Spring Birds in McHenry County

First Arrivals and Year Round Residents

Early March to Early April

Adult Male American Goldfinch. Photo: Mike’s Birds

Online resources to discover nature, MCCD.me/e-learning
Welcome to Springtime Birding in McHenry County!

Wild places in McHenry County nurture many year-round resident bird species that become more active as the weather warms. The prairies, oak savannas, wetlands, and woodlands of this area also provide important nesting and feeding habitat for all kinds of migratory birds who arrive or pass through each spring and fall. Our spring migration season, from March to May, is one of the best times to learn about northern Illinois birds.

Birding, also known as birdwatching, is the process of observing and identifying bird species. This guide will help **novice birders** get started with spotting common mid-spring bird arrivals in McHenry County. Many of these birds flock to neighborhoods as well as protected natural areas, so you may see them on a walk in the woods or during a stroll down your street. **Experienced birders** may also find this guide useful as a refresher or quick-start list. Happy birding!

*If you want to see birds even closer to home, look for the species in this guide that are marked with a bird house. These species are attracted to backyard feeders and habitat, making birding at your own window simple and fun for the whole family! Check the Resources at the end of this guide to learn more about bird-friendly backyards.*

**Tips for Beginner Birders**

**What do I need to start birding?** All you really need is a place to observe birds and your own eyes. However, most birders find that binoculars and a good bird identification guide make it easier and more enjoyable to spot and identify birds. Check the Resources page at the end of this guide for more information about binoculars and guides.

**Where should I go to see birds?** Public parks, trails, and conservation areas are great places for a birding adventure. And don’t forget to look in your own backyard and around your neighborhood! Many species can be spotted around the edges of shopping centers, subdivisions, and apartment complexes. The more you observe your surroundings, the more birds you will start to see everywhere.

**What if I need to stay home or can’t take a walk?** That’s the perfect opportunity to bring birds to your yard, balcony, patio, or porch! Bird feeders and food are sold online and at hardware, grocery, and big box stores. But feeding birds doesn’t have to be complicated or expensive. You can even make bird feeders out of items around the house or in your recycling bin. Check the Resources page of this guide for more information about attracting birds to your backyard.

**How do I develop my birding skills?** It’s pretty simple! Just listen and watch the world around you. Move slowly and quietly and observe your surroundings in detail. As you become familiar with common local bird species, you’ll be able to quickly and easily tell what kind of birds you see and hear. And of course, it’s fun to share your birding adventure with friends or family!

Another way to challenge yourself as a birder is by creating a “life list” of bird species to spot and check off as your skills grow. A good introduction to “life lists” can be found at [www.backyardnature.net/birdlist.htm](http://www.backyardnature.net/birdlist.htm).
American Robin
Some Robins stay here year-round, roosting in trees over the winter and becoming active and more visible as the weather warms. They are a familiar spring sight everywhere, from gardens, parks, and yards to farm fields, woodlands, and forests. Robins can be seen hopping along the ground and listening for the movement of tasty invertebrates in the top layer of soil. They also eat fruit and insects. Robins lay sky-blue eggs in nests made from grass and mud, tucked into tree branches or under the eaves of buildings.

Did You Know? You can attract this bird to your yard with suet, sunflower seeds, peanuts, fruit, and mealworms.

ID Tips: Males have a gray back, darker gray head and throat, white underside and a warm orange belly and breast. Females have identical coloring, but in subdued tones. Up to 6.7” long.

Listen to Calls: [www.allaboutbirds.org/guide/American_Robin/sounds](http://www.allaboutbirds.org/guide/American_Robin/sounds)

Scientific Name: *Turdus migratorius*

Black-Capped Chickadee
A common sight flocking to backyard bird feeders, this inquisitive and acrobatic bird lives in northern Illinois year-round. Listen for its cheerful, familiar calls, which sound like “spring’s here” and “chick a dee dee dee.” Researchers have discovered that some Chickadees mimic elements of human language in their calls, perhaps due to their natural curiosity and adaptability in living near people. Look for this little bird in forests, open woodlands, shrubby thickets, parks, and yards. They eat insects, seeds, and fruit.

Did You Know? You can attract this bird to your yard with suet, peanuts, mealworms, and sunflower, safflower, and nyjer seeds.

ID Tips: Males and females have the same gray back, paler gray belly and breast, white head, and black cap and throat. Up to 5.9” long.

