

BIRDS OF THE EASTERN SIERRA

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The Eastern Sierra is home to a wide variety of birds year-round, while many others migrate through. Following are descriptions of birds common to the Mammoth Lakes area. The high desert marshes and lakes east of US 395 host different birds, including ducks, grebes, terns, avocets, willets, and phalaropes, while sagebrush country has additional species, including shrikes, nighthawks, Brewer’s sparrows, thrashers, magpies, horned larks, towhees, kingbirds, harriers, and kestrels. On a lucky day, the soaring flight of a bald or golden eagle may even be witnessed. For more information on Eastern Sierra birds, explore *references* at the end of this section.

American robin (*Turdus migratorius*)

The American robin is a familiar bird signifying the arrival of spring, often seen in an erect stance quietly listening for bugs in grassy fields. The male has a deep reddish-colored breast and dark gray back, while the female is lighter and duller in color. Robins build nests of twigs, grass, and mud, often in the fork of a tree, and feed on worms, berries, and insects, such as caterpillars, beetles, and grasshoppers. The song of the robin is a clear, melodious carol, with rising and falling short phrases.

Brewer’s blackbird (*Euphagus cyanocephalus*)

The Brewer’s blackbird is a widespread, year-round resident of the Eastern Sierra. The male is all black with a glossy purple sheen on the head, green gloss on the body, and yellow eyes. The female is deep gray-brown, lighter on the underside, with brown eyes. Brewer’s blackbirds build nests of twigs, conifer needles, grass, and mud on the ground, in shrubs, or in trees, and they often nest in colonies of up to 20 pairs. Breeding season lasts from early April

Photo by Fred Fallon⁶

to late July, and the male may have more than one mate. Blackbirds forage on the ground, feeding on insects, spiders, snails, seeds, and grain.

Cassin's purple finch (*Carpodacus cassinii*)

This finch is the size of a sparrow, with a brown neck, back, wings, and tail. The rump, throat, and breast of the male are pale rose, with a deep rosy red patch on the top of his head, especially noticeable during breeding season. The female is brown, streaked with gray. They are commonly found in small flocks at 8,000 to 9,500 feet, where they often build nests of twigs, lined with finer material, in the tips of pine branches. They feed on buds, seeds, and insects in trees, bushes, and on the ground. Although they descend to lower elevations for the winter, they are a year-round resident in the Eastern Sierra.

Clark's nutcracker (*Nucifraga columbiana*)

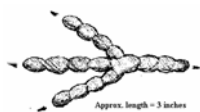
The Clark's nutcracker is slightly larger than a robin with a black beak, light gray head and body, and a white tail with black center feathers. Their wings are black with contrasting white patches. They are noisy, conspicuous, and smart birds, like their relative, the Stellar's jay.



The nutcracker shares a symbiotic relationship with the whitebark pine, meaning that their interaction benefits both species. Whitebark pine seeds do not disperse on the wind like most pine seeds and require the services of the Clark's nutcracker to disperse and establish. In the fall when the cones are ripe, the Clark's nutcracker pries them open with their strong beak to remove the seeds, storing up to a hundred in a sublingual throat pouch. They then bury small caches for future consumption. Studies have shown that a single bird can cache up to 98,000 seeds in one season. In heavy seed years, the nutcracker retrieves only about half of its seeds, leaving the rest to potentially germinate into new whitebark pine saplings (see "whitebark pine" in *Plant Communities of the Eastern Sierra*).

The Clark's nutcracker continues to store food late into the fall, caching pinyon and Jeffrey pine seeds at lower elevations. These snow free caches allow the nutcracker to nest during late winter and feed their young in the spring, months earlier than other Sierra birds. By mid-summer, most nutcrackers have worked their way back to their whitebark seed caches at or near treeline.

Common raven (*Corvus corax*)



The common raven is one of the most frequently seen birds in the Mammoth Lakes area. They are the largest species of songbird and the largest bird in the world that is completely black. Renowned as excellent fliers, they are often seen soaring at great heights and are sometimes mistaken for

hawks since they soar, hover, and circle like raptors.



Ravens mate for life, with the male building a bulky nest of branches and twigs lined with bark and other soft materials. The female incubates the eggs and is fed by the male. Their diet consists of insects, seeds, nuts, berries, eggs, nestlings, mollusks, carrion, and small vertebrates. Ravens are very intelligent birds with a large repertoire of vocalizations, including an unmistakable deep resonant "kaw," as well as a sound like a wood block instrument.

Dark-eyed junco (*Junco hyemalis*)



Four subspecies of dark-eyed junco are recognized and all tend to hybridize and interbreed. The most common dark-eyed junco in the Sierra is the Oregon junco. They are about the size of a sparrow, with a black head and breast, whitish beak, rusty brown back and wings, gray underparts, and pink legs and feet. The most distinctive marking on this bird is the conspicuous flash of white from the outer tail feathers during flight. The dark-eyed junco feeds mainly on seeds and sometimes insects, picking out

frozen bugs from snowbanks in late spring and summer. Nests are built on the ground, in shrubs, or in low tree branches.

