

California Towhee

Melospiza crissalis

Your first encounter with a California Towhee may be prompted by a tireless knocking at your window or car mirror: these common backyard birds habitually challenge their reflections. But California Towhees are at heart birds of the tangled chaparral and other hot scrublands of California and Oregon. You're as likely to hear their bright chip notes along a secluded trail as on your way out your front door. If you live in the Southwest, look for this bird's twin, the Canyon Towhee.

Keys to Identification

Size and Shape

California Towhees are essentially large sparrows, with a sparrow's short, rounded wings, long tail, and thick, seed-cracking beak – but towhees are larger and bulkier. The long tail and short wings can give this bird an ungainly look in flight.

Color Pattern

Few birds are as uniformly matte brown as a California Towhee. A patch under the tail (called the crissum, giving the bird its scientific name) is a noticeably warmer ruddy brown. Males look the same as females.

Behavior

California Towhees hop or run on the ground but tend to stay close to the protection of low shrubs and trees. When not foraging they may perch on shrubs, rooftops, and backyard fences, to sit and chip for long periods. In flight they look out of practice, using lots of wingpower to travel short distances.

Habitat

California Towhees live in chaparral and other tangled, shrubby, and dry habitats. They're also at home in the small backyards and neighborhood parks of lowland California towns.



Measurements

Both Sexes

- Length - 8.3 - 9.8 inches
- Wingspan - 11.4 inches
- Weight - 1.3 - 2.4 ounces