

What Bear (Bird) Goes Where?

Study Units

[Iowa's Wildlife Habitats](#)

Supplemental Information

Birds live in almost every habitat. Some species are very rare (e.g., Cerulean warblers, whooping cranes, piping plovers) while others are found in large numbers in many habitats (house sparrows, starlings, pigeons). Different species have different physical characteristics, behaviors, and habitat preferences that influence their numbers. Following is information about four bird species found in different habitats in Iowa:

Scarlet Tanager

The male **scarlet tanager** is unmistakable with its bright red body and black wings and tail. The female typically has a dull green back and pale yellow underparts with dark gray-brown to blackish-brown wings. Scarlet tanager habitat includes large (unfragmented) tracts of deciduous and/or coniferous forest. It is a Neotropical migrant that breeds in North America, but winters in forested areas of Central and South America. It eats insects – ants, beetles, moths, and caterpillars. It also eats wild berries.

The tanager's nest is made of fine twigs and grasses lined with vine tendrils and stems. It is saucer shaped and usually located in deciduous trees on the ends of branches anywhere from 10 to 70 feet above the ground. Tanagers usually lay four bluish, greenish eggs marked with brown. The female incubates about 13-14 days.

Scarlet tanager populations are declining in some areas. In fragmented forests, brown-headed cowbirds (a brood parasite) often lay eggs in scarlet tanager nests, so may contribute to declining populations. See [Iowa's Wildlife Habitats](#) for additional links on habitat quality and fragmentation.

Western Meadowlark

The **western meadowlark** is a chunky, relatively long-billed, short-tailed bird of open country, fields, and meadows. It can be found along roadsides, where it frequently sings from wires, poles, and fence posts. It has a brown and white upper body and a yellow breast with a black V on it.

The female builds a nest of grasses with an arching-entrance on the ground. It lays three to five white and speckled glossy eggs twice during the breeding season. It eats grain and wild grass seeds, wild fruits, grasshoppers, and other insects. It is considered a permanent Iowa resident, but winter sightings are rare.

American Robin

The **American robin** is a common, widespread bird that has flourished in towns and suburbs. It also frequents forest borders, woodland openings, pastures, groves, and parks. The robin was originally a forest species, and those who nest in woodland areas are typically shyer than the familiar suburban birds. In winter, robins typically migrate to Texas, Florida, and Mexico.



Robin nests are lined with grass with a mud bottom and walls reinforced with grass or twigs. The female usually lays four pale blue eggs that are incubated for 11-14 days. The male feeds the first brood while the female incubates a second clutch. Robins eat mainly insects and worms with some seeds and fruits.

Trumpeter Swan

The trumpeter swan, once common on Iowa wetlands, was extirpated from the state. The Iowa Department of Natural Resources (DNR) began a restoration program in 1993, with the first wild nest occurring in 1998. The State of Iowa reached a major milestone in 1998 when the first free-flying trumpeters nested in Iowa since 1883. In 2010, 42 wild pairs of trumpeter swans were found nesting here. The trumpeter swan is the largest waterfowl in North America. An adult weighs 20-30 pounds, stands about four feet tall, and can have a wingspan of seven feet. Trumpeters have snow white plumage with black feet and bills. Read more about the [Iowa's swan restoration efforts on the DNR website](#).

Adult trumpeters begin nesting in late April or early May. They build a large nest of grasses and other plants, usually on an island area in a pond or wetland. The nest can be five feet across. Four to six cream white eggs are laid, one every other day, between April and July. They are incubated about 30 days before cygnets (young swans) are hatched.

Cygnets fledge (learn to fly) in about 100 days, but often remain with adults until the following spring. Adult trumpeters eat mostly aquatic plants. Cygnets eat aquatic beetles and crustaceans as well as plants.

Teaching Suggestions

Discuss habitat components before doing this activity. Birds' habitats may not be obvious to students. A good introduction would be the *Project WILD* activity, 'Beautiful Basics.'

Follow the directions in the manual, but use birds and their habitats instead of bears. Have students find the species included here in a bird field guide or other research materials (printed or online). Have each group list at least four habitat elements (e.g., vegetation type, main diet, territory size, nest structure / location) required by their species before they begin their mural.

You may wish to do this activity as part of lessons about each habitat type. *Older students:* This activity is an excellent way to introduce the concept of migration and integrate map skills. Show areas to which the American robin, scarlet tanager, and trumpeter swan migrate. Students can check migration routes and population trends or get involved in surveying local birds at web sites listed in the [Additional Materials](#) section.

Evaluation

Have students answer the following review questions individually or use them as discussion questions: What things do birds need to live? Do birds need food and shelter when they are migrating? What do



you think would happen if the scarlet tanager's habitat was gone when it came back to Iowa next spring? What do you think a meadowlark would do if you were to build a house where it had built its nest?

Student Materials

None

Teacher Aids

Pictures: **American robin, meadowlark, scarlet tanager** (may be used as coloring sheets or as the basis for building habitat murals) Used with permission from: Kennedy, P.E. 1974. *Audubon's Birds of America Coloring Book*. John James Audubon. New York, NY: Dover Publications, Inc.

Additional Materials

- [All About Birds](#) Cornell Lab of Ornithology is a great resource for identification and to improve your birding skills.
- Search for bird sound at [Cornell's Macaulay Library](#)
- [Iowa Birds and Birding](#) Searchable online database of Iowa birding reports, birding site guides, and checklists from the Iowa's Ornithologists' Union.
- [Iowa Breeding Bird Atlas](#) This 5-year project collected information on the current ranges of Iowa's breeding birds from 2008-2012.
- Link for Iowa [early and late nesting dates](#) by species.
- [Audubon Guide to North American Birds](#) includes species information, range maps, songs, and calls.
- [Journey North](#) hosts data on migration of various species of wildlife.
- [North American Breeding Bird Survey](#) provides access to bird species population trends
- Kennedy, P.E. 1974. *Audubon's Birds of America Coloring Book*. John James Audubon. New York: Dover Publications, Inc.
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- Harrison, C. and P. Baicich. 1997. *A Guide to the Nests, Eggs and Nestlings of North American Birds – Second Edition*. New York: Academic Press.
- Kavanagh, J. 2001. *Iowa Birds*. Waterford Press Ltd.
- Peterson, R.T. 1980. *A Field Guide to the Birds East of the Rockies*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company.



American robin (*Turdus migratorius*)

Found throughout the United States. The adult male has insect, the adult female the berry.



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Western meadowlark (*Stunella neglecta*)

The flying bird and the standing one are males; the others females.



Scarlet tanager (*Piranga olivacea*)

The male is above.

