and the pages on which they can be found; may include extra information to aid in identification

**Stan's Notes:** Interesting natural history information. This could be something to look or listen for or something to help positively identify the bird. Also includes remarkable features.







SUMMER

## Brown-headed Cowbird

*Molothrus ater*

**Size:** 7½" (19 cm)

**Male:** Glossy black with a chocolate-brown head. Dark eyes. Pointed, sharp gray bill.

**Female:** dull brown with a pointed, sharp, gray bill

**Juvenile:** similar to female but with dull-gray plumage and a streaked chest

**Nest:** no nest; lays eggs in nests of other birds

**Eggs:** 5–7; white with brown markings

**Incubation:** 10–13 days; host birds incubate eggs

**Fledging:** 10–11 days; host birds feed the young

**Migration:** complete, to southern states

**Food:** insects, seeds; will come to seed feeders

**Compare:** The male Red-winged Blackbird (p. 31) is slightly larger with red-and-yellow patches on upper wings. Common Grackle (p. 37) has a long tail and lacks the brown head. European Starling (p. 27) has a shorter tail.

**Stan's Notes:** Cowbirds are members of the blackbird family. Of approximately 750 species of parasitic birds worldwide, this is the only parasitic bird in the Dakotas. Brood parasites lay their eggs in the nests of other birds, leaving the host birds to raise their young. Cowbirds are known to have laid their eggs in the nests of over 200 species of birds. While some birds reject cowbird eggs, most incubate them and raise the young, even to the exclusion of their own. Look for warblers and other birds feeding young birds twice their own size. Named "Cowbird" for its habit of following bison and cattle herds to feed on insects flushed up by the animals.



breeding



winter



YEAR-ROUND

## European Starling

*Sturnus vulgaris*

**Size:** 7½" (19 cm)

**Male:** Glittering, iridescent purplish black in spring and summer; duller and speckled with white in fall and winter. Long, pointed, yellow bill in spring; gray in fall. Pointed wings. Short tail.

**Female:** same as male

**Juvenile:** similar to adults, with grayish-brown plumage and a streaked chest

**Nest:** cavity; male and female line cavity; 2 broods per year

**Eggs:** 4–6; bluish with brown markings

**Incubation:** 12–14 days; female and male incubate

**Fledging:** 18–20 days; female and male feed the young

**Migration:** non-migrator to partial migrator; some will move to southern states

**Food:** insects, seeds, fruit; visits seed or suet feeders

**Compare:** The Common Grackle (p. 37) has a long tail. The male Brown-headed Cowbird (p. 25) has a brown head. Look for the shiny, dark feathers to help identify the European Starling.

**Stan's Notes:** One of our most numerous songbirds. Mimics the songs of up to 20 bird species and imitates sounds, including the human voice. Jaws are more powerful when opening than when closing, enabling the bird to pry open crevices to find insects. Often displaces woodpeckers, chickadees and other cavity-nesting birds. Large families gather with blackbirds in the fall. Not a native bird; 100 starlings were introduced to New York City in 1890–91 from Europe. Bill changes color in spring and fall.

female  
p. 155



# Spotted Towhee

*Pipilo maculatus*



SUMMER  
MIGRATION

**Size:** 8½" (22 cm)

**Male:** Mostly black with dirty red-brown sides and a white belly. Multiple white spots on wings and sides. Long black tail with a white tip. Rich, red eyes.

**Female:** very similar to male but with a brown head

**Juvenile:** brown with a heavily streaked chest

**Nest:** cup; female builds; 1–2 broods per year

**Eggs:** 3–5; white with brown markings

**Incubation:** 12–14 days; female and male incubate

**Fledging:** 10–12 days; female and male feed young

**Migration:** complete, to southern states

**Food:** seeds, fruit, insects

**Compare:** American Robin (p. 253) is larger. Male Rose-breasted Grosbeak (p. 57) has a rosy patch in center of chest.

**Stan's Notes:** Summer visitor in western and southern parts of the Dakotas and seen during migration. Found in a variety of habitats from thick brush and forest edges to suburban backyards. Usually heard noisily scratching through dead leaves on the ground for food. Over 70 percent of its diet is plant material. Eats more insects during spring and summer. Well known to retreat from danger by walking away rather than taking to flight. Nest is nearly always on the ground under bushes but away from where the male perches to sing. Song and plumage vary geographically and aren't well studied or understood.



male



female  
p. 153



YEAR-ROUND  
SUMMER

## Red-winged Blackbird

*Agelaius phoeniceus*

**Size:** 8½" (22 cm)

**Male:** Jet black with red-and-yellow patches (epaulets) on upper wings. Pointed black bill.

**Female:** heavily streaked brown with a pointed brown bill and white eyebrows

**Juvenile:** same as female

**Nest:** cup; female builds; 2–3 broods per year

**Eggs:** 3–4; bluish green with brown markings

**Incubation:** 10–12 days; female incubates

**Fledging:** 11–14 days; female and male feed the young

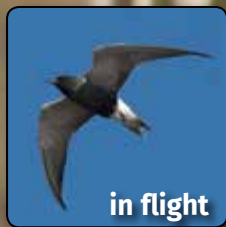
**Migration:** complete to partial migrator, to southern states, Mexico and Central America; will move around to find food

**Food:** seeds, insects; visits seed and suet feeders

**Compare:** The male Brown-headed Cowbird (p. 25) is smaller and glossier and has a brown head. The bold red-and-yellow epaulets distinguish the male Red-winged from other blackbirds.

**Stan's Notes:** One of the most widespread and numerous birds in the Dakotas. Found around marshes, wetlands, lakes and rivers. Flocks with as many as 10,000 birds have been reported. Males arrive before the females and sing to defend their territory. The male repeats his call from the top of a cattail while showing off his red-and-yellow shoulder patches. The female chooses a mate and often builds her nest over shallow water in a thick stand of cattails. The male can be aggressive when defending the nest. Red-winged Blackbirds feed mostly on seeds in spring and fall, and insects throughout the summer.







SUMMER  
MIGRATION

## Black Tern

*Chlidonias niger*

**Size:** 9¾" (24.5 cm)

**Male:** Breeding plumage (March to September) head, neck and body are black. Back, wings and tail are gray. Dark eyes, bill and legs. Winter is overall gray with a nearly white head and white undertail. Pale-yellow legs.

**Female:** same as male

**Juvenile:** similar to winter adult, back is more brown than gray

**Nest:** floating platform; male and female build; 1-2 broods per year

**Eggs:** 2-4; green with brown markings

**Incubation:** 21-22 days; female and male incubate

**Fledging:** 21-28 days; male and female feed young

**Migration:** complete, to South America

**Food:** insects, small fish, aquatic insects

**Compare:** The only tern with a black head and body.

**Stan's Notes:** Common breeding bird in prairie potholes, nesting in small colonies. The nest is often just a floating mat of vegetation. Often will use an old grebe nest. Young females begin to breed at 2 years of age. Aggressively defends nest site and young. Will dive at intruders and predators. Has a unique buoyant flight pattern, with erratic swoops. Unlike other tern species, rarely plunges into water after prey. Hunts for insects on surfaces of ponds and marshes and picks insects out of the air. Occasionally follows plows to pick off insects disturbed in fields. Gives a sharp "keff" call while in flight. Migrates in large flocks.





