



# MONTEREY NEWS

March 2023  
Est. 1970 Vol. LIII • Number 3



## The Musical Northern Mockingbird

The musical mockingbird is well known as a backyard bird with a vast vocabulary of songs and a variety of up to two hundred other sounds to select from. Each sound may be frequently repeated during the day and even more during the nights of mating season. According to [allaboutbirds.org](http://allaboutbirds.org) (Cornell Ornithology), "If you've been hearing an endless string of ten or fifteen different birds singing outside your house, you might have a northern mockingbird in your yard." Bird watching experts believe that as the male expands the number of possibilities to choose from he becomes a more attractive suitor to females looking for a mate.

The mockingbird's imitations also include a large number of human made sounds, such as loud human laughter, the ringing of a doorbell, or the sound of an alarm clock. Other mechanical sounds include a train whistle or the siren from a fire house. In my illustration, it can often be the sound of a church tower with a catchy religious hymn such as "The Bells of St. Mary's."

How can the mockingbird possibly imitate every one of these different sounds that come through so realistically? Most animals vocalize from low down in their throats, using the muscles of their larynx, to produce a thick throaty sound. Birds produce their sounds through their syrinx, an organ that only birds have, near their lungs, with another organ near their mouths for changing the sounds.

A hundred years ago people were allowed to trap and cage mockingbirds to show off their entertaining vocal per-



formances. They were taken out of nests at a young age and sold into influential homes in Philadelphia, St. Louis, and New York. In 1928 they would fetch as much as \$50 dollars. They're not too interested in bird feeders, however you can attract them to perform in your backyards by keeping the lawns open and edges planted with fruit trees, mulberry, and blackberries.

Given global warming and climate change, the mockingbird's range has expanded into more northern states, thus increasing your chances to enjoy their sounds, which are sometimes sung along with their neighbors, the northern cardinals.

— George B. Emmons