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Birds of the Great Plains: Family Mimidae (Mockingbirds and Thrashers)

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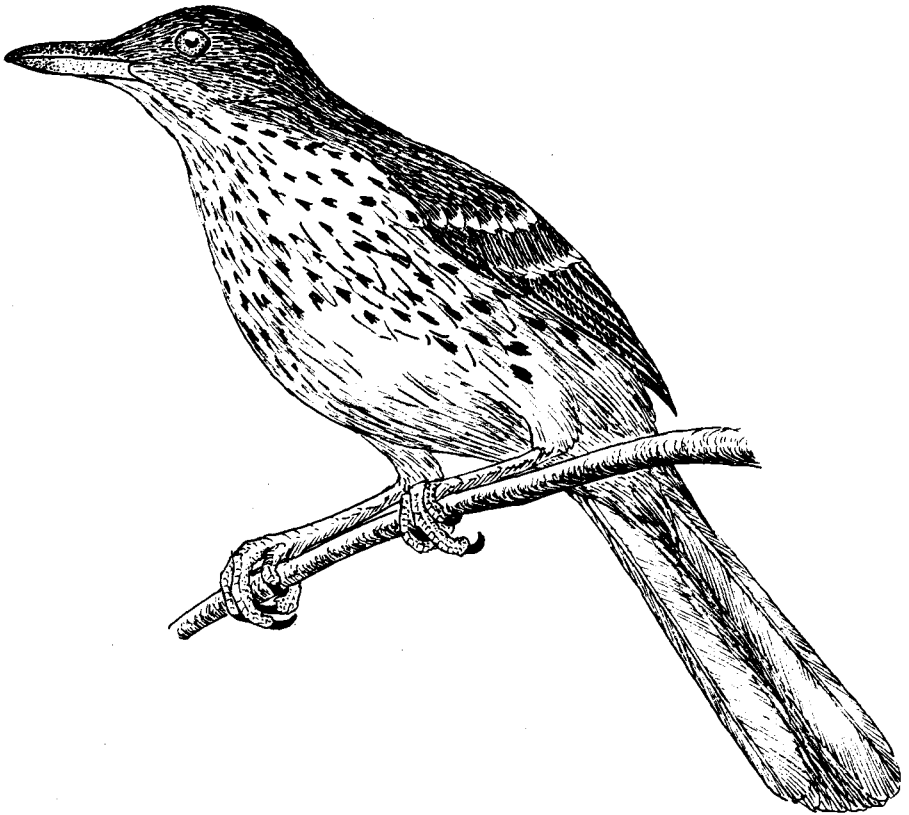
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FAMILY MIMIDAE
(MOCKINGBIRDS AND
THRASHERS)



Brown Thrasher

Mockingbird *Mimus polyglottos*

Breeding Status: The normal northern breeding limit of this species is probably northern Nebraska, although it is listed as a hypothetical breeding species for North Dakota and is rare but widespread in South Dakota. There are two Minnesota nesting records (*Loon* 49:229). In Nebraska the species breeds in the panhandle north to Sioux County, while in the Sandhills it occasionally breeds north to Thomas and Greeley counties and is most common in the southeast. In Kansas the species occurs throughout the state. In Colorado mockingbirds breed along the Platte Valley (Weld and Logan counties) and are locally common in the southern counties. They also breed through virtually all of Oklahoma and the Texas panhandle, as well as in northeastern New Mexico.

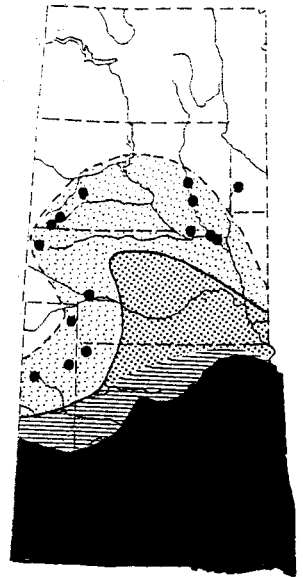
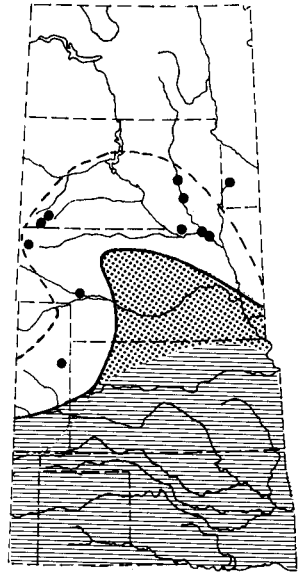
Breeding Habitat: Short, open woodlands, forest edges, farmlands, parks, cities and similar habitats are utilized, although treeless plains and deep forests are both avoided.