SUMMER

## Yellow-headed Blackbird

*Xanthocephalus xanthocephalus*

**Size:** 9–11" (23–28 cm)

**Male:** Large black bird with a lemon-yellow head, breast and nape of neck. Black mask and gray bill. White wing patches.

**Female:** similar to male but slightly smaller with a brown body and dull-yellow head and chest

**Juvenile:** similar to female

**Nest:** cup; female builds; 2 broods per year

**Eggs:** 3–5; greenish white with brown markings

**Incubation:** 11–13 days; female incubates

**Fledging:** 9–12 days; female feeds the young

**Migration:** complete, to southern states and Mexico

**Food:** insects, seeds; will come to ground feeders

**Compare:** The male Red-winged Blackbird (p. 31) is smaller and has red-and-yellow patches on its wings. Look for the bright-yellow head to identify the male Yellow-headed.

**Stan's Notes:** Found around marshes, wetlands and lakes. Nests in deep water, unlike its cousin, the Red-winged Blackbird, which prefers shallow water. Usually heard before seen. Gives a raspy, low, metallic-sounding call. The male is the only large black bird with a bright-yellow head. He gives an impressive mating display, flying with his head drooped and feet and tail pointing down while steadily beating his wings. Young keep low and out of sight for up to three weeks before they start to fly. Migrates in large flocks of as many as 200 birds, often with Red-winged Blackbirds and Brown-headed Cowbirds. Flocks of mainly males return in late March and early April; females return later. Most colonies consist of 20–100 nests.





YEAR-ROUND  
SUMMER

# Common Grackle

*Quiscalus quiscula*

**Size:** 11–13" (28–33 cm)

**Male:** Large, iridescent blackbird with bluish-black head and purplish-brown body. Long black tail. Long, thin bill and bright-golden eyes.

**Female:** similar to male but smaller and duller

**Juvenile:** similar to female

**Nest:** cup; female builds; 2 broods per year

**Eggs:** 4–5; greenish white with brown markings

**Incubation:** 13–14 days; female incubates

**Fledging:** 16–20 days; female and male feed the young

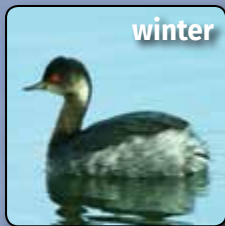
**Migration:** complete migrator to partial, to southern states; will move around to find food

**Food:** fruit, seeds, insects; will come to seed and suet feeders

**Compare:** The European Starling (p. 27) is much smaller with a speckled appearance, and a yellow bill during breeding season. Male Red-winged Blackbird (p. 31) has red-and-yellow wing markings (epaulets).

**Stan's Notes:** Usually nests in small colonies of up to 75 pairs but travels with other blackbird species in large flocks. Known to feed in farm fields. The common name is derived from the Latin word *gracula*, meaning "jackdaw," another species of bird and a term that can refer to any bird in the *Quiscalus* genus. The male holds his tail in a deep V shape during flight. The flight pattern is usually level, as opposed to an undulating movement. Unlike most birds, it has larger muscles for opening its mouth than for closing it, enabling it to pry crevices apart to find hidden insects.

winter





SUMMER

## Eared Grebe

*Podiceps nigricollis*

**Size:** 13" (33 cm)

**Male:** Breeding plumage (April to August) head, neck and back overall dark brown to black. Sides and chest are chestnut brown. Wispy yellow plumes feather out behind red eyes. Small black bill. Winter plumage chin and sides are dirty brown to black and white. Red eyes and a dark-tipped gray bill.

**Female:** same as male

**Juvenile:** similar to winter adult

**Nest:** floating platform; female and male build; 1-2 broods per year

**Eggs:** 3-5; light blue with brown markings

**Incubation:** 20-22 days; female and male incubate

**Fledging:** 20-40 days; male and female teach young what to eat

**Migration:** complete, to Pacific and Gulf coasts, Mexico

**Food:** fish, aquatic insects

**Compare:** Horned Grebe (p. 301) is slightly larger, with a rufous neck during breeding season.

**Stan's Notes:** A grebe of pothole lakes and ponds, nesting in large colonies. Builds a platform nest in shallow water, made from reeds and grasses. Often constructs more than one nest. A few days after hatching, the young are fed small feathers. Feather eating pads the stomach and is thought to aid the digestion of fish and fish bones. Chick siblings are not the same size, since young hatch several days apart. Chicks ride on backs of parents. Often dives underwater to avoid danger, remaining submerged with just its bill above water.





# American Coot

*Fulica americana*



SUMMER

**Size:** 13–16" (33–40 cm)

**Male:** Gray-to-black waterbird. Duck-like white bill with a dark band near the tip and a small red patch near the eyes. Small white patch near base of tail. Green legs and feet. Red eyes.

**Female:** same as male

**Juvenile:** much paler than adults, with a gray bill

**Nest:** floating platform; female and male construct; 1 brood per year

**Eggs:** 9–12; pinkish buff with brown markings

**Incubation:** 21–25 days; female and male incubate

**Fledging:** 49–52 days; female and male feed young

**Migration:** complete, to southern states, Mexico and Central America

**Food:** insects, aquatic plants

**Compare:** Smaller than most waterfowl, it is the only black, duck-like bird with a white bill.

**Stan's Notes:** Usually seen in large flocks on open water. Not a duck, as it has large lobed toes instead of webbed feet. An excellent diver and swimmer, bobbing its head as it swims. A favorite food of Bald Eagles. It is not often seen in flight, unless it's trying to escape from an eagle. To take off, it scrambles across the surface of the water, flapping its wings. Gives a unique series of creaks, groans and clicks. Anchors its floating platform nest to vegetation. Huge flocks with as many as 1,000 birds gather for migration. Migrates at night. The common name "Coot" comes from the Middle English word *coote*, which was used to describe various waterfowl. Also called Mud Hen.

in flight





YEAR-ROUND  
SUMMER

## American Crow

*Corvus brachyrhynchos*

**Size:** 18" (45 cm)

**Male:** All-black bird with black bill, legs and feet. Can have a purple sheen in direct sunlight.

**Female:** same as male

**Juvenile:** same as adult

**Nest:** platform; female builds; 1 brood per year

**Eggs:** 4–6; bluish to olive-green with brown marks

**Incubation:** 18 days; female incubates

**Fledging:** 28–35 days; female and male feed the young

**Migration:** non-migrator to partial migrator

**Food:** fruit, insects, mammals, fish, carrion; will come to seed and suet feeders

**Compare:** Black-billed Magpie (p. 73) has a long tail and white belly. Similar to Common Raven (not shown), but has a smaller bill and lacks shaggy throat feathers. The Crow has a higher-pitched call than Raven's deep, low raspy call. Crow has a squared tail. Raven has a wedge-shaped tail, apparent in flight.