Hermit thrush (*Catharus guttatus*)

The hermit thrush is the size of a sparrow with a grayish-brown head, back, and wings, a rusty tail, and a speckled throat and breast. They mainly feed on insects, along with seeds and berries, and spend much of their time in the shade, near cover, nesting in small trees. Characteristic behaviors include frequently raising and lowering their tail, but they are more often heard than seen. The hermit thrush's clear flute-like notes are among the most beautiful of all song birds. During the mating season in June and July, their territorial nesting and feeding calls of three high notes, followed by a slur down the scale can be easily heard in red fir forests at about 8,500 to 9,500 feet in elevation (especially east of Horseshoe Lake and along the Crystal Lake trail).



Photo by Marcus Martin

Mountain bluebird (*Sialia currucoides*)

Slightly larger than a sparrow, the mountain bluebird is one of the few brightly colored local birds. The male is a rich azure blue, except for a whitish belly, while the female is a dull brown with a touch of blue on the rump, tail, and wings. Bluebirds are common in lower meadows but can be seen as high as treeline. They fly from low perches to catch insects on the ground, or dive for insects from a low hover. Insects make up most of their diet, but they also feed on berries. Bluebirds build nests of stems, roots, grasses, and bark in dead snags, old woodpecker holes, or natural hollows.

Mountain chickadee (*Poecile gambeli*)



Mountain Chickadee
by Larry McQueen

The mountain chickadee is a small bird that lives year-round in the Eastern Sierra. Smaller than sparrows, mountain chickadees have a black head and neck, gray back and tail, and a lighter colored underside. They are very active, curious, and quick moving birds that are heard more often than seen with their distinctive "chick-a-dee" call. They are also referred to as the "cheeseburger bird" due to their spring/summer call that sounds similar to "cheese-bur-ger." Living in forested areas, they can be seen alone or in loose flocks eating insects, fruit, and seeds. They are relatively tame and are sometimes seen hanging upside down from tree branches foraging for food. Both parents raise their clutch of six to eight eggs in a nest that is four to 10 feet off the ground in a tree cavity or nest box.

Northern flicker (*Colaptes auratus*)

Northern flickers are members of the woodpecker family, although they forage primarily on the ground by probing the soil and occasionally tree trunks with their powerful beak. Their diet consists mainly of ants, along with other insects, acorns, seeds, and fruit. The back and wings of the flicker are brown with black bars, the undersides of the wings and tail are salmon red, and their underparts are white with distinct black spots. They have a conspicuous white patch on their rump, and the male has a red "moustache." Flickers prefer open forests of all types, and breed from early May to late July.



Photo by A. Wilson

Steller's jay (*Cyanocitta stelleri*)



Slightly larger than a robin, Steller's jays are seen year-round in the Sierra Nevada and are easily identified by a blackish crest on top of their head and a deep blue body, wings, and tail. They are intelligent, bold birds possessing a variety of calls, most commonly harsh and raucous. However, near their own nests, built of twigs and mud, Steller's jays are quiet and secretive. Their main foods are nuts, grains, and insects, but being very resourceful, they also frequent bird feeders and campgrounds, where scraps are plentiful.

Western tanager (*Piranga ludoviciana*)

Slightly larger than a sparrow, the western tanager is common from 7,500 to 9,000 feet in elevation. The breeding male has a brightly colored red head, with a yellow body, black back and wings, and two distinctive wing bars. The red disappears in the autumn and winter. The female is yellowish below and dull olive above, with white and yellow wing bars. The western tanager nests toward the top of branches and is relatively unafraid of people, readily coming to feeding trays.



Photo by D.A. Rintoul¹⁰

White-crowned sparrow (*Zonotrichia leucophrys*)



Photo by George Jameson¹¹

This sparrow has a smooth, grayish breast and a puffy crown striped with black and white. They are commonly found in willows near mountain meadows and lakes from about 7,500 to 9,000 feet in elevation. They build nests of twigs and grasses lined with soft material on the ground or in low branches of willows, feeding on insects in the summer and seeds and weed sprouts in the winter. Five subspecies exist in the Sierra, with great geographic variation in song.

White-headed woodpecker (*Picoides albolarvatus*)

The white-headed woodpecker has a black body with a white outer wing patch that is conspicuous in flight. The male has a small red patch on the back of the head. This is the only woodpecker with a white head. They forage for insects in trees with thick, creviced bark that they flake off with their beak. Their diet mainly consists of insects, although they also peel off pinecone scales to eat the seeds. The white-headed woodpecker breeds from mid-April to early August, preferring old stumps and snags for nesting. They are year-round residents in the Eastern Sierra, but often migrate downslope in the winter.



Photo by K. Ransom¹²

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