

## Orioles

By Adam Trujillo

Have you ever heard of an Oriole? No, not the black and white cookie. Orioles are colorful birds that eat berries, fruit, insects, and nectar. These birds are not only interesting to look at, they also have an intriguing natural history.

To start, there is a distinction between Old World Orioles and New World Orioles. Old World Orioles are in the family Oriolidae, which contains Figbirds, Pitohuis, and Orioles like the Black-naped Oriole, the Brown Oriole, and the Green Oriole, to name a few. These birds are distributed across Africa, Europe, Asia, and Australia. While similar diets, sizes, behaviors might link them to New World Orioles, there are contrasting plumage colors and patterns and genetic differences which split the group into two different families.

Nine New World Oriole species can regularly be seen in North America, with some pushing into Canada and the Caribbean. These are Scott's Oriole, Audubon's Oriole, Altamira Oriole, Baltimore Oriole, Black-backed Oriole, Black-cowled Oriole, Black-vented Oriole, Bullock's Oriole, Hooded Oriole, Orchard Oriole, Spot-breasted Oriole, and Streak-backed Oriole.

These orioles are closely related to blackbirds, which puts them in the family Icteridae, along with Cowbirds and Grackles. Male orioles are identified as having some combination of black and yellow-orange, red-orange plumages with white markings, a sharp beak, a long tail, and a complex song. Females and immature birds are, generally, a duller type of yellow, with some black.

Here in the Texas Gulf Coast, there are no resident (year-round) orioles, but during the spring migration season you can bet that Baltimore and Orchard Orioles will be flying through. If you're really lucky, potentially a Bullock's Oriole might fly through, but that is a rarity.

If you travel to other parts of Texas or nearby states, you might be able to see other Oriole species. Down in the Rio Grande Valley I was fortunate to see an Altamira Oriole, in New Mexico I got my first Bullock's Oriole, and in Southern California where I'm from, I've been fortunate enough to see a Hooded Oriole.

There is something just awe-inspiring about seeing an oriole, whether it's your first Hooded or 100<sup>th</sup> Baltimore, it never gets old. They are truly unmistakable too, even if you have to look through a guide book to know what kind of oriole you saw, you still know that you are looking for an oriole.

During the right season, Orioles are a common bird to find at your birdfeeders if the right food is put out. They won't be attracted by seeds like some other birds. They mostly eat insects, but are also quite partial to fruit and nectar. So, if you stick an orange wedge onto a branch, or even leave out some smooth grape jelly, there's a good chance an oriole will go after it. To increase your chances of seeing one, putting out oriole feeders in late March, early April will attract early spring migrants. And you can keep them out until late fall to attract any moving south.

Seeing an oriole is truly unmistakable and breathtaking. They may not be as flashy as some warblers or as colorful as a bunting, but an oriole is definitely high on my list of migrant birds to see. Even if you aren't a huge birder, you can't help but smile when you see an oriole, truly one of a kind.

Photo by Mike Williams. Caption: Altamira Oriole