**Stan's Notes:** One of the most recognizable birds in the Dakotas, found in most habitats. Imitates other birds and human voices. One of the smartest of all birds and very social, often entertaining itself by provoking chases with other birds. Eats roadkill but is rarely hit by vehicles. Can live as long as 20 years. Often reuses its nest every year if it's not taken over by a Great Horned Owl. Unmated birds, known as helpers, help to raise the young. Extended families roost together at night, dispersing daily to hunt. Cannot soar on thermals; flaps constantly and glides downward. Gathers in huge communal flocks of up to 10,000 birds in winter.



soaring



juvenile



drying



# Turkey Vulture

*Cathartes aura*



SUMMER

**Size:** 26–32" (66–80 cm); up to 6' wingspan

**Male:** Large and black with a naked red head and legs. In flight, wings are two-toned with a black leading edge and a gray trailing edge. Wing tips end in finger-like projections. Tail is long and squared. Ivory bill.

**Female:** same as male but slightly smaller

**Juvenile:** similar to adults, with a gray-to-blackish head and bill

**Nest:** no nest or minimal nest, on a cliff or in a cave, sometimes in a hollow tree; 1 brood per year

**Eggs:** 1–3; white with brown markings

**Incubation:** 38–41 days; female and male incubate

**Fledging:** 66–88 days; female and male feed the young

**Migration:** complete, to southern states, Mexico and Central and South America

**Food:** carrion; parents regurgitate to feed the young

**Compare:** Bald Eagle (p. 81) is larger and lacks two-toned wings. Look for the obvious naked red head to identify the Turkey Vulture.

**Stan's Notes:** The naked head reduces the risk of feather fouling (picking up diseases) from contact with carcasses. It has a strong bill for tearing apart flesh. Unlike hawks and eagles, it has weak feet more suited for walking than grasping. One of the few birds with a developed sense of smell. Mostly mute, making only grunts and groans. Holds its wings in an upright V shape in flight. Teeters from wing tip to wing tip as it soars and hovers. Seen in trees with wings outstretched, sunning itself and drying after a rain.

in flight



juvenile



crests



drying





SUMMER  
MIGRATION

# Double-crested Cormorant

*Phalacrocorax auritus*

**Size:** 31–35" (79–89 cm); up to 41⅓' wingspan

**Male:** Large black waterbird with unusual blue eyes and a long, snakelike neck. Large gray bill, with yellow at the base and a hooked tip.

**Female:** same as male

**Juvenile:** lighter brown with a grayish chest and neck

**Nest:** platform; male and female construct; 1 brood per year

**Eggs:** 3–4; bluish white without markings

**Incubation:** 25–29 days; female and male incubate

**Fledging:** 37–42 days; male and female feed the young

**Migration:** complete, to southern states, Mexico and Central America

**Food:** small fish, aquatic insects

**Compare:** The Turkey Vulture (p. 45) also spreads out its wings to dry in the sun, but it has a naked red head. The American Coot (p. 41) has a duck-like white bill. Look for the long, snakelike neck and large, hooked bill to help identify the Cormorant.

**Stan's Notes:** Flies in a large V or a line. Usually roosts in large colonies in trees close to water. Swims underwater to catch fish, holding its wings at its sides. This bird's outer feathers soak up water, but its body feathers don't. To dry off, it strikes an upright pose with wings outstretched, facing the sun. Gives grunts, pops and groans. Named "Double-crested" for the crests on its head, which are not often seen. "Cormorant" is a contraction from *corvus marinus*, meaning "crow" or "raven," and "of the sea."





male



female



## Black-and-white Warbler

*Mniotilta varia*

**Size:** 5" (13 cm)

**Male:** Small with zebra-like striping and a black-and-white striped crown. Black cheek patch and chin. White belly.

**Female:** duller than male and lacks a black cheek patch and chin

**Juvenile:** similar to female

**Nest:** cup; female builds; 1 brood per year

**Eggs:** 4–5; white with brown markings

**Incubation:** 10–11 days; female incubates

**Fledging:** 9–12 days; female and male feed the young

**Migration:** complete, to Florida, Mexico, and Central and South America

**Food:** insects

**Compare:** Climbs down tree trunks headfirst, like the White-breasted Nuthatch (p. 235) and Red-breasted Nuthatch (p. 229). Look for a small black-and-white bird climbing down trees to identify the Black-and-white Warbler.

**Stan's Notes:** This is the only warbler species that moves down tree trunks headfirst. Look for it searching for insect eggs in the bark of large trees. Its song sounds like a slowly turning, squeaky wheel going around and around. Female performs a distraction dance to draw predators away from the nest. Constructs its nest on the ground, concealing it under dead leaves or at the base of a tree. Found in a variety of habitats. Common summer resident that nests throughout the Dakotas. More conspicuous during migration. Most arrive in April and May and leave by September.

male

female





YEAR-ROUND

## Downy Woodpecker

*Dryobates pubescens*

**Size:** 6½" (15 cm)

**Male:** Small woodpecker with a white belly and black-and-white spotted wings. Red mark on the back of the head and a white stripe down the back. Short black bill.

**Female:** same as male but lacks the red mark

**Juvenile:** same as female, some with a red mark near the forehead

**Nest:** cavity with a round entrance hole; male and female excavate; 1 brood per year

**Eggs:** 3–5; white without markings

**Incubation:** 11–12 days; female incubates during the day, male incubates at night

**Fledging:** 20–25 days; male and female feed the young

**Migration:** non-migrator

**Food:** insects, seeds; visits seed and suet feeders

**Compare:** The Hairy Woodpecker (p. 59) is larger. Look for the Downy's shorter, thinner bill.

**Stan's Notes:** This is one of the most abundant, widespread woodpeckers in the Dakotas, found throughout where trees are present. Stiff tail feathers help to brace it like a tripod as it clings to a tree. Like other woodpeckers, it has a long, barbed tongue to pull insects from tiny places. Mates drum on branches or hollow logs to announce territory, which is rarely larger than 5 acres (2 ha). Repeats a high-pitched "peek-peek" call. Male performs most of the brooding. During winter, it will roost in a cavity. Undulates in flight.

**female**  
**p. 129**



**breeding male**



**non-breeding male**



# Lark Bunting

*Calamospiza melanocorys*



SUMMER

**Size:** 6½" (16 cm)

**Male:** Short, stocky black bird with a large, broad head. White wing patches and large bluish-gray bill. Winter male is black, brown, gray and white-striped with white wing patches.

