

BIRD MIGRATION IN SOUTH FLORIDA

Many gardeners appreciate the natural world beyond plants and create landscapes with the intention of attracting and sustaining wildlife, particularly birds. Birds provide added interest, and often color, to the garden. In Miami-Dade county, there are familiar birds who reside here year round including the ubiquitous **Northern Cardinal**, **Blue Jay** and **Northern Mockingbird**, while others visit only during periods of migration.

The fall migration of birds heading south to warmer climates for the winter usually begins in September and lasts well into November. The relatively warm weather of south Florida means that some bird species returning to their spring breeding grounds to the north can begin to be seen here as early as January, although February is generally regarded as the start of the spring migratory season. For some birds south Florida is a way station on their flight south to take advantage of warmer winter weather in the southern hemisphere. Others, such as the **Blue-gray Gnatcatcher** and the **Palm Warbler**, migrate to south Florida and make our area their winter home.

The largest grouping of migratory birds seen here are the **warblers**. While many have the word “warbler” in their names, others do not. They do share the distinction of being rather small birds – from the 4 ½ inch Northern Parula to the 6 inch Ovenbird – with most warblers measuring around 5 inches in length. Many warbler names reflect the color of their feathers, e.g., the Black-throated Blue Warbler and the Black-and-white Warbler. The Ovenbird gets its name from the dome shape of its nest built on the ground.

Identification of warblers is quite difficult, especially for the novice. During the fall migration bird plumage is less colorful than in the spring when the males are trying to attract a mate. Yellow is a common color for warblers and making note of where on their bodies the yellow is displayed will help in identification. Familiarity with accepted terms for the parts of a bird is also useful when using bird guides. You may find the yellow on a **Yellow-rumped Warbler** isn't where you thought it would be.

Raptors, such as **hawks** and **falcons**, include some migratory species. Those raptors commonly seen in south Florida year-round include the **Osprey**, **Red-tailed Hawk**, and **Red-shouldered hawk**. **Sharp-shinned Hawks** can be seen here in winter, as well as **Cooper's Hawks** and **Broad-winged**



Red-tailed hawk Photo: UF/IFAS File Photo

Hawks as they migrate to Central and South America for the winter. Such migratory journeys are often arduously long. The **Swallow-tailed Kite** for example travels 5,000 miles from south Florida to South America. Although these considerably larger birds are easier to see in theory, their flight path often takes them high above the ground where good binoculars and scopes are needed to identify specific species. For further information and the chance to see these birds in flight, check out the south Florida site of Hawk Watch International at <https://floridakeyshawkwatch.com/>.

Of the **woodpeckers** typically found in Miami Dade county, only the **Yellow-bellied Sapsucker** is migratory. Even when sapsuckers are not around, you can still see evidence of their former food sources



in the ring of often evenly spaced holes drilled into a tree's circumference. The holes encircle the trunk and there are usually many rings up and down it. Larger individual holes in tree and palm trunks are often the nests of other woodpeckers including the abundant Red-bellied Woodpecker.

In addition to the bird guides listed below under Sources, several mobile apps are available to aid you in your bird-watching, including Merlin sponsored by the Cornell Lab of Ornithology and The Audubon Bird Guide App. Both of these are free to download on to iPhone and Android devices.

Yellow-bellied Sapsucker

Photo: Florida Museum of Natural History

Sources:

Crossley, Richard. *The Crossley Guide: Eastern Birds*, Princeton University Press, 2011.

<https://ebird.org/explore>

Kale, Herbert W. II and David S. Maehr. *Florida's Birds: A Handbook and Reference*, Pineapple Press, 1990.

Peterson, Roger Tory. *Field Guide to Birds of Eastern and Central North America*, 6th ed., Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2010.

Sibley, David Allen. *National Audubon Society, The Sibley Guide to Birds*, Alfred A. Knopf, 2000.

UF/IFAS Sites

Birds UF Museum of Natural History

<https://www.floridamuseum.ufl.edu/birds/>

Attracting Backyard Birds

<https://www.floridamuseum.ufl.edu/birds/>

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