

Perching Birds

Class: Aves

Order: Passeriformes



The perching birds are classified as "Passeriformes," or passerines. The name means "sparrow-shaped". The passerines are the largest order of birds and are commonly known as songbirds. There are 59 families of songbirds, and about 5,100 species, which means song birds are about 60% of all living birds. That is a lot of singing!

Perching birds range in size all the way from the tiny kinglets and warblers to the magnificent raven. Passerines are believed to be the most advanced of all birds, as well as the most adaptive and intelligent. They all share the same type of foot, with three toes pointed forward, and one backward. This foot is adapted to gripping a perch, or branch. The muscles and tendons of their legs are designed to tighten the grip on the perch if the bird begins to fall backwards. Very handy when you have to sleep twenty feet above the ground!

Here are some of the more common perching/songbirds that you might see in Oregon:

American Robin (*Turdus migratorius*): The American Robin is a songbird of the thrush family and can be found throughout North America. The robin is a friendly, happy bird which likes to live near people. This beautiful bird is known for its song, which is described as sounding like "cheerily, cheerily, cheerily." Robins feed on small fruits, berries, insects and earthworms. They burn up 1/10th of their body weight just to stay alive during winter nights, so they need to eat a lot! Robins migrate south for the winter, and return to the same place year after year to build their nest. They like to build nests in tree branches, or in shelves of houses or barns. Nests are made of things such as twigs, string, and paper all held together with mud.

Interesting fact: Robins sing to their young before they have hatched.

American Crow (*Corvus brachyrhynchos*): This is one of the largest birds in the perching bird order, and is considered to be the smartest. The crow can live in a variety of habitats, but requires open ground for feeding, and trees for roosting and nesting. Their song is usually recognized by most people, but sounds



like a loud “caaw.” Crows congregate together , and have even been found to be nesting in groups of up to a million birds in one area! That is a lot of crows!! Some roosts have been forming in the same area for over 100 years. Wow. Young crows usually stay with their parents and help raise young in the future. Some crow families may include up to 15 individuals and contain young from five different years. Crows are scavengers, meaning they do not capture their prey, but rather feed on open carcasses (road kill) of dead animals. This is because their beak is not strong enough to break through the skin of an animal. They also eat nuts, berries, corn, bird eggs and babies, and insects. Their nest is made of twigs, sticks, lined with bark and grass, and placed high in a tree.



Interesting facts: Young crows are the same size as an adult, but have blue eyes that darken with age. American crows engage in a fascinating behavior called anting. A crow will position itself over an anthill and allow ants to scramble among its feathers, or it may pick up an ant and smear its feathers with it. Gross!

Western Scrub Jay (*Aphelocoma californica*): This perching bird is often confused with the Blue Jay. These birds are nicknamed the “sentinels” of the forest as they make a loud ruckus when something is happening. Most scrub jays eat insects, acorns, eggs and nestlings, berries, frogs, fruit, and pine seeds. Many scrub jays will “cache” their food, meaning they bury and store food for later. It is not uncommon for one scrub jay to watch another bury its food, and then go steal it for itself! These birds have an uncanny knack of remembering where they buried their food. Their nest is made of twigs, grass, lined with fibers and placed in a shrub or bush. They live in a variety of habitats such as forests, cities, open country, desert, and canyons.

Interesting Facts: Some people who feed scrub jays have found that they love cat or dog food. The Western Scrub Jay feeds on parasites on the body of a mule deer, hopping over the body and head to get them. The deer often helps by standing still and holding their ears up!