Listen to Calls: [www.allaboutbirds.org/guide/Black-capped_Chickadee/sounds](http://www.allaboutbirds.org/guide/Black-capped_Chickadee/sounds)

Scientific Name: *Poecile atricapillus*
**Downy Woodpecker**
This acrobatic, active little woodpecker lives in the Midwest year-round and is a frequent visitor to backyard bird feeders. Look for their distinctive black and white colors flitting from tree to tree in woodlands, gardens, parks, yards, and fencerows, and listen for their drumming on wood as they forage for insects and spiders. Woodpeckers are also known to eat acorns, berries, grains, seeds, suet, and peanut butter.

**Did You Know?** You can attract this bird to your yard with peanuts, suet, mealworms, and sunflower or safflower seeds.

**ID Tips:** Males have bright checkered black and white coloring, a white breast, belly and throat, and a tiny bright red cap. Females look the same but do not have a red cap. Up to 6.7” long.

**Listen to Calls:** [www.allaboutbirds.org/guide/Downy_Woodpecker/sounds](http://www.allaboutbirds.org/guide/Downy_Woodpecker/sounds)

**Scientific Name:** *Dryobates pubescens*

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**Eastern Bluebird**
This colorful migratory bird is found across North America and as far south as Nicaragua. Many birders look forward to their bright return each spring! Look for their unique blue and orange colors out in open spaces dotted with trees and sparse understory. This includes parks, savannas, pastures, yards, and golf courses. Bluebirds often seek out nest boxes and bird houses to raise their young. They eat insects and fruit as well as the occasional small animal, like frogs.

**Did You Know?** You can attract this bird to your yard with suet, peanuts, mealworms, and fruit.

**ID Tips:** Males have a brilliant royal blue back and head, a warm red-brown breast and throat, and a white underside. Females have identical coloring in subdued shades, with gray-blue and paler red-brown feathers. Up to 8.3” long.

**Listen to Calls:** [www.allaboutbirds.org/guide/Eastern_Bluebird/sounds](http://www.allaboutbirds.org/guide/Eastern_Bluebird/sounds)

**Scientific Name:** *Siala sialis*
### Northern Cardinal
Cardinals live here year-round and are common, cheery visitors to bird feeders and residential areas. Look for their red colors and listen for their perky “birdie birdie birdie” call in dense shrubby and wooded areas. This includes hedges, wooded edges, thickets, parks, and yards. Cardinals enjoy seeds, fruit, and insects.

#### Did You Know?
You can attract this bird to your yard with sunflower and safflower seed, peanuts, cracked corn, and millet.

#### ID Tips:
- **Males** are scarlet red with a perky, pointed crest, orange bill, and a distinct black mask across the front of the face. Females share the same shape but a completely different coloring. They are a red-tinged tan with deeper red wings and tail, and no mask on the face. Up to 9.1” long.

#### Scientific Name:
*Cardinalis cardinalis*

#### Listen to Calls:
[www.allaboutbirds.org/guide/Northern_Cardinal/sounds](http://www.allaboutbirds.org/guide/Northern_Cardinal/sounds)

### Hairy Woodpecker
Hairy Woodpeckers look similar to their smaller cousins, Downy Woodpeckers. Look for a larger bodied bird with fluffy little feathers around the base of its long bill. You will see Hairy Woodpeckers hammering for insects and larvae on the trunks and main branches of large trees. They also eat fruit and seeds. Mature woodlands, wooded edges in parks and yards, orchards, and shady cemeteries are good places to spot this bird.

#### Did You Know?
You can attract this bird to your yard with sunflower and safflower seeds, peanuts, suet, and mealworms.

#### ID Tips:
- Males and females are boldly patterned in contrasting black and white. Look for black wings checkered with white, two white stripes on the head, and a large white patch in the center of a black back. Males also have a small patch of red on the back of the head. Up to 10.2” long.

#### Scientific Name:
*Dryobates villosus*

#### Listen to Calls:
[www.allaboutbirds.org/guide/Hairy_Woodpecker/sounds](http://www.allaboutbirds.org/guide/Hairy_Woodpecker/sounds)
**Species Information**

**Red-Bellied Woodpecker**
Listen for loud drumming sounds as this bird hammers trees with its beak in search of tasty insects. Larger than the Hairy and Downy Woodpeckers, the Red-Bellied Woodpecker is able to stick its barb-tipped tongue out nearly 2” past the end of its beak to snatch prey from the crevices in bark. They are found in forests, parks, and yards as they hunt for insects, spiders, acorns, nuts, pinecones, fruit, suet, and small animals.

