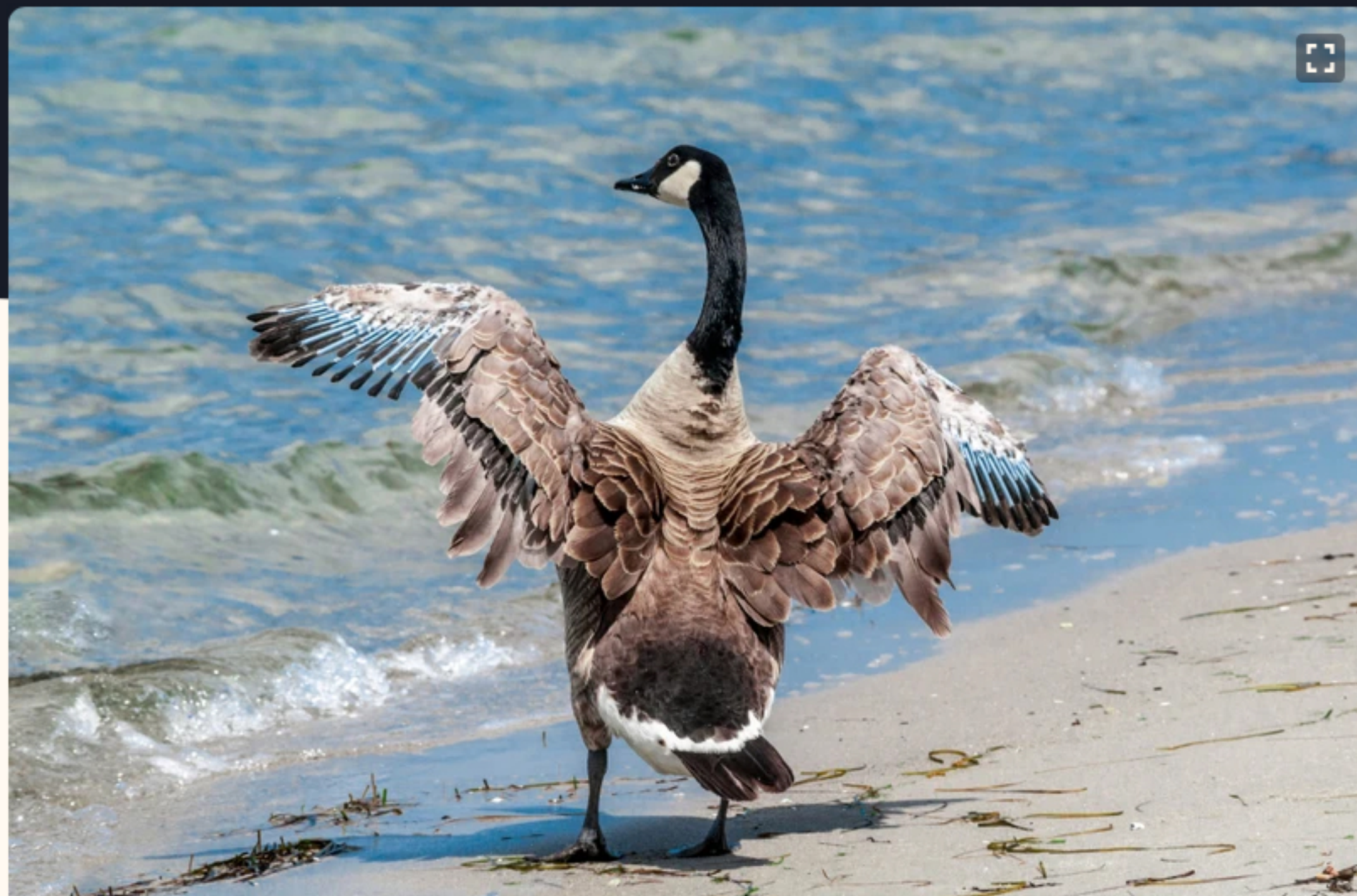


Who Wore It Worst? Behold the Awkward Glory of Molting

Replacing feathers can leave birds looking rough—but there's much to appreciate in their unsightly season.



