

Birds of El Paso County

By Doug Harling
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Curve-Billed Thrasher



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A pair of Curve-Billed Thrashers.

PHOTOS BY DOUG HARLING

What a nice surprise to run into some Curve-Billed Thrashers in Eastern El Paso County.

I was out using calls to try and attract some Burrowing Owls when a couple of these little song birds flew in. They are very easy to identify if you see or even just hear one. The obvious curved bill and a very distinct whistle they make are unmistakable. The whistle has been described as "like hearing someone hailing a cab". However, be careful not to try and identify them by sound alone. Curve-Billed Thrashers share their territory with Northern Mockingbirds and mockingbirds have mastered their sound. Seeing is believing. Some birds may take a little research to accurately identify them. However, when you see the Curve-Billed Thrasher, there won't be any guessing.

The curved bill in their name is the obvious part. The long bill is the perfect tool for the Curve-Billed Thrasher to hunt insects in a desert environment. This Thrasher hunts bugs hiding in the ground and deep in the spiny plants. Early in the mornings and late afternoon, the Curve-Billed Thrasher will use that beak to probe deep into the spiny plants where other birds can't reach. The long bill also allows them to catch long legged insects and keep them at a distance.

During the heat of the day, these birds will stay on the ground in the shade. The behavior of the Curve-Billed Thrasher feeding on the ground is where the thrasher part comes in. Thrashers get their name from the thrashing around on the ground kicking up dirt to uncover insects. The Curve-Billed Thrasher is considered a desert bird. Much of El Paso County is considered the high plains or high desert.

If you would like to find one, go out to the eastern plains and find fields of Cholas Cactus. Google Curved-Billed Thrasher calls. Play the calls and wait. If you see nothing within a few minutes, move to a new location. They are out there! Don't be surprised if you attract a Northern Mockingbird. In a previous column I wrote about

Northern Mockingbirds, you may remember one of the reasons Mockingbird imitate other birds is to make other birds think the area is too populated and they will move on. So Mockingbirds will respond to the call to try and drive the Thrashers out of their area. Basically, leaving more bugs for them to eat! I found that the Thrashers respond very well to the calls.

Some Curve-Billed Thrashers do a full migration. Some will stay year round and only migrate as far south as it takes to get away from bad winter temps. The Cholas Cactus is the main defense system for the Thrashers as well as many other birds. The Thrashers will nest in the center of the cactus 3 to 4 feet off the ground. Very few predators can penetrate this cactus without being stuck by the cactus needles. In areas that have taller species of cactus, Thrashers will nest as high as 8 or 9 feet. Babies will learn from a very young age that this cactus will protect them from predators. Curve-Billed Thrashers, Mockingbirds, Horned Larks, Meadowlarks and Scaled Quail are just some of the birds that use these cacti for protection from predators.

I challenge my readers to go out and see if you can spot this fun little desert song bird. My research says they will come to backyard feeders but I have never seen one. Maybe if you live closer to the Cholas Cactus you will have a good chance. Happy birding!

Update on migration! I had my first Hummingbird at the feeders last week. As of May 1st, I have not seen the Orioles or Grosbeaks yet. Tanagers, Buntings and Grosbeaks should be coming soon. Orioles should be any day now. I have heard of sightings in Pueblo.

Feel free to message me on Facebook, email or give me a call if you observe behavior in birds that you have never seen. If I don't know about it we can learn together.

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Curve-Billed Thrasher landing on a Cholla Cactus.



Curve-Billed Thrasher on a Cholla Cactus.



Curve-Billed Thrasher probing a Cholla Cactus for bugs.



Curve-Billed Thrasher standing on a cactus needle.