

State Birds: How were they elected? By Celeste Silling

It's common knowledge that each U.S. state has a state bird. But do you know how each of these birds were chosen? The tradition originated in the 1920's when the General Federation of Women's Clubs decided to assign a state bird to each state. Of course, it would be up to each state to pick their own bird for their own reasons. Texas was one of the first states to jump on this idea and elect our own state bird.

The state bird of Texas is the Northern Mockingbird. It's a relatively plain-looking bird that's only about eleven inches long, including its tail. It has gray upper parts and white underparts with dark wings and tail. Overall, one might say that the Northern Mockingbird doesn't have a very striking appearance, so why did the Texas branch of Women's Clubs elect it to represent us?

Well, there were several reasons. For one, the Northern Mockingbird is found in all parts of the state during all seasons. Unlike most other birds, the mockingbirds can live in the city, the country, the forest, the beach, and so on. So, this is a state bird that all Texans are able to see and appreciate all throughout the year.

The Northern Mockingbird is also a talented singer, being able to imitate other species and sounds as well as its own. In fact, the males of the species can have over 150 songs in their repertoire. That's one smart bird! Mockingbirds are also determined fighters when protecting their territory. So, this bird was essentially chosen because it held many qualities that the Texans identified with!

But, seeing as how the Northern Mockingbird is such a wonderful bird, we weren't alone in our choice. Four other states also chose the Northern Mockingbird as their state bird... copycats! On the other hand, seven other states all have the Northern Cardinal as their state bird, so we could do worse.

The different U.S. states all had different reasons for picking their state birds. Utah, for example, chose the California Gull for a very unique reason. The gulls saved the people of Utah from an insect plague in 1848. The state had been absolutely overrun by a horde of crickets that were eating all of the crops. People would have likely starved due to the infestation, but for the heroic California Gulls! The gulls stepped in and bravely ate the crickets, saving many crops and many lives.

Another interesting state bird is the Nene of Hawaii. Hawaii chose this species to raise awareness of the bird's plight. The Nene was once found in large populations on the islands, but now only a few thousand remain. In an effort to bring more attention to this and other disappearing species, Hawaii elected the Nene for state bird.

I wonder, if we were choosing a state bird nowadays, would the Northern Mockingbird still win? Personally, I think the Green Jay is a pretty good choice, because they are smart, bright, and Texas is the only U.S. state they are found in. Who would you elect?

Photo by Mike Williams

Caption: The Northern Mockingbird is the State Bird of 5 different U.S. states.