Canada Goose. Photo: Nick Pecker/Shutterstock



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Each year, one of the most important events in every bird's life goes largely unnoticed by even the most dedicated birders. There is good reason: Molting—the replacement of old, worn feathers with fresh plumes—is typically a slow and subtle process, making it hard to detect.

But for some species, including many feeder visitors and common park residents, the transformation is awkward and obvious. Scroll on to see 10 shining examples of birds in ungraceful transition. Feel free to laugh, but have some empathy for all of these ragamuffins: Molting is an essential life event that demands lots of energy, and birds are more vulnerable during the process. If you're lucky enough to spot molting birds in the wild, give them plenty of space—and help them out by keeping your feeders full.

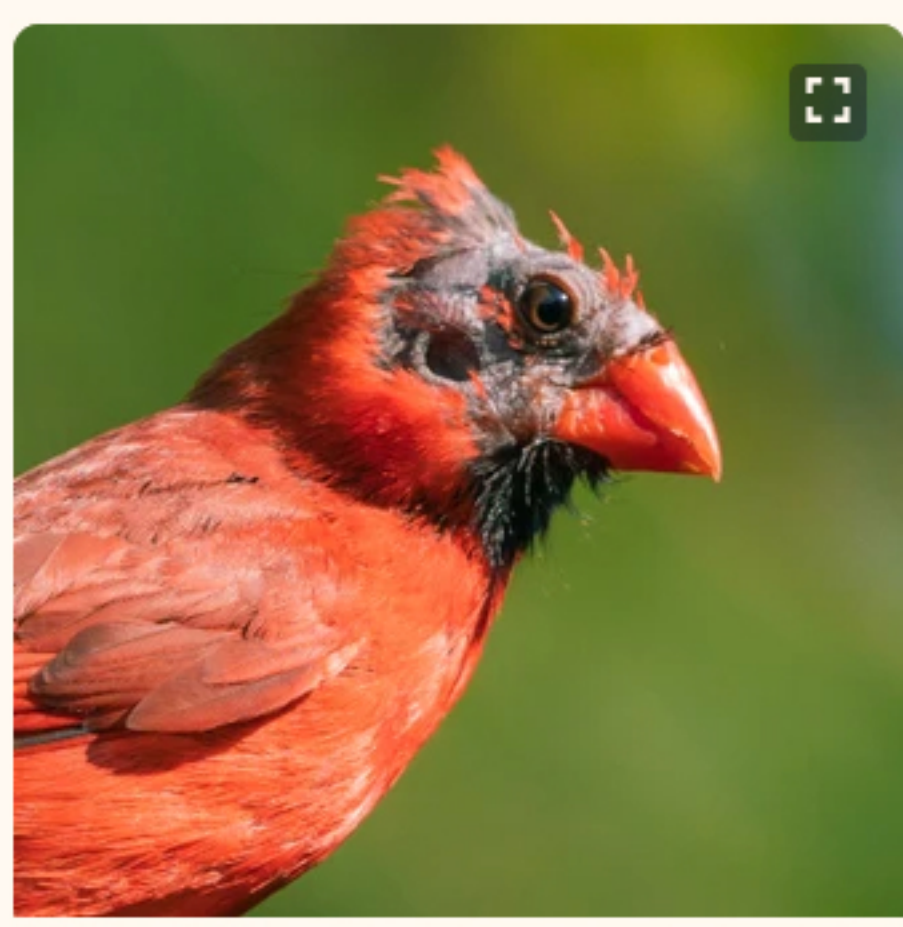


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Northern Cardinal

While molting is usually a feather-by-feather affair, Northern Cardinals sometimes drop their head plumes all at once, leaving them shockingly exposed. Though their appearance can be unsettling, it's perfectly natural (and necessary!), and the plumes regrow quickly. Take the opportunity to admire usually hidden features like their charcoal-hued skin and large ear cavities, clearly visible on this mutton-chopped male.

