

Songbirds of Missouri

American Robin



The American robin belongs to the bird family Turdidae, a group of species commonly known as the thrushes. This family, which has 304 species, consists primarily of songbirds with large eyes, slender bills and strong legs. This bird's name is derived from its similarities to the European robin (*Erithacus rubecula*), an unrelated species.

Bald eagles and an owl named "Woodsy" are birds that are well-known symbols of ecological recovery. But a better representative of the environmental movement might be a bird which played an important role in starting it; the American robin.

This orange-breasted, clear-sounding bird has been honored in songs and poetry for many generations. Although it has long been thought of as a harbinger of spring, the robin is actually a year-round resident throughout much of its range, including Missouri. Its entire range extends from southern Canada to the Gulf of Mexico.

The robin's ability to adapt to a variety of habitats is one reason it is seen in so many places. In spring and summer, robins can be seen in backyards, parks and other urban and rural environments where they feed on earthworms, insects, berries and fruit.



Females begin building cup-shaped nests in late March or April, and lay three to five blue-green eggs. They incubate the eggs for approximately 14 days. Offspring are usually ready to fly from the nest in 15 days. Robins usually have two broods per year.

Because robins can be seen in Missouri year-round, the idea that the bird returns to Missouri in spring from a winter hiatus in warmer states isn't really accurate. Still, there is a reason for this perception.

In winter, robins gather in huge flocks, especially in the southern part of Missouri where they are joined by other birds that have flown in from colder regions to the north. Because they're clumped together at select roosting sites, the robins are seen much less frequently in winter. When spring finally does arrive, however, they begin their courtship and mating routines, spreading out and becoming more visible in yards and parks across the state. So while they may not be returning here from warmer regions, their reappearance in your backyard from their winter roosting sites still marks a change of seasons.

A half-century ago, a noticeable reduction of robins in some parts of the country contributed to a landmark change in environmental thinking. In the 1950s, a study in Michigan reported a declining number of robins in areas

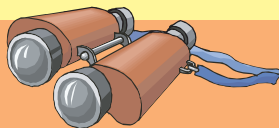
where elm trees had been sprayed with the pesticide DDT. The pesticide had been used to get rid of beetles that were spreading Dutch elm disease. The study concluded that as a result of the spraying, earthworms and caterpillars had accumulated DDT in their bodies. The robins were then indirectly poisoned and died when they ate the earthworms and caterpillars. Eagles are another bird that were harmed by DDT. After ingesting the chemical, the bird produced eggs that were brittle and easily broken, which hampered its ability to reproduce.

Today, robins are a common sight in Missouri backyards and elsewhere around the country. If you'd like to make your yard more robin-friendly, include an area of turned soil, such as a garden or flower bed, where the birds can easily get worms and mud for nest-building. Robins will often use nesting shelves, which can be simple boards attached under the eaves of a house or an out-building. Planting native berry-producing bushes or trees, as well as adding a bird bath, will also attract them.

Visit your nearest Missouri Department of Conservation office for more information about attracting robins or other types of birds to your yard.

(Missouri Show Me Standards: S.3, S.4, S.8)

Be a Bird Watcher!



Look...

Robins are year-round residents in Missouri, and have adapted to a variety of habitats. In general they need open ground to forage and woodland or shrubby areas for nesting and roosting. In the spring and summer, they can be seen in backyards, parks, and other urban and rural environments.

...and Listen

The common robin call sounds something like "cheerily, cheer-up, cheer-up, cheerily, cheer-up, cheer-up." Their calls can also be a sharp "chup" or a high-pitched whistle.

Learn More

Companion activities for this series can be accessed at www.mo-nie.com using code: birdteach