

Phainopepla

Phainopepla nitens

A crested songbird of the deserts and arid woodlands of the southwestern United States and Mexico, the Phainopepla is unique in taxonomy, distribution, and behavior. It is particularly notable for its enigmatic pattern of breeding twice each year, in two different habitats.

Keys to Identification

Adult Description

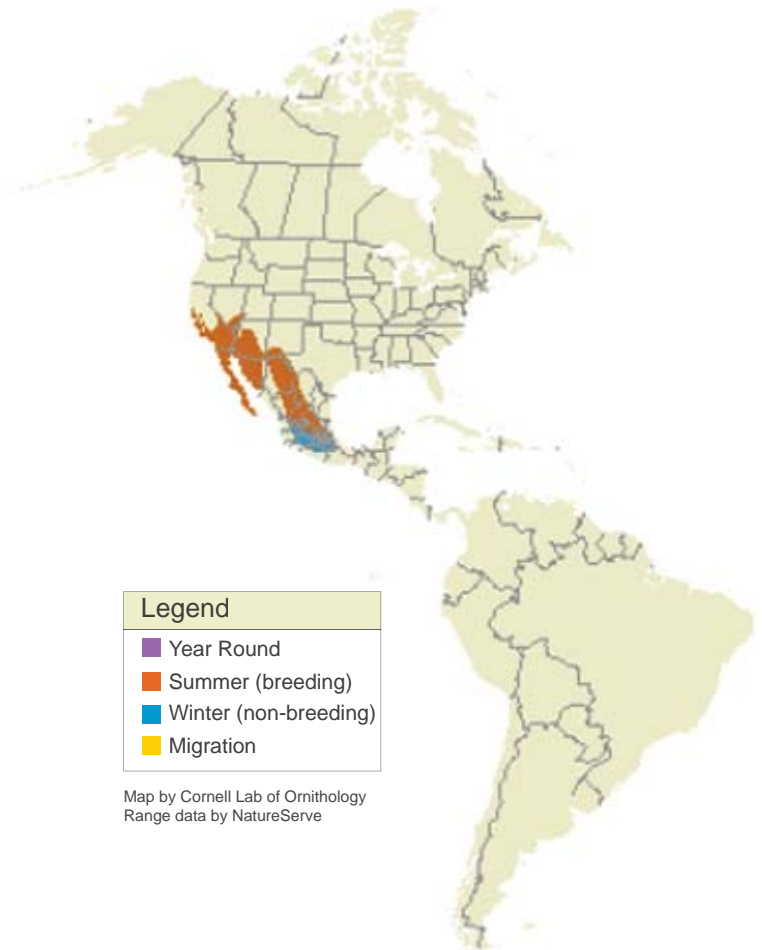
- Medium-sized songbird.
- Tall, wispy crest.
- Slender, with a long tail.
- Male is shiny black.
- Female is all gray.

Immature Description

Immature resembles adult female, but more brownish, and with brown eyes.

Cool Facts

- The Phainopepla, when pursued by predators or handled by humans, mimics the calls of other birds; imitations of at least 13 species have been recorded.
- An individual Phainopepla eats at least 1,100 mistletoe berries per day, when they are available.
- The Phainopepla exhibits strikingly different behaviors in its two habitats. In the desert, it is territorial, actively defending nesting and foraging sites, while in the woodlands it is colonial, with as many as four nesting pairs sharing one large tree.
- The Phainopepla rarely drinks water, even though research indicates that it loses about 95 percent of its body mass in water per day. Instead, it gets the water it needs from its diet of mistletoe.
- The name “Phainopepla” (pronounced fay-no-PEP-la) comes from the Greek for “shining robe,” a fitting characterization of the shiny, jet-black plumage of the adult male.



Measurements

Both Sexes

- Length - 7.1 - 8.3 inches
- Wingspan - 11.4 inches
- Weight - 0.6 - 1.0 ounces