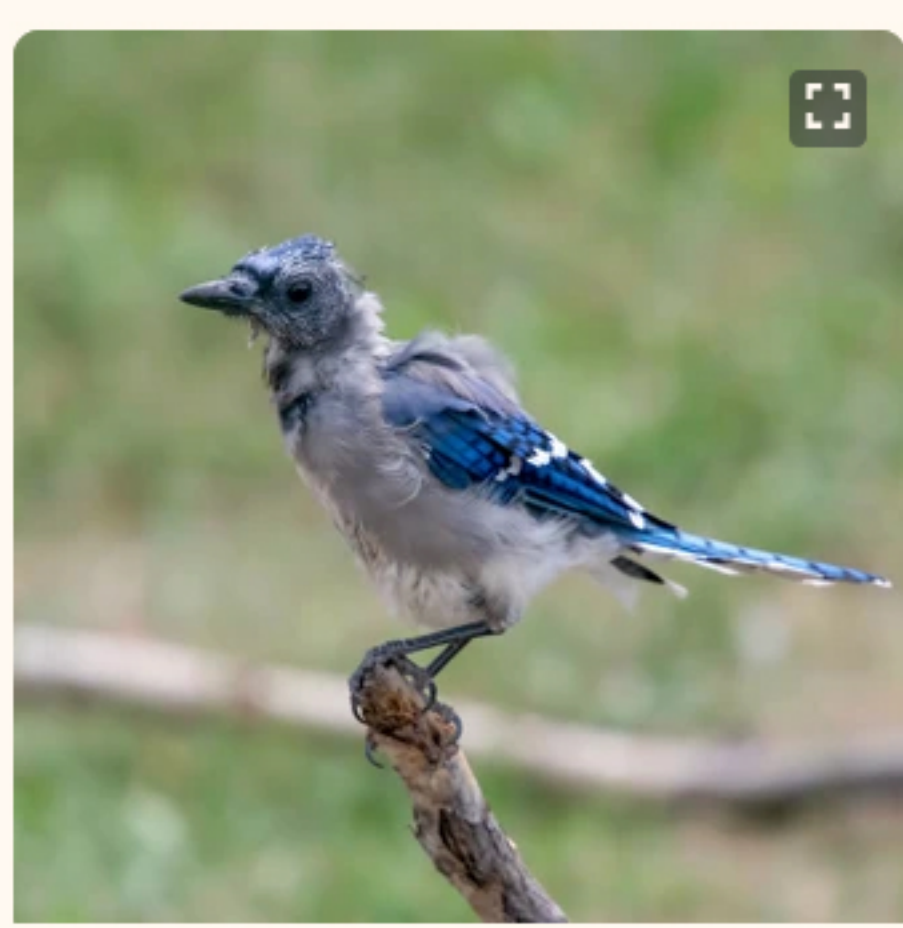


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Blue Jay

The Blue Jay's annual molt, which typically begins in June, can take months—but like cardinals, the corvids often replace their head feathers in one go, leaving them looking like zombies or punk-rockers. In this brief window, it's easy to see the keratin sheaths, called pins, that protect newly sprouted feathers and supply them with nourishing blood flow as they grow. The pins flake off when the feathers are fully grown.