**Female:** overall brown with a heavily streaked chest, white belly, black vertical line on each side of white chin, may have a dark central spot on the chest, faint white eyebrows

**Juvenile:** similar to adult of the same sex

**Nest:** cup; female builds; 1-2 broods per year

**Eggs:** 4-6; pale blue with markings

**Incubation:** 11-13 days; female and male incubate

**Fledging:** 8-12 days; female and male feed young

**Migration:** complete, to southwestern states and Mexico

**Food:** insects, seeds

**Compare:** The breeding male's bold black-and-white plumage is hard to confuse with any other bird's. Look for the rather large broad head and large bill to help identify.

**Stan's Notes:** Common throughout, but is more abundant in the western third of the Dakotas in dry plains and sagebrush regions. Has short rounded wings. Has short rounded wings. Flying with shallow wingbeats, the male flashes white wing patches. Male takes to air to display to female, setting its wings in a V position and floating back, rocking like a butterfly, singing a most amazing song. Song is like the song of Old World larks, hence the common name. Will flock in fall with hundreds, if not thousands, of other Lark Buntings for migration.





WINTER

## Snow Bunting

*Plectrophenax nivalis*

**Size:** 7" (18 cm)

**Male:** Winter male has a white chin, breast and belly, and rusty brown head, back and shoulders. Small yellow bill. Black legs and feet. Breeding male is overall white with black-and-white wings.

**Female:** similar to breeding male, but lacks the all-white head

**Juvenile:** similar to winter male

**Nest:** cavity; female builds; 1-2 broods per year

**Eggs:** 4-7; green to blue with brown markings

**Incubation:** 10-16 days; female incubates

**Fledging:** 10-17 days; male and female feed young

**Migration:** complete to northern states

**Food:** insects, seeds

**Compare:** This bird is easy to identify since no other small sparrow-like bird has so much white.

**Stan's Notes:** A winter resident of the Dakotas. Often feeds on the ground along roads. Usually seen in flocks of up to 30 individuals of mixed ages and sexes. Individual Snow Buntings appear slightly different from each other; some are completely black and white, others are a combination of black, white, brown and rust. Winter plumage is seen from September to March. Sometimes seen with other winter birds such as Horned Larks and Lapland Longspurs. Female constructs a grass and moss nest in a cavity or on a cliff that is well protected from the weather. Young hatch at different times, so some leave the nest before others. Doesn't nest in the Dakotas.





female  
p. 139



male



SUMMER  
MIGRATION

# Rose-breasted Grosbeak

*Pheucticus ludovicianus*

**Size:** 7–8" (18–20 cm)

**Male:** Plump black-and-white bird with a large triangular, rose-colored patch on the breast. Wing linings are rose red. Large ivory bill.

**Female:** heavily streaked with obvious white eyebrows and orange-to-yellow wing linings

**Juvenile:** similar to female

**Nest:** cup; female and male construct; 1–2 broods per year

**Eggs:** 3–5; blue-green with brown markings

**Incubation:** 13–14 days; female and male incubate

**Fledging:** 9–12 days; female and male feed the young

**Migration:** complete, to Mexico, Central America and South America

**Food:** insects, seeds, fruit; comes to seed feeders

**Compare:** Male is very distinctive, with no look-alikes. Look for the rose breast patch to identify.

**Stan's Notes:** A summer resident, but more conspicuous when in small groups during spring and autumn migrations. Prefers a mature deciduous forest for nesting. Both sexes sing, but the male sings much louder and clearer. Sings a rich, robin-like song with a chip note in the tune. "Grosbeak" refers to the thick, strong bill, which is used to crush seeds. The rose patch varies in size and shape in each male. Males have white wing patches that flash during flight. Males arrive at the breeding grounds a few days before the females. Several males will come to seed feeders together in spring. When the females arrive, males become territorial and reduce their feeder visits. After fledging, young grosbeaks visit feeders with the adults.



A male Downy Woodpecker is perched on a light-colored, textured tree trunk. The bird has a black cap with a prominent red patch on the forehead. Its back and wings are black with white spots, and its underparts are white with black spots. The background is a soft-focus green with yellow flowers and red berries in the upper left corner.

male



A close-up of a female Downy Woodpecker's head. The bird has a black cap with a white stripe through the eye. The background is a solid red color.

female

# Hairy Woodpecker

*Leuconotopicus villosus*



YEAR-ROUND

**Size:** 9" (23 cm)

**Male:** Black-and-white woodpecker with a white belly. Black wings with rows of white spots. White stripe down the back. Long black bill. Red mark on the back of the head.

**Female:** same as male but lacks the red mark

**Juvenile:** grayer version of the female

**Nest:** cavity with an oval entrance hole; female and male excavate; 1 brood per year

**Eggs:** 3–6; white without markings

**Incubation:** 11–15 days; female incubates during the day, male incubates at night

**Fledging:** 28–30 days; male and female feed the young

**Migration:** non-migrator; moves around in winter to find food

**Food:** insects, nuts, seeds; comes to seed and suet feeders

**Compare:** Downy Woodpecker (p. 51) is much smaller and has a much shorter bill. Look for Hairy Woodpecker's long bill.

**Stan's Notes:** A common bird in wooded backyards. Announces its arrival with a sharp chirp before landing on feeders. Responsible for eating many destructive forest insects. Uses its barbed tongue to extract insects from trees. Tiny, bristle-like feathers at the base of the bill protect the nostrils from wood dust. Drums on hollow logs, branches or stovepipes in spring to announce territory. Prefers to excavate nest cavities in live aspen trees. Excavates a larger, more oval-shaped entrance than the round entrance hole of the Downy Woodpecker. Makes short flights from tree to tree.





SUMMER  
MIGRATION

## Red-headed Woodpecker

*Melanerpes erythrocephalus*

**Size:** 9" (22.5 cm)

**Male:** All-red head with a solid black back. White chest, belly and rump. Black wings with large white wing patches seen flashing in flight. Black tail. Gray legs and bill.

