



Birds of Petrified Forest National Park

The twelve most common birds seen in the park

Turkey Vulture *Cathartes aura*



This dark, eagle-sized bird soars over the countryside with long wings are held upward in a wide, shallow V. The flight feathers are silvery below, and the tail is long, but it is the small, bare, reddish head that truly defines the turkey vulture. Summer residents in the park, turkey vultures can be seen throughout the area, but particularly near cliffs such as the rim of the Painted Desert. With their acute sense of smell, turkey vultures seek out carrion for food.

Red-tailed Hawk *Buteo jamaicensis*



These large stocky hawks have light-colored breasts and rust-colored tail. This species can be quite variable in color, especially in West, where blackish individuals occur, although these usually retain rusty tail. Considered the most common and widespread American member of the genus *Buteo*, red-tailed hawks soar over open country in search of prey, mainly small rodents.

Northern Harrier *Circus cyaneus*



Northern harriers are long-winged, long-tailed hawks with a distinctive white rump. The male has a pale gray back, head, and breast with black wing tips, while female and young are brown above, streaked below. Northern harriers hunt by flying close to the ground and taking small animals by surprise. Harriers have keener hearing than other hawks; their disk-shaped faces, not unlike those of owls, enable them to amplify sound. This species is sometimes called the marsh hawk.

Greater Roadrunner *Geococcyx californianus*



This large, long-legged, long-tailed bird has a bushy crest and bright yellow eyes. The comical-looking roadrunner would rather run than fly. Twisting and turning in and out of shrubs and grass, the bird can easily outdistance a human. The roadrunner jerks its tail from side to side or up and down; it also elevates its bushy crest when excited. It eats a variety of animal foods, including small snakes, lizards, mice, scorpions, and insects. On cold mornings, roadrunners turn their back to the sun and expose black skin beneath their feathers to absorb the warmth.

Northern Flicker *Colaptes auratus*



A large brownish woodpecker, the northern flicker has a brown back with dark bars and spots; whitish or buff below with black spots; black crescent on breast; white rump which is visible in flight. The western birds—red-shafted flickers—have salmon-pink wing linings—seen as they open their wings; males have red “mustache.” Northern flicker the only woodpeckers in North America that commonly feed on the ground, searching for ants and beetle larvae.

Western Kingbird *Tyrannus verticalis*



Olive-brown above, yellow below the western kingbird has a gray head, lighter grayish throat and upper breast. The wings are dusky and blackish tail has white margins (these distinguish the western kingbird from Cassin’s kingbird). The western kingbird is very protective of its territory and nest, sometimes attacking much larger birds. Flying insects make up the bulk of its diet.

Horned Lark *Eremophila alpestris*

Larger than a sparrow, the horned lark is brown with a black stripe below the eye and white or yellowish stripe above, black crescent on breast, and black “horns”. In flight, the tail is black with white edges. The horned lark, which walks or runs instead of hopping, moves in an erratic pattern when feeding on seeds and ground insects. The only true lark native to the New World, the horned lark is one of the earliest nesting birds. This bird is *philopatric*, or faithful to its birthplace, where it returns after every migration.

Common Raven *Corvus corax*

Similar to the American crow but larger, the common raven has a heavier bill and wedge-shaped tail. Highly intelligent and creative, ravens are primarily scavengers and opportunists. They can often be seen begging for food at overlooks and trailheads. Please remember not to give in and feed ravens or any wildlife in the park! Enjoy watching ravens as they ride on rising air currents and frequently indulge in aerial displays, with mock fighting, tumbling, and other forms of acrobatics.

Rock Wren *Salpinctes obsoletus*

This sparrow-sized wren is pale grayish brown with a finely streaked breast. The outer tail feathers have whitish or pale buff tips. The males are very protective of their rocky territory, often displaying at the top of a rock or petrified log with bobbing and intricate singing. The rock wren has the unusual habit of laying down a path of small pebbles in front of its nest; this little “pavement” often simplifies an observer’s effort to locate nests.

Western Meadowlark *Sturnella neglecta*

The robin-sized western meadowlark is streaked brown above, bright yellow below, with a bold black V on breast. This bird, often perching on fences and posts is best known for its beautiful song. Where their range overlaps, western and eastern meadowlarks can interbreed. Its bright colors, fearless behavior, abundance, and above all its loud, cheerful song make the western meadowlark one of the best known of western birds.

Great-tailed Grackle *Quiscalus mexicanus*

Named for its long, keel-shaped tail, the great-tailed grackle has an amazing vocabulary including whistles, chuckles, and warbling. The males are black, with iridescent purple on back and breast while the smaller females are brown with a paler breast. Eyes always yellow. Like magpies, these noisy, opportunistic birds feed on a great variety of food: fruits, grain, insects, and garbage. They are usually bold but become cautious and wary when in danger. The polygamous male is more cunning and shyer than the female; he often remains in a treetop until all his females are feeding on the ground. He will then join them when all seems safe.

House Finch *Carpodacus mexicanus*

This sparrow-sized finch can be seen throughout the park, particularly around developed areas where it nests in any spare hole. Most adult males have bright red on crown, breast, and rump, but less extensively so than male Cassin’s finches. The female has a plain, unstriped head and heavy streaking on light underside. House finches are omnivorous, gleaning insect pests and, in winter, grass and weed seeds.

Two other birds that are quite common in the area, the European starling and the house sparrow, are invasive non-natives. Such birds can cause the native birds to decrease in numbers and even disappear.

For more information on the birds of Petrified Forest National Park, there is a bird checklist available at the park bookstores.