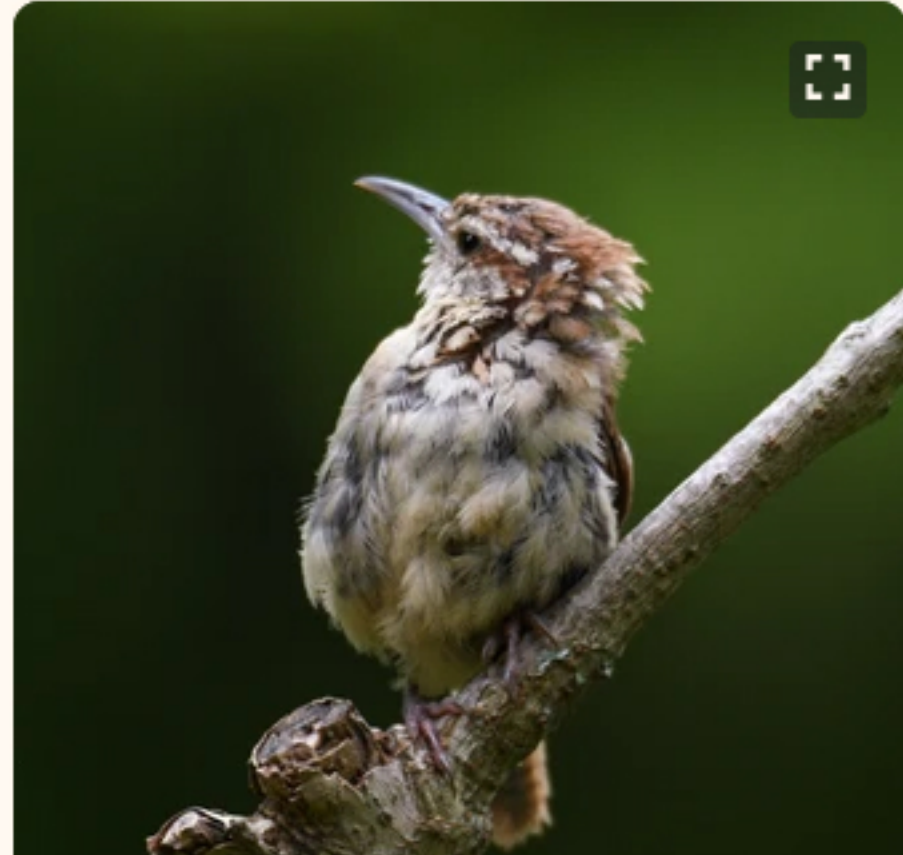


Photo: Susan Berthelot/Audubon Photography Awards

Carolina Wren

Molting can leave ordinarily sleek birds with a serious case of what looks like bed-head. Carolina Wrens like this one, which wander during the winter but do not technically migrate, are fine molting just once a year. Their Marsh and Sedge Wren cousins, on the other hand, are migratory and make their home in abrasive, watery habitats; these species replace feathers a second time in late winter or early spring due to the extra wear and tear.

