

# GRAY CATBIRD - DUMETELLA CAROLINENSIS

**Taxonomy:** Kingdom: Animalia Phylum: Chordata Class: Aves Order: Passeriformes Family: Mimidae Genus: Dumetella  
Species: D. carolinensis

## **Habitat:**

**Biomes:** Gray Catbirds live amid dense shrubs, vine tangles, and thickets of young trees in both summer and winter. Human disturbance and development often create these habitats in the form of clearings, roadsides, fencerows, abandoned farmland, and residential areas. On tropical wintering grounds catbirds spend more time in forests than they do while in North America.

## **Distribution:**

**In US:** Native to most of temperate North America east of the Rocky Mountains, gray catbirds migrate to the southeastern United States, Mexico, Central America, and the Caribbean in winter; except for the occasional vagrant they always stay east of the American Cordillera. They are extremely rare vagrants to western Europe.

**In Other Countries:** NONE

**Holistic Description:** If you're convinced you'll never be able to learn bird calls, start with the Gray Catbird. Once you've heard its catty mew you won't forget it. Follow the sound into thickets and vine tangles and you'll be rewarded by a somber gray bird with a black cap and bright rusty feathers under the tail. Gray Catbirds are relatives of mockingbirds and thrashers, and they share that group's vocal abilities, copying the sounds of other species and stringing them together to make their own song.

**Species Richness:** 2 SUBSPECIES

**Population Dynamic:** CHECK THREATS

## **Evolution and Systematics:**

**Evolution:** This species has been reported from late Pleistocene (late Rancholabrean North American Land Mammal Age, <400,000 years before present) of Bell Cave, AL.

**Systematics:** Plumage varies minimally across the species' wide range. The chestnut crissum typical of the species is paler in the West and darker in the East. Aldrich reported that the ventrum is paler gray and the dorsum purer gray (less sooty) in the West, but Phillips could not confirm these difference in fresh specimens.

**Number of Species:** 2 SUBSPECIES

**Number of Genera:** 2 SUBSPECIES

## **Physical Characteristics:**

**Size and Length:** Length: 8.3-9.4 in (21-24 cm) Weight: 0.8-2.0 oz (23.2-56.5 g)

**Wingspan:** 8.7-11.8 in (22-30 cm)

**Coloration:** Catbirds give the impression of being entirely slaty gray. With a closer look you'll see a small black cap, blackish tail, and a rich rufous-brown patch under the tail.

**General Body Features:** A medium-sized, slender songbird with a long, rounded, black tail and a narrow, straight bill. Catbirds are fairly long legged and have broad, rounded wings.

**Special Features of the Body:** NONE

**Special Features of the Head and Sensory Organs:** NONE

**Dentition:** BEAK/LAMELLAE/GIZZARD

**Special Features of the Limbs and Digits:** NONE

**Any Special Internal Anatomy:** NONE

**Sexual Dimorphisms:** Sexes indistinguishable.

**Differences Between Juvenile Stage and Adult:** Juvenile eyes usually cloudy grayish; adults clear black.

## **Behavior:**

**Diurnal, Nocturnal, or Crepuscular:** Diurnal

**Activity:** You'll find catbirds hopping through low vegetation or flying short distances at a time, just above the surrounding vegetation. Male catbirds are territorial during spring and summer, singing from prominent perches and chasing away intruders including several other species of birds. Males and females defend their own territories during winter, a time when territoriality is uncommon in many species. In altercations, Gray Catbirds may fluff up the breast and rump feathers, spread their tail, and open their bill toward the sky. Gray Catbirds sometimes destroy eggs and nestlings of woodland species including Eastern Wood-Pewee, Chipping Sparrow, and Song Sparrow.

**Locomotion:** Flights typically short and low, just above top of shrubs or through small spaces among them; avoids flying across large, open space. Wingbeat tempo is constant, even. Hops when moving along branches. Travels through shrubs using

combination of hopping and short flights. Frequently flicks tail, often while calling. This movement varies from quick (<0.3 s) downward or upward flick to circular motion.

**Communication and Perception:** Male Gray Catbirds sing a long, halting series of short notes collected into "phrases," which combine to make a song. One whole song can last many minutes. Sounds include whistles, squeaks, gurgles, whines, and nasal tones. The notes often are imitations of other birds as well as of frogs and mechanical sounds. The series of sounds is random, but certain notes are often repeated. While mockingbirds tend to repeat phrases three or more times, and Brown Thrashers typically sing phrases twice before moving on, Catbirds usually don't repeat phrases. Females sing infrequently, and when they do, their songs are sung more quietly.

**Home Range:** Male defends small area around nest by singing and chasing rivals. In s. Ontario, territory size 0.32 ha. Several Gray Catbirds may feed and gather nest material in undefended areas up to several hundred meters from nest without aggression. Abandons territory after loss of mate, and unmated male will not remain on territory throughout the breeding season.

**Degree of Sociality:** Occurs in territorial pairs during breeding season. Little known about sociality outside breeding season. Following breeding, often congregates in thickets near water.

**Level of Aggression:** Gray Catbirds are not reported to strike one another during conflicts, but chases are frequent early in breeding season. During encounters, birds may alternately move to higher and higher perches.

**Migration:** Resident along the Atlantic Coast; otherwise migratory. Catbirds from across North America spend winters along the Gulf Coast from Florida through Texas and all the way down Central America and the Caribbean.