Nest Location: Nests are usually 2-10 feet above the ground, in trees, shrubs, or vines. They are rather loosely constructed of twigs, with an inner layer of leaves or grasses and a lining of rootlets and horsehairs. Small evergreen trees are favored nest sites, and evergreen vines are also used frequently.

Clutch Size and Incubation Period: From 3 to 5 eggs (27 Kansas clutches averaged 3.5). The eggs are greenish to bluish with heavy brown blotches or spots. Incubation lasts 12-13 days. Frequently double-brooded, and up to four broods have been reported.

Time of Breeding: Kansas breeding records are from April 21 to July 31, with most first clutches laid in early June. Breeding records in Oklahoma extend from April 9 (nest-building) to August 8 (nestlings), and dependent young have been observed as late as September 3.

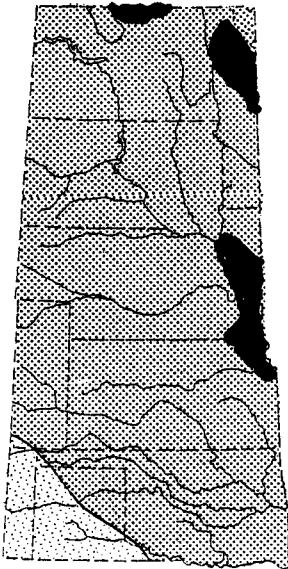
Breeding Biology: Mockingbirds tend to be fairly long-lived, and mates frequently remain unchanged for several years. In fall the pair bonds are broken; the female leaves the nesting area and (in southern states) the male remains on his territory through the winter. Females establish their own nonbreeding territories at this time, but in spring they again seek out a male's territory. In addition to territorial advertisement by singing, nest-building is a part of the male's courtship. He carries nesting material to potential nest sites within the territory until he attracts a female and they establish a pair bond. She may then accept one of his nesting sites or select a new one. Both sexes participate in completing the nest, and a new nest is usually constructed for each brood. One case of simultaneous bigamy has been reported. The female incubates, and though the male continues to guard the territory he



does not feed her. However, both sexes feed the young birds, which have a fledging period of 10-13 days, and they may continue to be fed by one or both parents for nearly a month.

Suggested Reading: Laskey 1962; Adkisson 1966.

Gray Catbird *Dumetella carolinensis*



Breeding Status: Breeds in suitable habitats nearly throughout the region, becoming less common toward the west and south, and reaching its southern limits in southeastern Colorado (Baca County), the Oklahoma panhandle (Cimarron County), and the eastern panhandle of Texas (Hemphill and Wilbarger counties).

Breeding Habitat: Catbirds breed in thickets, woodland edges, shrubby marsh borders, orchards, parks, and similar brushy habitats. A combination of dense vegetation and vertical or horizontal "edge" is a major criterion for nesting habitats.

Nest Location: Small brushy trees, vine tangles, or dense thickets are preferred nesting sites, with the nest usually 2-10 feet above the ground. It has a bulky foundation of stick, weed stems, twigs, leaves, and grass, with a lining of rootlets and often horsehair.

Clutch Size and Incubation Period: From 3 to 5 greenish blue eggs (43 Kansas clutches averaged 3.3 eggs; 11 North Dakota nests averaged 4.3). The incubation period is 12-13 days. Frequently double-brooded.

Time of Breeding: North Dakota egg dates extend from June 3 to June 29, with dependent young seen as late as August 20. Kansas egg dates are from May 11 to July 31, with a peak of egg-laying in late May.

Breeding Biology: Although catbirds are distinctly territorial, active defense seems to be largely limited to the vicinity of the nest site, and much of the territorial proclamation is achieved by singing from within the dense vegetation the birds frequent. In one Michigan study, most nests were within 2 feet of the side or top of shrub cover, in sites providing good visibility for the sitting bird. Males frequently "point out" possible nest sites by sitting on branches with their wings spread and manipulating twigs or other objects as if nest-building. However, once a nest is begun the female does most of the actual building, although the male may bring her materials. The first egg is usually laid 2 days after the nest is completed, and thereafter eggs are laid daily until the clutch has been completed. Incubation is by the female alone, and the male apparently feeds her very little during this time. The

young remain in the nest for an average of 11 days, and they are cared for by their parents for approximately 2 more weeks. In many cases the pair raises a second brood, but rarely if ever is a third brood successfully reared in central or northern states.