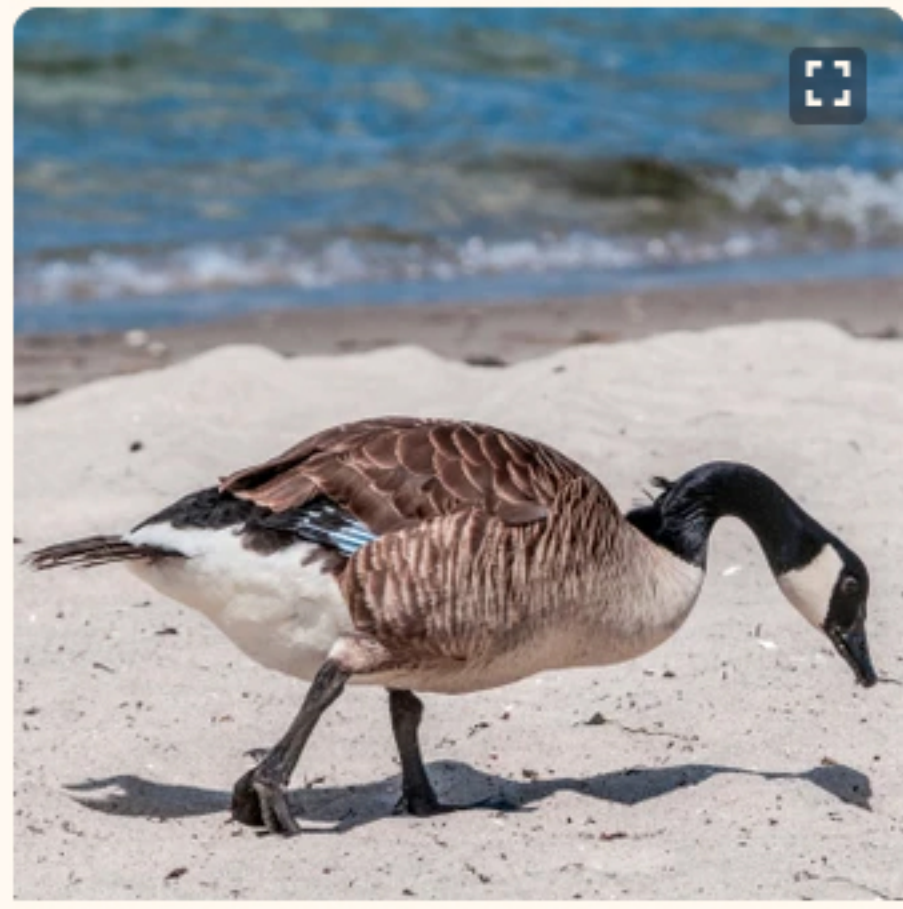


Photo: Nick Pecker/Shutterstock

Canada Goose

Some of the most dramatic molters are also among the easiest to see in action, thanks to resident flocks of Canada Geese in parks across the United States. Unlike songbirds that absolutely need to fly to stay alive, waterbirds like geese can get away with a faster molt, dropping many wing feathers at once. Though flightless as the plumes regrow, geese can take to the water to feed and evade predators. Their large size makes it easy to see the feather pins, tinted blue from blood.

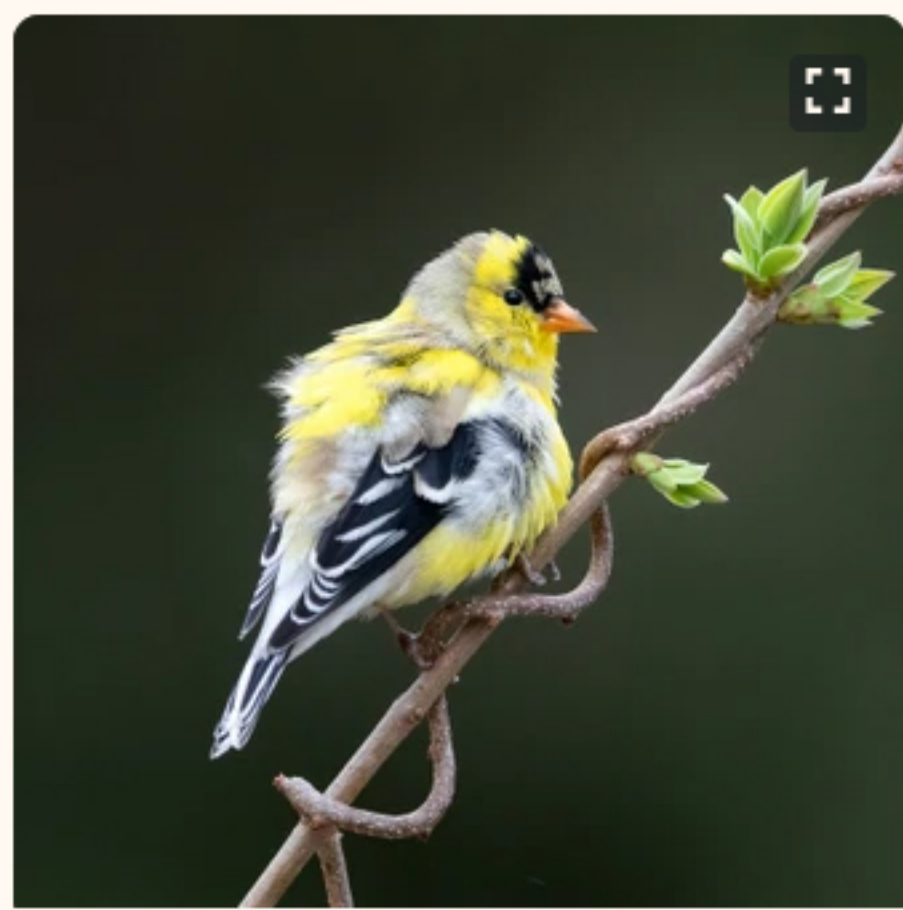


Photo: Ann Pacheco/Audubon Photography Awards

American Goldfinch

Some songbirds, especially long-distance migrants such as warblers, molt twice a year. In many species, the plumes look exactly like the ones they replace, but others, like the American Goldfinch, swap non-breeding plumage for a flashier appearance in the spring. Goldfinches sport brilliant yellow feathers for courting season and duller brown ones the rest of the year. When transitioning, they may appear strangely patchy.

