

Brown Creeper

by Taylor Bennett

At Gulf Coast Bird Observatory, we participate in several of Audubon's Christmas Bird Counts (CBCs) every year in the winter. The counts are a way to provide population data for use in conservation and biological studies. They are conducted nationwide and have grown to include several countries as well. This year, I participated in the San Bernard CBC, Freeport CBC, and Brazoria CBC. It was during the Brazoria CBC that I just so happened to encounter one of the most cryptic birds we have here, the Brown Creeper.

Brown Creepers are very small tree-climbing songbirds that can be observed in Texas during their winter migration. It is the only species of creeper in the United States. They prefer forested habitats with lots of large, live trees for foraging and forests with abundance of dead and dying trees to nest in. Their breeding range is widely distributed, ranging from Alaska to Canada, Western and Eastern United States, and Middle America.

Brown Creepers can be a bit difficult to spot. Just imagine a piece of bark moving that just so happens to have a long downward-curved bill. That is exactly what a Brown Creeper looks like. Their back is speckled brown, black, and white, camouflaging them perfectly well with the tree bark. Their bellies are whitish, heads are small with slender decurved bill, legs are pink and short with long curved toes and claws, and tail is long and stiff. Breeding and non-breeding plumage are the same and the only known way to tell male from female is the size of their bill; female bills are slightly shorter.

Brown Creepers mainly prey on insects that can be found within and on the bark of trees. This includes a large variety of insect and larvae such as flies, beetles, weevils, spiders and their eggs, ants, and pseudoscorpions. During the winter, if insects are scarce, they have been observed eating small seed and vegetable matter.

Brown Creepers are incredibly adapted for climbing trees. They use their long stiff tails to prop themselves up and their long toes and claws to hook onto the outside of the tree bark. The term creeper comes from the way they behave. They move in a hopping spiral up and around tree trunks with their legs sprawled out on either side of their body. They move their legs and feet at the same time while their body is kept vertically parallel to the tree trunk and their heads are pointing upward.

As they are spiraling, they are constantly using their long bill to pick off insects. Once they reach the top, they fly down to another nearby tree trunk and start the process again, always moving in an upward spiral and never down.

Like other migratory species, Brown Creepers are protected by the Migratory Bird Treaty Act, so please give them their space. On behalf of Gulf Coast Bird Observatory, thank you for reading and keep your eye on the trees you may never know what you might find.

IMG_1194: Brown Creeper observed on a tree trunk during the Brazoria Christmas Bird Count in Brazoria, TX. Picture by Taylor Bennett on December 30, 2023.