**Female:** same as male

**Juvenile:** gray brown with white chest, lacks any red

**Nest:** cavity; male builds with help from female; 1 brood per year

**Eggs:** 4–5; white without markings

**Incubation:** 12–13 days; female and male incubate

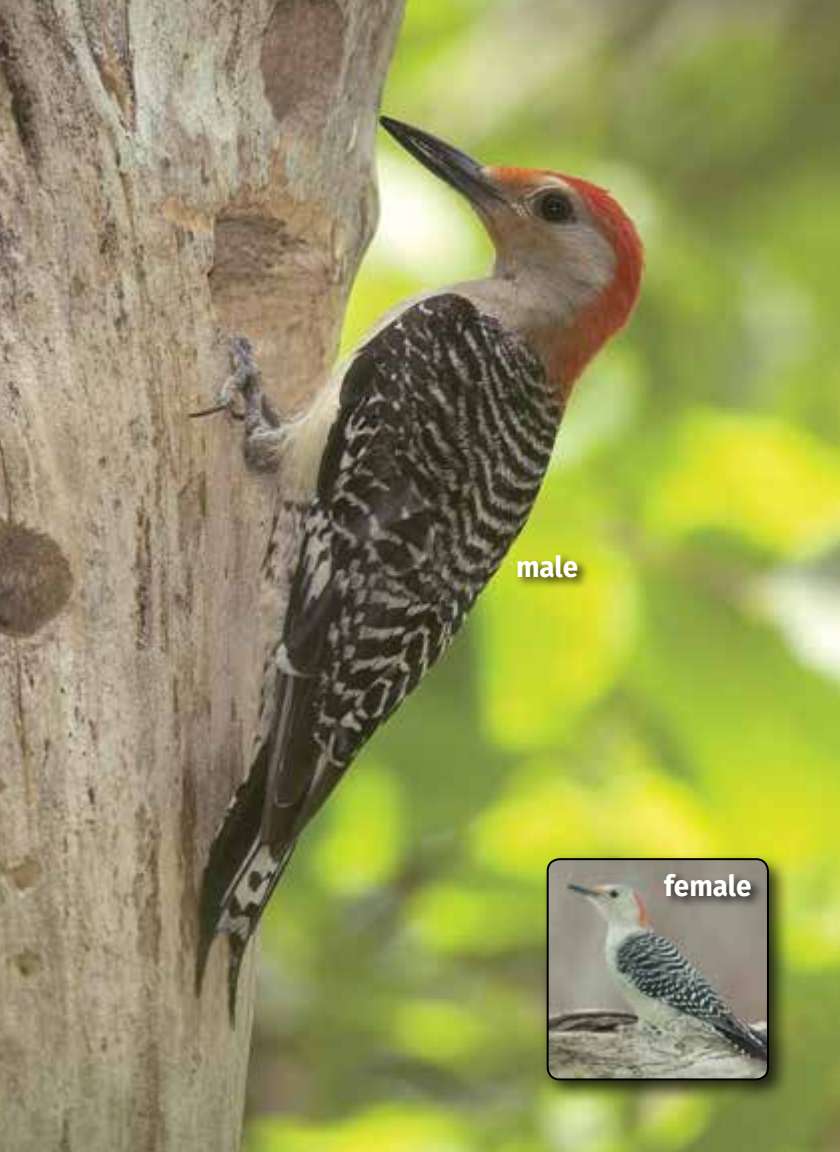
**Fledging:** 27–30 days; female and male feed the young

**Migration:** partial migrator to complete migrator; will move to areas with an abundant supply of nuts

**Food:** insects, nuts, fruit; visits suet and seed feeders

**Compare:** No other woodpecker in the Dakotas has an all-red head.

**Stan's Notes:** One of the few non-dimorphic woodpeckers, with males and females that look alike. Bill is strong enough to excavate a nest cavity only in soft, dead trees. Prefers open woodlands or woodland edges with many dead or rotting branches. Unlike other woodpeckers, which use nest cavities just once briefly, it may use the same cavity for several years in a row. Often perches on top of dead snags. Stores acorns and other nuts. Gives a shrill, hoarse "churr" call. Was once the most common of woodpeckers and now is very uncommon to rare. Population decline near 90 percent.



male



female





YEAR-ROUND

## Red-bellied Woodpecker

*Melanerpes carolinus*

**Size:** 9–9½" (23–24 cm)

**Male:** Black-and-white “zebra-backed” woodpecker with a white rump. Red crown extends down the nape of the neck. Tan chest. Pale-red tinge on the belly, often hard to see.

**Female:** same as male but with a light-gray crown and a red nape

**Juvenile:** gray version of adults; lacks a red crown and red nape

**Nest:** cavity; female and male excavate; 1 brood per year

**Eggs:** 4–5; white without markings

**Incubation:** 12–14 days; female incubates during the day, male incubates at night

**Fledging:** 24–27 days; female and male feed the young

**Migration:** non-migrator; moves around to find food

**Food:** insects, nuts, fruit; visits suet and seed feeders

**Compare:** Similar to the Northern Flicker (p. 185). Look for the zebra-striped back to help identify the Red-bellied Woodpecker.

**Stan's Notes:** Likes shady woodlands, forest edges and backyards. Digs holes in rotten wood to find spiders, centipedes, beetles and more. Hammers acorns and berries into crevices of trees for winter food. Returns to the same tree to excavate a new nest below that of the previous year. Often kicked out of nest hole by European Starlings. Undulating flight with rapid wingbeats. Gives a loud “querrr” call and a low “chug-chug-chug.” Named for the pale red tinge on its belly. Expanding its range all over the country.



female p.187



male





SUMMER  
MIGRATION

## Lesser Scaup

*Aythya affinis*

**Size:** 16–17" (40–43 cm)

**Male:** Appears mostly black with bold white sides and a gray back. Chest and head look nearly black, but head appears purple with green highlights in direct sun. Bright-yellow eyes.

**Female:** overall brown with a dull-white patch at the base of a light-gray bill; yellow eyes

**Juvenile:** same as female

**Nest:** ground; female builds; 1 brood per year

**Eggs:** 8–14; olive-buff without markings

**Incubation:** 22–28 days; female incubates

**Fledging:** 45–50 days; female teaches the young to feed

**Migration:** complete, to southern states, Mexico, Central America and northern South America

**Food:** aquatic plants and insects

**Compare:** Larger than American Coot (p. 41), which lacks male Scaup's white sides. The male Blue-winged Teal (p. 185) is slightly smaller, with a white crescent on its bill. The white sides and gray back help identify the male Lesser Scaup.

**Stan's Notes:** A summer resident in North Dakota. Seen in South Dakota during migration. A common diving duck. Submerges completely to feed on the bottom (unlike dabbling ducks, which tip forward to reach the bottom). Note the bold white stripe under the wings when in flight. The male leaves the female when she starts incubating eggs. Egg quantity (clutch size) increases with the female's age. Has an interesting babysitting arrangement: groups of young (crèches) are tended by one to three adult females.

female  
p. 189



male





SUMMER

## Ring-necked Duck

*Aythya collaris*

**Size:** 16–19" (41–48 cm)

**Male:** Striking black duck with light-gray-to-white sides. Blue bill with a bold white ring and a thinner ring at the base. Peaked head with a sloped forehead.

**Female:** brown with darker-brown back and crown, light-brown sides, gray face, white eye-ring, white ring around the bill, and peaked head

**Juvenile:** similar to female

**Nest:** ground; female builds; 1 brood per year

**Eggs:** 8–10; olive-gray to brown without markings

**Incubation:** 26–27 days; female incubates

**Fledging:** 49–56 days; female teaches the young to feed

**Migration:** complete, to southern states and Mexico

**Food:** aquatic plants and insects

**Compare:** Similar size as male Lesser Scaup (p. 65), which has a gray back unlike the black back of male Ring-necked Duck. Look for the blue bill with a bold white ring to identify the male Ring-necked Duck.