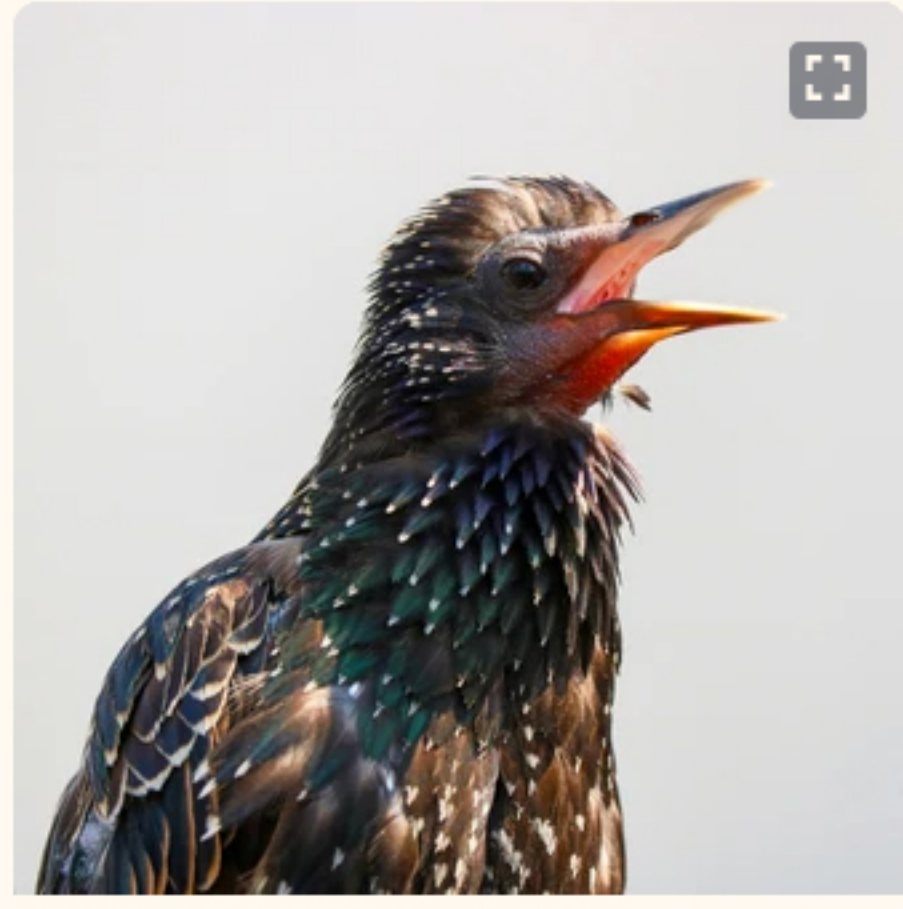


Photo: Markusmayer/Shutterstock

European Starling

European Starlings molt just once annually, usually starting in June or July, but they rock two distinct looks each year. How? Molting starlings, like this Elvis-looking individual, grow fresh feathers capped with pale tips that give them an eye-catching spangled appearance (and first-year birds are spottier than older adults). The caps usually wear off over the next few months, leaving them glossy black in spring and summer.



Photo: Nobski/Shutterstock

American Robin

Though not as dramatic as starlings' spangles, American Robins grow new plumes with pale tips, so their fresh feathers can actually appear already faded. By spring, the weak tips have worn away, revealing the full glory of the species' signature red breasts. Missing feathers or visible pins are clear sign of robins' annual molting (and a dramatically notched neck like this is a dead giveaway), which they typically undertake between July and September.

