



CT State Bird – A Sure Sign of Spring

By Dawn Pettinelli, UConn Home & Garden Education Center

To many New Englanders, a sure sign spring is almost here is the arrival of chatty flocks of robins devouring those persistent crabapple fruits and holly berries. Robins do overwinter here, but typically, northern populations migrate further south each fall and return north as the weather warms. Birds may travel 250 miles per day when migrating. Recent research has found that robins are migrating northward about 5 days earlier each decade, likely due to changes in climate conditions.

They are found throughout North America from southern Canada to Florida and from the east to the west coast. There are 7 sub-species of robins in North America with *Turdus migratorius* typically inhabiting the Northeast.

The state bird of Connecticut, American robins are readily recognizable with their dark brown to greyish backs and wings and orangy-red breast feathers. Females are generally duller than the males while juveniles can be distinguished by brown flecks on their chests. All have thin white eye rings and white throats with blackish streaks. The undertail coverts and the belly are also white. Robins' beaks are yellow with black tips. Adults are usually between 9 to 11 inches long with a 14 to 16-inch wingspan. New World settlers called this bird the American robin after their beloved, similarly colored but unrelated European species, robin redbreast.

Robins are adaptable birds, capable of locating food and shelter in unfamiliar surroundings. They typically are found in woody or shrubby locations with patches of open spots. Yards with expanses of grass and large shade trees are inviting habitats for them. They tolerate human activity more than many avian species and their nests are often located under porches or eaves, on wide window ledges, outbuildings, and bridges. These birds will not use a typical nest box. They are platform nesters and look for horizontal branches, crotches or manmade flat surfaces to build their nests on. Nesting platforms are simple to make or can be purchased from businesses selling wild bird accessories.

Shortly after their arrival, robins get to work nest building and raising young. In fact, they are among the earliest of North American birds to begin breeding. Pair bonds are formed and both parents feed and protect their young.

Females build cup-shaped nests from twigs, grasses and other natural items held tight with mud. Fine grasses, plant fibers and feathers make up a softer inner layer. Nests may be anywhere from 5 to 25 feet off the ground. Three to 5 light blue eggs are laid and incubated by the female. Once you see the eggs, you'll know where the term, robin's egg blue, comes from.

After about 14 days, the eggs hatch. The blind, naked baby birds develop quickly with care from their parents. About two weeks later they are ready to leave the nest as fledglings with the parents tending to them until the young birds can forage on their own. The adult pair goes right back to breeding, building a new nest and raising another family. In good years, 3 clutches can be raised.

A robin's diet consists of about 60 percent fruits and berries, either wild or cultivated, and about 40 percent small invertebrates including earthworms, caterpillars, grubs, spiders, and grasshoppers. It is a common sight to see robins running or hopping across a lawn searching for worms and other tasty tidbits. This behavior is more prevalent after mowing or irrigation. Robins also can be found searching for food on newly turned patches of earth.

Robins are very vocal birds and communicate with each other through vocalizations and singing. Often, their rich and complex songs are the first you hear in the morning as they can carry quite a distance. Hear some of their sounds at www.allaboutbirds.org. Perhaps most familiar to us is their 'cheerily cheerup cheerup cheerily cheerup' vocalization.

As breeding season winds down and winter approaches, robins often roost for the night in large flocks. They break into smaller ones to forage during the day. Some head south for the winter but others remain. It used to be rare to spy robins in Connecticut during the winter but now estimates of 40,000 or more are not uncommon. In part, this is due to warmer and shorter winters but also to the proliferation of berry producing invasive plants like Asiatic bittersweet, autumn olive and multiflora rose which can serve as food sources.

As spring draws closer, give thanks for the birdsong of robins and other avian species. They bring life back to our yards and neighborhoods which we'll start to enjoy again as the weather warms.

If you have any home & garden questions, contact the UConn Home & Garden Education at (877) 486-6271 or www.ladybug.uconn.edu or your local Cooperative Extension Center.