Suggested Reading: Nickell 1965; Bent 1948.

Brown Thrasher *Toxostoma rufum*

Breeding Status: Breeds in suitable habitats throughout most of the region, reaching its western limits in southwestern Nebraska, eastern Colorado (west at least to Adams and Crowley counties), the Oklahoma panhandle (rarely to Cimarron County), and probably the eastern parts of the Texas panhandle (nearest breeding record Wilbarger County). It has also bred at Clayton, New Mexico (Hubbard, 1978).

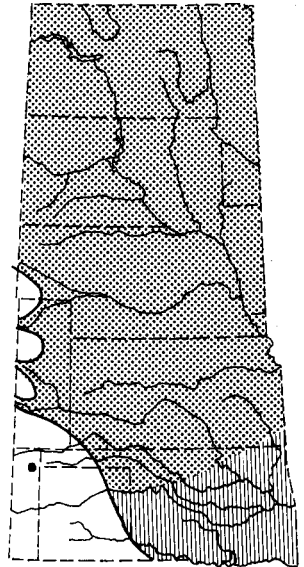
Breeding Habitat: The species frequents open brushy woods, or scattered patches or tracts of brush and small trees in open environments. Shelterbelts, woodlots, and suburban residential areas planted to shrubbery are also used.

Nest Location: Nests are in trees, shrubs, or vines in dense thickets, between 1 and 25 feet from the ground but usually less than 5 feet up. Ground nests are apparently common in New England but not in the Great Plains. The nest is loosely constructed of thorny twigs, leaves, and grasses with a deep cup lined with rootlets. The outside diameter of the nest averages 12 inches, and it is about 4 inches high.

Clutch Size and Incubation Period: From 2 to 5 greenish blue eggs (102 Kansas clutches averaged 3.6, and 6 North Dakota clutches averaged 4.3). The eggs are pale bluish white with small brown speckles. The incubation period is 12-13 days. Frequently double-brooded in southern states.

Time of Breeding: North Dakota egg dates are from May 20 to July 8, with dependent young seen as late as July 23. In Kansas, egg records span the period May 1 to July 20, with a peak in mid-May. Oklahoma egg records are from April 12 to July 10, with dependent young seen as late as August 24.

Breeding Biology: Males of this migratory species usually arrive on their breeding areas a few days ahead of females and apparently establish nesting territories almost immediately, although territorial singing may not begin for 10 days or more. Once a territory has been established, the males become very sedentary, and all the nests of the season are built within this territory.

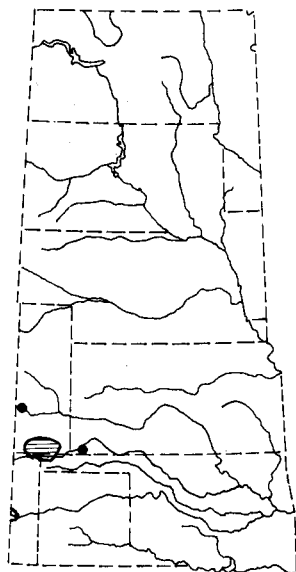




Brown thrashers and catbirds have very similar territorial requirements, and at times thrashers will evict catbirds from their territory. Incubation is primarily by the female, and both birds also help brood the young, although males seem to be less efficient than females. The average nestling period is 11 days, but in some cases the female leaves the care of the young to the male soon after hatching and begins a second nest. In other cases the two parents may each take part of the brood after they fledge, later joining to begin a second nesting effort. Studies of banded birds have indicated that birds sometimes change mates between broods, even when the original mate is still available.

Suggested Reading: Bent 1948; Erwin 1935.

Curve-billed Thrasher *Toxostoma curvirostre*



Breeding Status: Very rare or local breeder in southeastern Colorado (Baca County, *Colorado Field Ornithologist* 11:16), southwestern Kansas (Kearny County) and the Black Mesa of extreme northwestern Oklahoma (Cimarron County). In New Mexico it breeds in the Cimarron Valley of Union County and east to the Conchas Lake area of San Miguel County. This species is apparently now extending its breeding range eastward in Oklahoma (G. M. Sutton, pers. comm.), and bred in Morton County Kansas, in 1978.