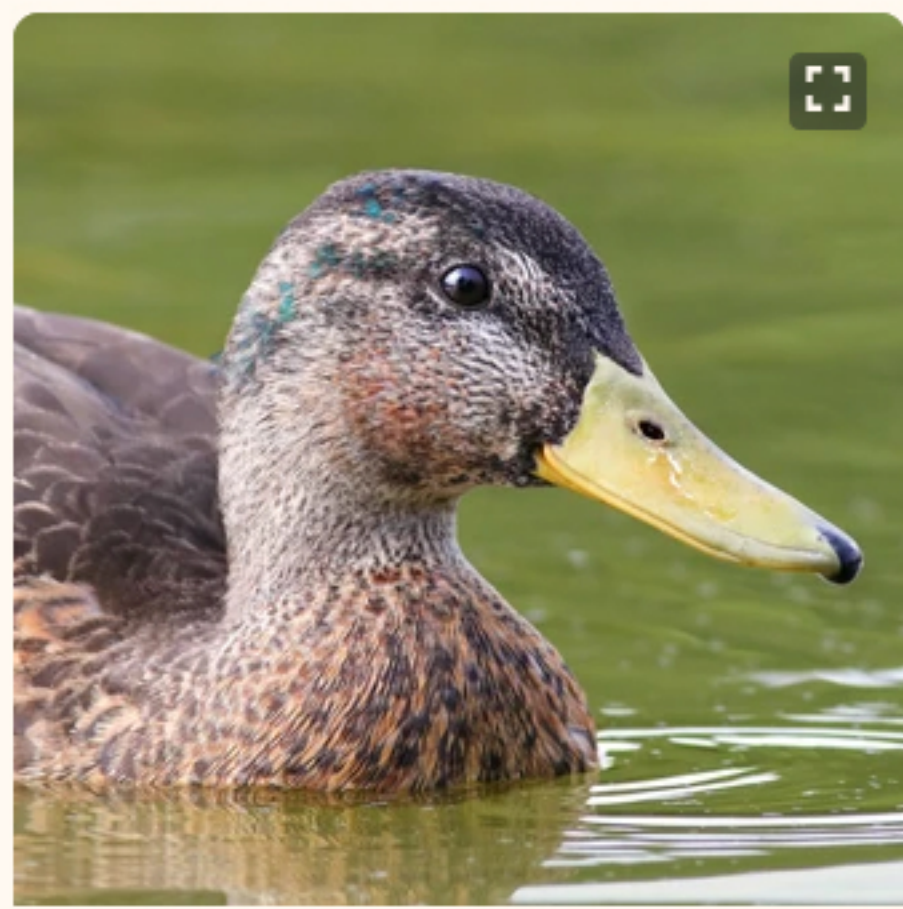


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Mallard

Look closely—this Mallard is a male! See the small fleck of emerald green on his head? Mallards molt out of their flashier feathers into what's called cryptic (or "eclipsed") plumage for some of the year, which helps them keep a lower profile for two vital but risky undertakings: first nesting, then replacing flight feathers, which leaves them temporarily flightless. Fortunately for the ducks, like their goose relatives, they can swim.