**Stan's Notes:** Usually in larger freshwater lakes rather than marshes, in small flocks or just pairs. Watch for this diving duck to dive underwater to forage for food. Springs up off the water to take flight. Flattens its crown when diving. Male gives a quick series of grating barks and grunts. Female gives high-pitched peeps. Named "Ring-necked" for its cinnamon collar, which is nearly impossible to see in the field. Also called Ring-billed Duck due to the white ring on its bill.

winter



breeding





SUMMER

## American Avocet

*Recurvirostra americana*

**Size:** 18" (45 cm)

**Male:** Black-and-white back, with a white belly. A long, thin upturned bill and long gray legs. Rusty-red head and neck during breeding season, gray in winter.

**Female:** similar to male, more strongly upturned bill

**Juvenile:** similar to adults, slight wash of rusty red on the neck and head

**Nest:** ground; female and male construct; 1 brood per year

**Eggs:** 3–5; light olive with brown markings

**Incubation:** 22–29 days; female and male incubate

**Fledging:** 28–35 days; female and male feed young

**Migration:** complete, to southwestern states, Mexico

**Food:** insects, crustaceans, aquatic vegetation, fruit

**Compare:** One of the few long-legged shorebirds in the Dakotas. Look for the rusty-red head of breeding Avocet and the long upturned bill.

**Stan's Notes:** A handsome, long-legged bird that prefers shallow alkaline, saline or brackish water, it is well adapted to arid western U.S. conditions. Uses its upturned bill to sweep from side to side across mud bottoms in search of insects. Both the male and female have a brood patch to incubate eggs and brood their young. Nests throughout the Dakotas in loose colonies of up to 20 pairs; all members defend against intruders together.

female  
p. 197



male





SUMMER  
MIGRATION  
WINTER

## Common Goldeneye

*Bucephala clangula*

**Size:** 18–20" (45–51 cm)

**Male:** Mostly white duck with a black back and a large, puffy, green head. Large white spot on the face. Bright-golden eyes. Dark bill.

**Female:** large dark-brown head with a gray body and a white collar, bright-golden eyes, yellow-tipped dark bill

**Juvenile:** same as female but has dark eyes

**Nest:** cavity; female lines an old woodpecker cavity; 1 brood per year

**Eggs:** 8–10; light green without markings

**Incubation:** 28–32 days; female incubates

**Fledging:** 56–59 days; female leads the young to food

**Migration:** complete to southern states and Mexico; winters in parts of the Dakotas

**Food:** aquatic plants, insects, fish, mollusks

**Compare:** The black-and-white male Lesser Scaup (p. 65) is similar but smaller. American Coot (p. 41) is smaller and lacks the bright-golden eyes and white spot in front of each eye.

**Stan's Notes:** Known for the loud whistling sound produced by its wings during flight. During late winter and early spring, the male performs elaborate mating displays that include throwing his head back and calling a raspy note. The female will lay some of her eggs in other goldeneye nests or in the nests of other species (called egg dumping), causing some mothers to incubate as many as 30 eggs in a brood. Named for its bright-golden eyes. Winters in the Dakotas wherever it finds open water.







YEAR-ROUND

# Black-billed Magpie

*Pica hudsonia*

**Size:** 20" (50 cm)

**Male:** Large black-and-white bird with a very long tail and white belly. Iridescent green wings and tail in direct sunlight. Large black bill. Black legs. White wing patches flash in flight.

**Female:** same as male

**Juvenile:** same as adult, but has a shorter tail

**Nest:** modified pendulous; male and female build; 1 brood per year

**Eggs:** 5–8; green with brown markings

**Incubation:** 16–21 days; female incubates

**Fledging:** 25–29 days; female and male feed young

**Migration:** non-migrator

**Food:** insects, carrion, fruit, seeds

**Compare:** Larger than the Common Grackle (p. 37). The contrasting black-and-white colors and the very long tail of the Black-billed Magpie distinguish it from the all-black American Crow (p. 43).

**Stan's Notes:** A wonderfully intelligent bird that is able to mimic dogs, cats and even people. Will often raid a barnyard dog dish for food. Feeds on a variety of food from roadkill to insects and seeds it collects from the ground. Easily identified by its bold black-and-white colors and long streaming tail. Travels in small flocks, usually family members, and tends to be very gregarious. Breeds in small colonies. Unusual dome nest (dome-shaped roof) deep within thick shrubs. Mates with same mate for several years. Prefers open fields with cattle or sheep, where it feeds on insects attracted to livestock.

soaring





SUMMER  
MIGRATION

# Osprey

*Pandion haliaetus*

**Size:** 21–24" (53–61 cm); up to 5½' wingspan

**Male:** Large eagle-like bird with a white chest, belly and head. Dark eye line. Nearly black back. Black “wrist” marks on the wings. Dark bill.

**Female:** same as male but slightly larger and with a necklace of brown streaks

**Juvenile:** similar to adults, with a light-tan breast

**Nest:** platform on a raised wooden platform, man-made tower or tall dead tree; female and male build; 1 brood per year

**Eggs:** 2–4; white with brown markings

**Incubation:** 32–42 days; female and male incubate

**Fledging:** 48–58 days; male and female feed the young

**Migration:** complete, to southern states and Mexico

**Food:** fish

**Compare:** The juvenile Bald Eagle (p. 81) is brown with white speckles. The adult Bald Eagle has an all-white head and tail. Look for the white belly and dark eye line to identify the Osprey.

**Stan's Notes:** The only species in its family, and the only raptor that plunges into water feetfirst to catch fish. Always near water. Can hover for a few seconds before diving. Carries fish in a head-first position for better aerodynamics. Wings angle back in flight. Often harassed by Bald Eagles for its catch. Gives a high-pitched, whistle-like call, often calling in flight as a warning. Mates have a long-term pair bond. May not migrate to the same wintering grounds. Was nearly extinct but is now doing well.



in flight



juvenile



SUMMER  
MIGRATION

# Black-crowned Night-Heron

*Nycticorax nycticorax*

**Size:** 22–27" (56–69 cm); up to 3½' wingspan

**Male:** A stocky, hunched and inactive heron with black back and crown, white belly and gray wings. Long dark bill and bright-red eyes. Short dull-yellow legs. Breeding adult has 2 long white plumes on crown.

**Female:** same as male

**Juvenile:** golden-brown head and back with white spots, streaked breast, yellow-orange eyes, brown bill

**Nest:** platform; female and male build; 1 brood per year

**Eggs:** 3–5; light blue without markings

**Incubation:** 24–26 days; female and male incubate

**Fledging:** 42–48 days; female and male feed the young

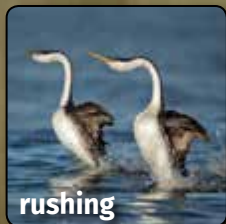
**Migration:** complete, to southern states, Mexico and Central America

**Food:** fish, aquatic insects

**Compare:** American Bittern (p. 217) is overall brown and has a yellow bill. A perching Great Blue Heron (p. 275) looks twice the size of a Black-crowned. Look for a short-necked heron with a black back and crown.

