

IT'S A SIN TO KILL A MOCKINGBIRD!



...so said author Harper Lee--and Atticus Finch, her ideal father figure: "Mockingbirds don't do one thing but make music for us to enjoy . . . but sing their hearts out for us. That's why it's a sin to kill a mockingbird."



When I first got back to live in the Capay Valley, I enjoyed sitting in the warm summer evenings listening to all the various bird songs. One such evening I sat enjoying this with neighbor Jim Hiatt and said, "I love hearing all the different birds we have here--I wish I knew what they all were!" Well, he chuckled and said, "Right now you are hearing only one--a mocking bird!" And then he proceeded to explain--whereupon I came to realize he was actually a hobby ornithologist in disguise! So, since that day, I have not only



learned to tell when I am being "mocked" by a crafty bird, but I have learned a great deal about all the birds we have



here'bouts--and am enjoying sharing Jim's knowledge with my readers. Recently, Jim has been finding baby birds in his ranch nests while doing yard work and
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The Mockingbirds of Capay Valley

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chores and got busy with his camera in order to better share them with all of us.

To Kill a Mockingbird is one of my favorite books--and movies--so, of course, it gave me a special love for Mockingbirds. And one of my favorite childhood memories was finding a baby bird on the ground and running to Mom with it--she could rescue anything! Soft boiled egg and poached millet or bread soaked in milk pushed down the gullet eventually led to a fully-fledged

bird that would then hop around the house and yard until it took wing one day! Sam, our magpie, was just such a rescued bird--and he never did leave! We had baby owls "only a mother could



Above: Mockingbird nest in the crotch of a Eucalyptus tree in Hungry Hollow. Bottom left: baby Mockingbirds just feathering out--fledglings!



love"--ugly that Mom taught us to care for until they became beautiful and free--and back in the barn rafters they had fallen from. And since then, I have rescued many, myself--along with a few opossums and many a near-death feral kitten! It's the family tradition!



Photos and text by Jim Hiatt, bird man of Hungry Hollow:

The Mockingbird, *Mimus polyglottis*, is one of our more common and better known birds. According to *Birds of North America* (page 519), during the 1700s and 1800s it was such a popular thing to have a caged Mockingbird for the singing, that the Mockingbird wasn't too far from extinction. Thankfully that's behind us.

These are known for being able to imitate--or mock--over 100 different species, insect sounds, such as crickets and frogs, and mechanical sounds, such as a squeaky gate, and so on. What I've found interesting here at the ranch, is that sometimes juveniles-turned adults are heard imitating species that are partially migratory in their traveling habits, and are imitating birds not even in this area at the time--or even imitating birds, such as the Acorn Woodpecker, which are simply not here at all, but are a bird of higher elevations. I've heard them imitate Scrub Jays, which are here "once in a blue moon" and usually on their way elsewhere. Not sure just how they "know" the song of a bird not normally here, or not here at all, during the first year or two of the Mockingbird's life. I've heard new Mockingbirds, hatched just about the time of the Western Kingbird's departure (in late August-early September for Central America and Mexico, and who won't be back until early April), and yet are imitating their calls before their return. 'Tis one of those "sweet mysteries of Avian life."

Mockingbirds have an impressive life-span for a bird of this size, and can live up to 20 years--which does give them an opportunity to "remember" lots of different sounds! The calls can be so accurate that at times a beginning "birder" has trouble telling if they're hearing a Scrub Jay or a Mockingbird imitating one! They do seem to have an "call" of their own, which is most closely described as simply a loud "Chirp!" My mother and Grandmother used to say, "Oh, listen, Jimmy, the Mockingbird is 'blowing you a kiss'"--'cause I guess it did kinda sound like that. I did the same with my own kids and they loved it--especially my girls.

At times, these will call for most of the night, and it's amazing the litany of different sounds you'll hear. One night when I was in college, I was staying the night at Grandma's out here and in the old olive tree just outside the porch window one was singing. I happened to have my old portable reel-to-reel tape recorder with me, and put the microphone on the windowsill with a one-hour tape--got nothing but lovely singing to sleep by. Later, I submitted a copy of the tape to my old Ornithology Professor at CSUS as part of my semester project on "The nocturnal singing behavior of the Mockingbird"--and it was part of what got me an "A" on the project!

Our Mockingbirds don't migrate; they're here year-round. At times they'll be perched atop a high object, and will fly up several feet, and then straight back down to the same perch again, slowly flapping their wings so as to show off the conspicuous white patch on each wing. I believe, though don't know for sure, that this is more of a "territorial" activity, but could also be part of the courtship. Food-wise, they are very omnivorous--insects of all sorts, fruits and berries depending on the seasonality of everything. Another part of the courtship is fun to watch--they'll perch on the ground, facing each other so closely that their beaks nearly touch, and hop up and down either in unison or separately, and just keep doing it for a time, with a flap or two of the wings.

Their nest is in a branch-crotch, as the pix show, and have a stick and twig nest lined with very soft stuffs, holding 3-4 eggs at a time, looking a good deal like Brewer's Blackbird eggs, but are a bit darker aqua-blue, with the same dark brownish spots. They have 2-3 broods during the warmer times of the year.



'Tis a wonderful thing that Nature has done with a bird that is pretty drab in its coloration--as everything about this little friend is varying shades of white-to-gray! Yet for all its lack of "impressiveness" in its plumage, the singing by far makes up for it. The singing itself, and the imitative "mocking" nature of it, may also be a part of its territoriality. Hopefully this little sharing of mine will help the reader love and appreciate these lovely friends of ours just a little more.

Jim