

# Winter Birding in Warren Woods

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Warren Woods across from the Warren Conference Center on Chestnut Street contains many treasures — open space, diverse habitats, vernal pools, historic stonewalls, walking trails and abundant animals. You might also add to that list — a bird paradise.

On a recent afternoon, I toured Warren Woods with Ashland resident and birding enthusiast James Toledano. A birder for the past 20 years, Toledano, a geographer by trade, has taken bird watching vacations all over the world. Nonetheless, he considers Warren Woods birding as good as any other place he has visited. “I’ve documented 65 different bird species here,” he said. “In the right light, a blue jay looks spectacular.”

## Mocking Birds and More

According to the Center of Biological Diversity in Arizona, there are almost 10,000 living species of birds in the world, with 12 percent listed as endangered or threatened with extinction. In my various walks through Warren Woods, it never occurred to me that I was sharing this peaceful oasis with a wide array of birds. Over the years, Toledano has documented species such as geese, mallards, wild turkeys, great blue herons, killdeer, chimney swift, hawks, mourning doves, kingfishers, starlings, kingbirds, titmouse, redstarts, nuthatches, woodpeckers, owls, crows, cowbird, blue jays, ovenbird, swallows, kinglet, wood-pewee, goldfinch, junco, vireos, thrush, chickadees, wrens, towhee, flycatcher, grackle, veery,

blackbird, phoebe, catbirds, warblers, tanager, cardinals, orioles, yellow throat, finches, buntings and mockingbirds.

I confided in Toledano that once I saw the film *To Kill A Mockingbird* I longed to hear a mockingbird sing but knew they only lived in the Deep South where Harper Lee’s story took place. A few steps later, he stopped and asked me to listen.

It was a northern mockingbird singing.

The bird of my film dreams sings throughout the day and often into the night with a single song lasting for up to 20 seconds. These versatile creatures spend their entire lives learning new sounds by mimicking other birds, frogs and even car alarms, chain saws and police car sirens. That this bird lives a few hundred feet from my home on Eliot Street underscores how unaware we humans can be of the gifts that surround us. In the splendor of the aviary moment, I became extra grateful that Ashlanders voted in 2010 to buy this habitat-rich wilderness, the home for many local birds. They might have lost their lives had the trees and shrubs that hold their nests been destroyed to build homes. As Atticus Finch explained to his two children, Scout and Jem, “It’s a sin to kill a mockingbird.”

## What Makes Warren Woods Special

As we continued wandering through the woods, Toledano said, “I come here more to listen than to see.” Soon, I, too, keyed into the symphony of bird chirps and songs, and asked what they meant. “It might be a warning of



Cooper's Hawk (Photo by Brad Dinerman from The Fieldbrook Reserve, a collection of wildlife and nature photographs)

predators. A mating call. A communication,” he said.

Toledano pointed out the various habitats that we passed through: grassland, forest edge, open woodland, mature forest and orchard. “In less than an hour, I can wander through a variety of habitats, each a niche for certain bird species,” he said. “For example, you will find a red winged blackbird in the grassland and a northern mockingbird at the forest edge. The diversity is what makes Warren Woods such a great local place to go birding.”

But not everything worth seeing in this nature enclave hovered above us. Toledano pointed down to what looked like a miniature pine tree on the edge of the trail. “It’s an emergent species. It may resemble the original but is not a tree. An example of the overall forest and soil health and an indicator of how the forest keeps moving.” At that moment, I wished the local schools would see the woods as giant outdoor science classrooms and take the

kids on weekly nature tours. Why have them sit quietly in chairs and read about things in books, when they can experience the magic of science first hand?

## Birding as Meditation

As we passed under a canopy of pine trees, I asked Toledano what he loves most about birding. He thought for a moment and said, “It has taught me to slow down. Before I took up birding, I did everything fast, like hiking through the woods. Now I take my time when I’m in nature. I can stand in the same spot for 30 minutes and happily count birds. I’m much more observant than when I was younger.”

I, too, felt myself unwinding as we ambled up, down and around the many paths of Warren Woods in search of feathered creatures. The societal demand to gallop through my days and inevitably through my life dissipated as we ventured deeper into this playground for fowl. I envied the birds’ ability to soar and sail through the airspace above us.

When we reached the open grasslands that run along Eliot Street, Toledano pointed up to a large group of crows lining the tree branches. I cringed and said, “Those birds symbolize death.” Toledano challenged my stereotype: “Crows are one of the most intelligent, ‘playful’ species. On windy days, I’ve come out to Warren Woods and seen them using air streams to kite, tumble and swoop.”

Back at the parking lot, I asked about migration patterns and the best time to see birds in Warren Woods. “Most birds used to head south for the winter in search of food, but with the proliferation of backyard feeders, many birds now stay here year round. Winter can be a good season to see them,” Toledano said.

If you have some free weekend time this winter, grab some binoculars, a bird identification book and head out to Warren Woods. You’ll be amazed at how many birds you can see and how many you can hear. I can almost guarantee that by the time you return to your car, you’ll feel more relaxed, mellow and apt to break into song yourself.

## Resources

- YouTube of a mockingbird: [www.youtube.com/watch?v=kCh2eyDSeNE](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kCh2eyDSeNE)
- A real-time checklist for the birding community: [EBird.org](http://EBird.org)
- Center for Biological Diversity: [www.biologicaldiversity.org/species/birds/](http://www.biologicaldiversity.org/species/birds/)
- Cornell Lab of Ornithology: [www.allaboutbirds.org/guide/Northern\\_Mockingbird/sounds](http://www.allaboutbirds.org/guide/Northern_Mockingbird/sounds)



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