**Stan's Notes:** A very secretive bird, this heron is most active near dawn and dusk (crepuscular). It hunts alone, but it nests in small colonies. Roosts in trees during the day. Often squawks if disturbed from the daytime roost. Often seen being harassed by other herons during days. Stalks quiet backwaters in search of small fish and crabs.





# Western Grebe

*Aechmophorus occidentalis*



SUMMER

**Size:** 24" (60 cm)

**Male:** Long-necked, nearly all-black waterbird. White chin, neck, chest and belly. Long greenish-yellow bill. Bright-red eyes. Dark crown extends around eyes to base of bill. In winter, becomes light gray around eyes.

**Female:** same as male

**Juvenile:** similar to adult

**Nest:** platform; female and male construct; 1 brood per year

**Eggs:** 3-4; bluish white with brown markings

**Incubation:** 20-23 days; female and male incubate

**Fledging:** 65-75 days; female and male feed young

**Migration:** complete, to western coastal U.S.

**Food:** fish, aquatic insects

**Compare:** A familiar long-necked waterbird. Striking black-and-white plumage makes it hard to confuse with any other bird.

**Stan's Notes:** Well known for its unusual breeding dance, called rushing. Side by side with necks outstretched, mates spring to their webbed feet and dance across the water's surface (see inset). Often holds long stalks of water plants in bill when courting (weed dance, see inset). Its legs are positioned far back on the body, making it difficult to walk on ground. Shortly after choosing a large lake for breeding, it rarely flies until late in summer. Young ride on backs of adults, climbing on minutes after hatching. Nests in large colonies of up to 100 pairs on lakes with tall vegetation.

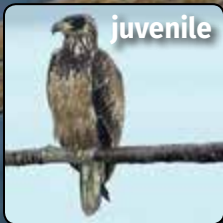




soaring



juvenile



soaring  
juvenile





YEAR-ROUND  
WINTER

## Bald Eagle

*Haliaeetus leucocephalus*

**Size:** 31–37" (79–94 cm); up to 7½' wingspan

**Male:** White head and tail contrast sharply with the dark-brown-to-black body and wings. Large, curved yellow bill and yellow feet.

**Female:** same as male but larger

**Juvenile:** dark brown with white speckles and spots on the body and wings; gray bill

**Nest:** massive platform, usually in a tree; female and male build; 1 brood per year

**Eggs:** 2–3; off-white without markings

**Incubation:** 34–36 days; female and male incubate

**Fledging:** 75–90 days; female and male feed the young

**Migration:** partial to non-migrator, to southern states; moves around to find open water and food

**Food:** fish, carrion, birds (mainly ducks)

**Compare:** The Turkey Vulture (p. 45) lacks the white head and white tail of adult Bald Eagle. Turkey Vulture has two-toned wings and flies with its wings in a V shape, unlike the straight-out wing position of the Eagle.

**Stan's Notes:** Nearly became extinct due to DDT poisoning and illegal killing. Returns to the same nest each year, adding more sticks and enlarging it to huge proportions, at times up to 1,000 pounds (450 kg). In their midair mating ritual, one eagle flips upside down and locks talons with another. Both tumble, then break apart to continue flight. Not uncommon for juveniles to perform this mating ritual even though they have not reached breeding age. Long-term pair bond but will switch mates when not successful at reproducing. Juveniles attain the white head and tail at 4–5 years of age.





SUMMER

# Tree Swallow

*Tachycineta bicolor*

**Size:** 5–6" (13–15 cm)

**Male:** Blue-green in spring, greener in fall. Changes color in direct sunlight. White from chin to belly. Long, pointed wing tips. Notched tail.

**Female:** similar to male but duller

**Juvenile:** gray-brown with a white belly and a grayish breast band

**Nest:** cavity; female and male line a vacant woodpecker cavity or nest box; 2 broods per year

**Eggs:** 4–6; white without markings

**Incubation:** 13–16 days; female incubates

**Fledging:** 20–24 days; female and male feed the young

**Migration:** complete, to southern states, Mexico and Central America

**Food:** insects

**Compare:** Purple Martin (p. 93) male is similar in color, but it is larger and lacks a white chest and belly. The Barn Swallow (p. 87) has a rusty belly and a long, deeply forked tail.

**Stan's Notes:** Most common along ponds, lakes and agricultural fields. Can be attracted to your yard with a nest box. Competes with Eastern Bluebirds for cavities and nest boxes. Builds a grass nest within and will travel long distances, looking for dropped feathers for the lining. Watch for it playing and chasing after feathers. Flies with rapid wingbeats, then glides. Gives a series of gurgles and chirps. Chatters when upset or threatened. Eats many nuisance bugs. Gathers in large flocks to migrate.



male



female  
p. 115

# Lazuli Bunting

*Passerina amoena*



SUMMER  
MIGRATION

**Size:** 5½" (14 cm)

**Male:** A turquoise-blue head, neck, back and tail. Cinnamon chest with cinnamon extending down flanks slightly. White belly. Two bold white wing bars. Non-breeding male has a spotty blue head and back.

**Female:** overall grayish brown, warm-brown breast, a light wash of blue on wings and tail, gray throat, light-gray belly and 2 narrow white wing bars

**Juvenile:** similar to adult of the same sex

**Nest:** cup; female builds; 2–3 broods per year

**Eggs:** 3–5; pale blue without markings

**Incubation:** 11–13 days; female incubates

**Fledging:** 10–12 days; female and male feed young

**Migration:** complete, to Mexico

**Food:** insects, seeds

**Compare:** The male Eastern Bluebird (p. 89) is larger, darker blue, has a darker-brown breast and lacks white wing bars.

**Stan's Notes:** This bunting is more common in the western half of the Dakotas. Strong association with water such as rivers and streams. Gathers in small flocks after breeding to hunt for insects and look for seeds. Has increased in population and expanded its range over the last century. Males sing from short shrubs and scrubby areas to attract females. Rarely perches on tall trees. Each male has his own unique combination of notes to produce his "own" song.





SUMMER

# Barn Swallow

*Hirundo rustica*

**Size:** 7" (18 cm)

**Male:** Sleek swallow. Blue-black back, cinnamon belly and reddish-brown chin. White spots on a long, deeply forked tail.

**Female:** same as male but with a whitish belly

**Juvenile:** similar to adults, with a tan belly and chin, and shorter tail

**Nest:** cup; female and male build; 2 broods per year

**Eggs:** 4–5; white with brown markings

**Incubation:** 13–17 days; female incubates

**Fledging:** 18–23 days; female and male feed the young

**Migration:** complete, to South America

**Food:** insects (prefers beetles, wasps, flies)

**Compare:** Cliff Swallow (p. 117) is smaller and lacks a distinctive, deeply forked tail. The Chimney Swift (p. 99) has a narrow pointed tail with wings longer than the body. Purple Martin (p. 93) is nearly 2 inches (5 cm) larger and has a dark-purple belly. Look for Barn Swallow's deeply forked tail.