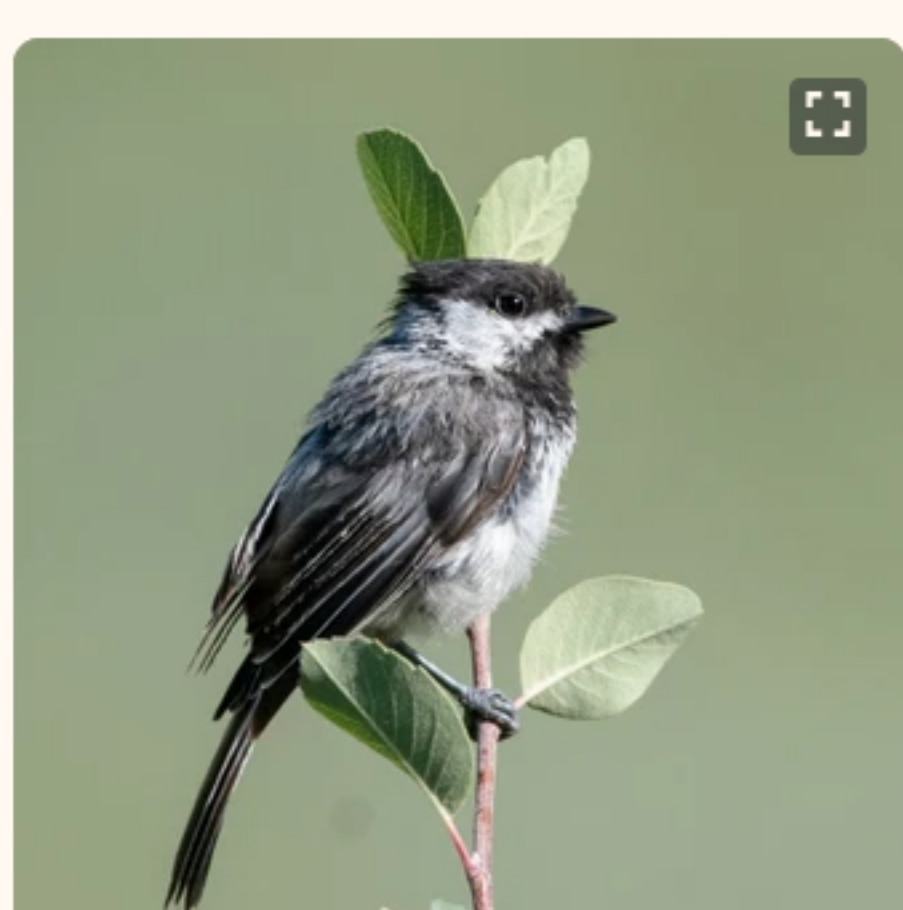


Photo: Mia McPherson

Black-capped Chickadee

Like many resident species, chickadees molt just once each year, typically between July and September. During this period, a scruffy-looking bird might well be molting, but looks can also be deceiving: By late summer, female Black-capped Chickadees can look bedraggled after weeks of scrambling in and out of cavity nests. Soon enough, they'll molt and replace their tattered feathers with fresh plumes.

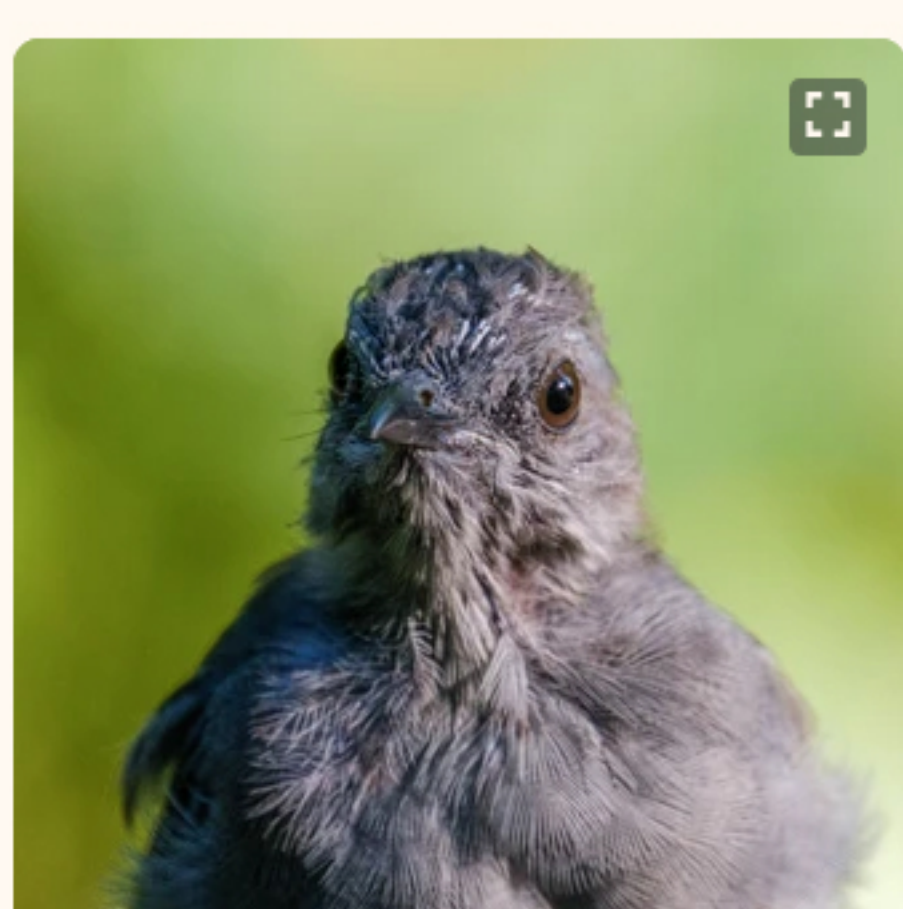


Photo: Paul Lisiker/Audubon Photography Awards

Gray Catbird

The Gray Catbird may be a familiar sight in much of North America, but its molt cycle remains mysterious. There is evidence that, unlike their closest relatives, mockingbirds and thrashers, at least some Gray Catbirds replace body feathers more than once a year, but scientists aren't certain. If you see a patchy, molting catbird (and you see a picture! You could help crack the catbird conundrum).

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