Breeding Habitat: Arid semidesert to desert habitats, especially those with tall cacti, yuccas, and thorny brush, are favored.

Nest Location: With few exceptions, nests are in tall cholla cacti, 3-5 feet above the ground. The nests are bulky, about 10 inches in diameter, constructed of thorny twigs and lined with fine grasses, rootlets, and sometimes hair. Sometimes the old nests of cactus wrens are used as a foundation.

Clutch Size and Incubation Period: From 2 to 4 eggs, usually 3. The eggs are green to bluish with brown speckling or spotting. The incubation period is about 13 days. Regularly double-brooded.

Time of Breeding: The breeding season in Oklahoma is from April (heavily incubated eggs reported April 24) through the summer (newly fledged young found as late as October 2). Records from New Mexico also indicate a prolonged nesting season.

Breeding Biology: At least in many parts of their breeding range these thrashers are permanent residents, and pairs apparently remain mated throughout the winter. In some areas they coexist with Bendire thrashers, competing with them and generally being

more successful, at least in the vicinity of Tucson, Arizona. Probably the birds maintain the same territory in successive years; at least as many as four old thrasher nests have been found in a single bush containing a new thrasher nest and five old cactus wren nests as well. Both sexes are said to participate in incubation and in the care of the young. The birds remain in the nest 14-18 days and do not become independent of their parents until they are about 40 days old. Studies on hand-raised birds indicate that young thrashers are apparently not innately able to recognize and respond appropriately to potential predators such as birds and reptiles before that age. Typically two broods are raised each season, with a second clutch begun about 2-3 weeks after the first brood has fledged. The birds either use the same nest or initiate a new one nearby.

Suggested Reading: Bent 1948; Ambrose 1963.

Sage Thrasher

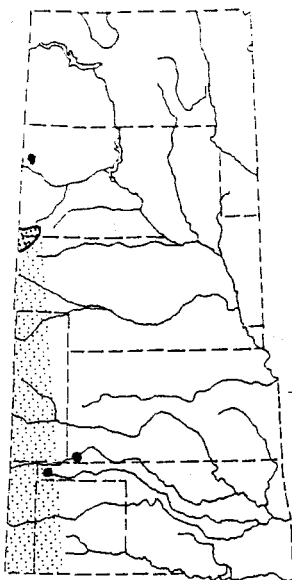
Oreoscoptes montanus

Breeding Status: An uncommon to rare breeder in southwestern South Dakota (Buffalo Gap National Grassland) and possibly a very rare breeder in northwestern Nebraska (Sioux County, *Nebraska Bird Review* 40:71). It is considered a hypothetical breeding species in North Dakota, and in Colorado it is a common breeder in western areas, though specific breeding records seem to be lacking east of Fremont County. There is a single breeding record for southwestern Kansas (Morton County) and an early nesting record for Cimarron County, Oklahoma. There are no breeding records for northeastern New Mexico or the Texas panhandle.

Breeding Habitat: The species is closely associated with sage-dominated grasslands or similar shrubby aridlands.

Nest Location: Nests are in low shrubs, especially sagebrush, or on the ground. They are typically from a few inches to about 3 feet above the ground, well hidden among the dense shrubbery. They are bulky structures of twigs with a lining of fine grasses, rootlets, and sometimes hair or fur. A few nests have had platforms of twigs above them, seemingly to provide protection from the sun.

Clutch Size and Incubation Period: From 3 to 7 eggs, usually 4-5. The eggs are blue to greenish blue with brownish spotting. The incubation period is 14-17 days, averaging 15. Single-brooded, but second nestings are known (*Auk* 95: 580-82).



Time of Breeding: Nests with eggs have been found in Colorado as early as May 13, and nestlings as early as June 24. The single Oklahoma egg record is for June 13.

Breeding Biology: Relatively little has been written on the breeding biology of this arid-adapted thrasher. Some early descriptions suggested a territorial song flight, with the bird zigzagging low over the ground, uttering a warbling song, and landing with upraised and fluttering wings. Apparently both sexes incubate, and incubation probably begins the day before the last egg is laid. The nestling period is 11-13 days. When bringing food to the young, the adults are highly secretive, landing on a sagebrush about 10 feet away, then approaching the nest while hidden from view. Pairs often remain mated during successive years, and the birds are sometimes rather long-lived, with one banded individual known to have reached 13 years.

Suggested Reading: Killpack 1970; Bent 1948.