**Stan's Notes:** Seen in wetlands, farms, suburban yards and parks. Of the six swallow species regularly found in the Dakotas, this is the only one with a deeply forked tail. Unlike other swallows, it rarely glides in flight. Usually flies low over land or water. Drinks as it flies, skimming water, or will sip water droplets on wet leaves. Bathes while flying through rain or sprinklers. Gives a twittering warble, followed by a mechanical sound. Builds a mud nest with up to 1,000 beak-loads of mud. Nests on barns and houses, under bridges and in other sheltered places. Often nests in colonies of 4–6 birds; sometimes nests alone.





**male**



**female**

# Eastern Bluebird

*Sialia sialis*



YEAR-ROUND  
SUMMER

**Size:** 7" (18 cm)

**Male:** Sky-blue head, back and tail. Rust-red breast and white belly.

**Female:** grayer than male, with a faint rusty breast and faint blue wings and tail

**Juvenile:** similar to female but with spots on the breast and blue wing markings

**Nest:** cavity, vacant woodpecker cavity or nest box; female adds a soft lining; 2 broods per year

**Eggs:** 4–5; pale blue without markings

**Incubation:** 12–14 days; female incubates

**Fledging:** 15–18 days; male and female feed the young

**Migration:** complete, to southern states

**Food:** insects, fruit; comes to shallow dishes with live or dead mealworms, and to suet feeders

**Compare:** Mountain Bluebird (p. 91) is the same size but lacks Eastern's rusty red breast. Blue Jay (p. 95) is considerably larger, with a crest and white markings.

**Stan's Notes:** A summer resident of open fields and agricultural areas, gathering in large family groups for migration. Once nearly eliminated from the Dakotas due to a lack of nest cavities. Thanks to people who installed thousands of nest boxes, bluebirds now thrive. Prefers open habitats, such as farm fields, pastures and roadsides, but also likes forest edges, parks and yards. Easily tamed. Often perches on trees or fence posts and drops to the ground to grab bugs, especially grasshoppers. Makes short flights from tree to tree. Song is a distinctive "churlee chur chur-lee." The rust-red breast is like that of the American Robin, its cousin.

**male**



**female**



# Mountain Bluebird

*Sialia currucoides*



SUMMER  
MIGRATION

**Size:** 7" (18 cm)

**Male:** Overall sky-blue bird with a darker blue head, back, wings and tail. White lower belly. Thin black bill.

**Female:** similar to male, but paler with a nearly gray head and chest and a whitish belly

**Juvenile:** similar to adult of the same sex

**Nest:** cavity, old woodpecker cavity, wooden nest box; female builds; 1–2 broods per year

**Eggs:** 4–6; pale blue without markings

**Incubation:** 13–14 days; female incubates

**Fledging:** 22–23 days; female and male feed young

**Migration:** complete, to Arizona, California and Mexico

**Food:** insects, fruit

**Compare:** Similar to Eastern Bluebird (p. 89) but lacks Eastern's rusty red breast.

**Stan's Notes:** Common in open country, nesting in the western Dakotas. Main diet is insects. Often hovers just before diving to the ground to grab an insect. Due to conservation of suitable nesting sites (dead trees with cavities and man-made nest boxes), populations have increased over the past 40 years. Like other bluebirds, Mountain Bluebirds take well to nest boxes and tolerate close contact with people. Female sits on baby birds (brood) for up to six days after the eggs hatch. Young imprint on their first nest box or cavity and then choose a similar type of box or cavity throughout their life. Any open field is a good place to look for Mountain Bluebirds.

**male**



**female**





SUMMER  
MIGRATION

# Purple Martin

*Progne subis*

**Size:** 8½" (21.5 cm)

**Male:** Iridescent with a purple-to-black head, back and belly. Black wings and a notched black tail.

**Female:** grayish-purple head and back, darker wings and tail, whitish belly

**Juvenile:** same as female

**Nest:** cavity; female and male line the cavity of the house; 1 brood per year

**Eggs:** 4–5; white without markings

**Incubation:** 15–18 days; female incubates

**Fledging:** 26–30 days; male and female feed the young

**Migration:** complete, to South America

**Food:** insects

**Compare:** Usually seen only in groups. The male Purple Martin is the only swallow with a very dark-purplish belly.

**Stan's Notes:** The largest swallow species in North America. Once nested in tree cavities; now nests almost exclusively in man-made, apartment-style houses. The most successful colonies often nest in multiunit nest boxes within 100 feet (30 m) of a human dwelling near a lake. Main diet consists of dragonflies, not mosquitoes, as once thought. Gives a continuous stream of chirps, creaks and rattles, along with a shout-like “churrr” and chortle. Often drinks in flight, skimming water, and bathes in flight, flying through rain. Returns to the same nest site each year; the males arrive before the females and yearlings. The young leave to form new colonies. Large colonies gather in fall before migrating to South America.



## BIRDING ON THE INTERNET

Birding online is a great way to discover additional information and learn more about birds. These websites will assist you in your pursuit of birds. Web addresses sometimes change a bit, so if one no longer works, just enter the name of the group into a search engine to track down the new address.

### Site

Author Stan Tekiela's homepage

Audubon Dakota Society

American Birding Association

Black Hills Raptor Center

The Cornell Lab of Ornithology

eBird

North Dakota Birding Society

South Dakota Ornithologists' Union

### Address

[naturesmart.com](http://naturesmart.com)

[dakota.audubon.org](http://dakota.audubon.org)

[aba.org](http://aba.org)

[blackhillsraptorcenter.org](http://blackhillsraptorcenter.org)

[birds.cornell.edu](http://birds.cornell.edu)

[ebird.org](http://ebird.org)

[ndbirdingsociety.com](http://ndbirdingsociety.com)

[sdou.org](http://sdou.org)



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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Naturalist, wildlife photographer and writer Stan Tekiela is the originator of the popular state-specific field guide series that includes the *Birds of Minnesota Field Guide*. Stan has authored more than 190 educational books, including field guides, quick guides, nature books, children's books and more, presenting many species of animals and plants.

With a Bachelor of Science degree in natural history from the University of Minnesota and as an active professional naturalist for more than 30 years, Stan studies and photographs wildlife throughout the United States and Canada. He has received national and regional awards for his books and photographs and is also a well-known columnist and radio personality. His syndicated column appears in more than 25 newspapers, and his wildlife programs are broadcast on a number of Midwest radio stations. You can follow Stan on Facebook and Twitter or contact him via his website, [naresmart.com](http://naresmart.com).



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### About the Author

Naturalist Stan Tekiela is an award-winning wildlife photographer and the author of many popular state-specific field guides. He has written educational books about wildlife, including children's books, quick guides and more, presenting birds, mammals, reptiles, amphibians, trees, wildflowers and cacti.

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