**Did You Know?** You can attract this bird to your yard with peanuts, suet, mealworms, fruit, cracked corn, and sunflower and safflower seeds.

**Red-Winged Blackbird**
One of our earliest signs of spring arriving in northern Illinois, these flashy black birds sing their “Conk-la-reee!” call all day long. Males are highly territorial and spend about 25% of each day aggressively defending their chosen radius of territory against male competitors and predators. Look for Red-Winged Blackbirds near wetlands and waterways, in fields and prairies, and in the grasses and trees along roads. They enjoy insects, seeds, and grains.

**Did You Know?** You can attract this bird to your yard with sunflower seeds, cracked corn, peanuts, millet, and oats.
### Sandhill Crane

This tall, stately crane is one of our region’s most spectacular seasonal sightings. You may see enormous circling flocks overhead during spring migration. Listen for their unique trilling calls and look for them near wetlands, fields, and prairies. They search for a variety of foods including seeds, cultivated grains like corn and wheat, berries, tubers, invertebrates, and small animals like mice and frogs.

**ID Tips:** Males and females are slate gray with black legs, pale cheeks, and red skin patches on the head. Some may have a rusty wash on the back and wings. Juveniles, also known as colts, do not have pale cheeks or red skin. Up to 42.7” long.

**Listen to Calls:**
[www.allaboutbirds.org/guide/Sandhill_Crane/sounds](http://www.allaboutbirds.org/guide/Sandhill_Crane/sounds)

**Scientific Name:** *Antigone canadensis*

**Did You Know?** Sandhill cranes choose lifetime mating partners based on their dancing skills, which involve flapping the wings, pumping the head, and leaping.

### Whooping Crane

Thank to decades of conservation efforts, the U.S. population of Whooping Cranes grew from just 20 remaining birds in 1941 to more than 800 individuals today. This massive white crane species is sometimes spotted in McHenry County on its way north for the summer. Keep an eye open near wetlands, fields, and prairies, as well as among groups of their smaller cousins, Sandhill Cranes. Whooping Cranes forage for plants, invertebrates, and small animals like frogs.

**ID Tips:** Males and females are snowy white with black legs and black wing tips that are more visible in flight. The head features a long yellow bill and reddish-black coloring near the bill and on the crown. Juveniles have light brown heads and brown mottling on the wings. Up to 59.1” long.

**Listen to Calls:**
[www.allaboutbirds.org/guide/Whooping_Crane/sounds](http://www.allaboutbirds.org/guide/Whooping_Crane/sounds)

**Scientific Name:** *Grus americana*

**Did You Know?** Scientists have tracked the annual migration patterns of Whooping Crane flocks for years. You can see where these birds are moving at [map.bringbackthecranes.org](http://map.bringbackthecranes.org).
Resources

Choose Your Birding Tools:


The Cornell Laboratory of Ornithology’s All About Birds website offers extensive **free bird identification** information, from photos to recordings of bird songs, at [www.allaboutbirds.org](http://www.allaboutbirds.org).


Become a Citizen Scientist:

Become a **volunteer scientist** with eBird, a free worldwide citizen science project, at [www.ebird.org](http://www.ebird.org). Birders can develop their skills with online learning tools and submit their own birding data to support global bird research.

Volunteer to look for local crane species during the annual **Midwest Crane Count** project, a multi-state effort organized by the International Crane Foundation. This non-profit conservation organization also operates a learning center in Baraboo, Wisconsin, where you can see 15 species of cranes up close! Visit [www.savingcranes.org](http://www.savingcranes.org).

Join a Birding Group:

Meet other birders through **birding events and outings** hosted by the McHenry County Audubon Society and the Illinois Audubon Society. Visit [www.mchenryaudubon.org](http://www.mchenryaudubon.org) and [www.illinoisaudubon.org](http://www.illinoisaudubon.org).

Find Birding Activities for the Whole Family:

Find resources and activities for **young birders** through the eBird’s Young Birders Network at [https://ebird.org/about/resources/for-young-birders](https://ebird.org/about/resources/for-young-birders).

Sign the “Pledge to Fledge” and help **spread the word** about birding to your family and friends! [https://gbbc.birdcount.org/pledge-to-fledge/?lang=fr](https://gbbc.birdcount.org/pledge-to-fledge/?lang=fr).

Learn About Backyard Bird Feeding:

Visit [www.feederwatch.org/learn/feeding-birds/](http://www.feederwatch.org/learn/feeding-birds/) for lots of information about attracting birds to your backyard, porch, balcony, or neighborhood.