#### **Predators:**

**Predators:** Snakes, Raptors, Long-eared Owl, Blue Jay, American Crow, Common Grackle, Domestic Cat, Shrews, Squirrels/Chipmunks, Foxes.

**Anti-Predator Defenses:** Both sexes respond. If chipmunk or squirrel approaches nest, Gray Catbird flies at it and mews. Snakes elicit strong response. In one case, Gray Catbirds hopped around a racer (Coluber constrictor) while spreading tails and flashing wings. In second case, also involving racer, male jumped at the snake with wings raised above back and occasionally spread tail while giving Quirt and Mew calls and Quiet Song; female gave Quirt Call nearby. In third case, not at a nest, male and female attacked the tail of a racer crossing an open fire lane, pecking at least six times.

#### **Diet and Nutrition:**

**Adult Diet:** In summer, Gray Catbirds eat mainly ants, beetles, grasshoppers, midges, caterpillars, and moths. When fruits are available they also eat holly berries, cherries, elderberries, poison ivy, greenbrier, bay, and blackberries. They are sometimes garden pests, eating or damaging raspberries, cherries, grapes, and strawberries.

**Juvenile Diet:** Nestlings are fed mainly small invertebrates, insects and spiders, with  $\leq 5\%$  fruit.

**Special Adaptations for Getting Prey:** Forages in a variety of locations ranging from ground to treetops. When foraging on ground, often flicks dead leaves aside using bill. Distribution of foraging maneuvers on Bermuda and in coastal Georgia as follows: glean 96%, hover 3%, flycatch 1%

#### **Reproduction:**

**Mode of Reproduction:** Monogamous.

**Mating System:** Monogamous. Two records of a male mated simultaneously to females in separate territories.

**Mating Season:** March to May

**Courtship:** Head-up Fluffed Display given in courtship. Head-down Fluffed Display also used during courtship. During this display, body is horizontal with back and rump feathers fluffed. Bill pointed down, tail depressed and spread. In this posture, male moves along ground or branches near female. Bill may be held level rather than pointed downward (Charles 1954). Sometimes during Head-down Fluffed Display, male mews, rocks body from side to side, and flicks tail upward displaying undertail-coverts.

**Territoriality:** HOME RANGE

**Mating:** When soliciting copulation, female holds body horizontal with tail raised and directed toward male. In this posture, she vibrates wings at sides.

**Nest Placement:** Catbirds usually build nests on horizontal branches hidden at the center of dense shrubs, small trees, or in vines, including dogwood, hawthorn, cherry, rose, elderberry, grape, honeysuckle, and blackberry. Nests are typically around 4 feet off the ground, but may be on the ground or as high as 60 feet.

**Nest Description:** Females build the nests, with males sometimes supplying materials. Nests take 5-6 days to build. The final product is a bulky, open cup made of twigs, straw, bark, mud, and sometimes pieces of trash. It has a finely woven inner lining of grass, hair, rootlets, and pine needles. Finished nests are about 5.5 inches across and 2 inches deep.

Egg-Laying: Clutch Size: 1-6 eggs Number of Broods: 2-3 broods Egg Length: 0.9-1.0 in (2.2-2.6 cm) Egg Width: 0.5-0.6 in (1.2-1.6 cm) Incubation Period: 12-15 days Nestling Period: 10-11 days Egg Description: Turquoise green, sometimes with small red spots.

Hatching and Incubation/Gestation: Naked, eyes closed, helpless and partially covered with dark brown or gray down.

Development: Altricial. Partially covered by brown or dark gray down.

Parental Care: Both sexes feed nestlings directly. Male does most feeding during the early nestling period. Feeding by female increases over the nestling period, inversely related to time spent brooding and shading.

Lifespan: Average longevity in the wild is about 2.5 years.

**Conservation:**

Official Federal Status: Least Concern

Special Statuses in Individual States: NONE

Threats: Gray Catbirds are common and their populations were stable from 1966 to 2014, though there has been declines in the southeastern U.S., according to the North American Breeding Bird Survey. Partners in Flight estimates a global breeding population of 27 million with 87% spending some part of the year in the U.S., 13% breeding in Canada, and 25% wintering in Mexico. They rate an 8 out of 20 on the Continental Concern Score and are not on the the 2014 State of the Birds Watch List. Catbirds tend to winter near the coast, making development of coastal habitat a possible concern for the future. Along parts of the Gulf Coast in winter, many catbirds are killed by cars as they fly across roads.

Conservation Efforts: ^^^^^^

**Extra Facts:**

1. The Gray Catbird's long song may last for up to 10 minutes.
2. The male Gray Catbird uses his loud song to proclaim his territory. He uses a softer version of the song when near the nest or when a bird intrudes on his territory. The female may sing the quiet song back to the male.
3. The Gray Catbird belongs to the genus *Dumetella*, which means "small thicket." And that's exactly where you should go look for this little skulker.
4. The oldest known Gray Catbird was at least 17 years, 11 months old when it was recaptured and rereleased during banding operations in New Jersey in 2001. It had been banded in Maryland in 1984.

**Notable Species:**

1. *D. c. carolinensis* - Breeds from se. Manitoba east to Nova Scotia and south to e. Texas east to central Florida
2. *D. c. ruficrissa* - Breeds from s. British Columbia east to s.-central Manitoba and south to ne. Oregon, n. Utah, and n. New Mexico east to w. North Dakota south to w. Oklahoma and w. Texas