Mimus polyglottos (Northern Mockingbird)

Family: Mimidae (Mockingbirds)
Order: Passeriformes (Perching Birds)
Class: Aves (Birds)

Fig. 1. Northern mockingbird, *Mimus polyglottos.*

[http://ibc.lynxeds.com/photo/northern-mockingbird-mimus-polyglottos/perched-showing-large-white-wing-patch downloaded 7 November 2012]

TRAITS. The northern mockingbird is a songbird which can be identified by its upper part of the body being either grey or grey-brown and the lower parts of its body being white or grey (Doughty 1988). The total length of females would usually be 208-235 mm, whereas the males would typically be 220-255 mm. The northern mockingbird has short wings that are rounded in shape and it has a long tail, as well as long legs. White narrow bars can be found on its wings, as well as a patch of white colour (Derrickson et al. 1992). Its head is small and on it is a thin, short, black-coloured bill that is curved to a small extent. Juveniles have similarities to the adult, except that they have slightly spotted breasts (Dunne, 2006).

ECOLOGY. The northern mockingbird is found in habitats ranging from open woodland, suburban lots, parks and farmland. They are typically found in the United States, southern Canada, Mexico and the Greater Antilles (Mobley, 2009). They are an accidental visitor to Trinidad, where the tropical mockingbird *M. gilvus* is the common resident species of mockingbird. Their food consists of seeds, insects and berries, which may be found either in vegetation or on the ground. Usually it builds its nest using twigs, in high areas for example on trees and telephone poles in urban areas. They are territorial since they defend their nest aggressively against predators such as animals and other birds (MobileReference, 2009).

FORAGING BEHAVIOUR. They are omnivorous and their diet consists of a wide variety of foods. They consume fruits (Fig. 4) such as grapes, blackberries and figs and insects such as spiders, grasshoppers and caterpillars (Likoff, 2007). When obtaining arthropods as food, the northern mockingbird jumps towards the arthropod after running or hopping a short distance towards it. In areas where there is short grass present, the northern mockingbird can catch and consume insects that are slightly above the ground. When this bird is sitting on a high area and it spots an insect at ground level, it attacks and kills the insects on the ground and consumes it there, or it carries this newly caught food back to the high area it was sitting on previously. Fruits that are on trees are eaten whilst the bird is on the tree branch or when it is hovering. Also ripe fruits that fall on the ground are ripped open, and then eaten by the bird (Derrickson et al. 1992).

COMMUNICATION. Young northern mockingbirds usually develop vocal abilities to produce songs when they are two months old. The songs young mockingbirds produce are made quietly (Derrickson et al. 1992). Songs that this bird produces involves the repetition of a number of notes, which may consist of its own sounds or mimicry of other sounds. These birds are well known for their mimicry of sounds from the environment which include calls made by other birds or non-avian sounds (Burton and Burton 2002). Some calls that are usually made by this bird are begging call, “hew” call, nest relief call and “chat”. “Chat” and begging call are incorporated in songs made by adult males. Males usually vocalize whilst sitting on trees, during flight or any place that is within its territory. When a northern mockingbird starts singing, it usually produces repeats of the same song and the presentation of the song is done in bouts. In order for it to start singing a different song, it must first complete repetitions of the previous song it was singing (Derrickson et al 1992). The purpose of vocalization is for males to attract females using their songs, which can result in mating between them. Also, vocalization can be used to chase away predators or other birds for a northern mockingbird’s territory (MobileReference, 2009).

SEXUAL BEHAVIOUR. Northern mockingbirds are monogamous birds that form pair bonds with each other. In order for mating to occur the male must attract a female, by producing songs from its repertoire (Derrickson et al. 1992). It was found that males who produced songs that had a high variety attracted females (Day, 2007). During courtship, both the male and female make harsh chjjj calls while chasing each other around (Elliott, 2004). Some courtships displays include the soft production of hew calls between each other while the male chases the female within his territory. Flight display is another sign of courtship, while the male is singing when perched on a branch, he immediately jumps up and starts flapping his wings. Then he leaves his wings open and floats down to a branch on the tree. Before and during copulation singing occurs, usually by the male. Copulation takes place on the ground, in an area that has shrubs present.

Mounting of the female by the male occurs when the female starts quivering her wings, then the male which is perched on a branch would fly down and land on the ground. The male would then walk towards the female prior to mounting (Derrickson et al. 1992).

JUVENILE BEHAVIOUR. After young birds are hatched from the eggs they are blind and naked (altricial chicks). Also they cannot fly so they have to stay in the nest until they can fly. After about three days, pinfeathers and quills start to grow on the skin of the young birds. Around day five the eyes become opened completely. By day six the young birds start making a loud call, known as the begging call. These nestlings also produce "chat" calls, which are loud, short notes made (Derrickson et al. 1992).

PARENTAL CARE. Before the eggs are laid, the male and female make a nest on a high area, such as a tree. The nest is cup-shaped and is made using grass and twigs. When the eggs are laid in the nest, the female would incubate it most of the time, but the male would incubate the eggs for a short period of time if the female leaves the nest (Burton and Burton 2002). Nestlings obtain food from both the male and female parents; they bring food that they caught to the nest in their bills (Fig. 2). Nestlings are fed fruits and arthropods such as grasshoppers, beetles, butterflies and spiders. Nestlings are protected by both parents from any predators, but the males play a larger role when it comes to defending the nest. For example male northern mockingbirds had protected nestlings by attacking any potential predators; this increased the nesting success (Derrickson et al. 1992).

DEFENCE BEHAVIOUR. Any predator that comes close to the nest of a northern mockingbird would be physically attacked. This bird would dive from its perched position on a tree branch and peck at predators such as cats and snakes that come close to its nest (Burton and Burton 2002). Northern mockingbirds are greatly territorial and usually protect their territories in pairs. When some predators such as other birds try to enter a northern mockingbird's territory, it makes "chat" or "hew" calls while it chases the predator away. The "hew" call is a type of vocalization that is raspy, has a high amplitude and is produced by both male and female. To show that a certain territory belongs to a northern mockingbird, it would do a boundary dance when it encounters a male moving towards its territory. A boundary dance involves the birds on the ground facing towards each other and then one of the birds starts laterally hopping from side to side. This occurs until the invading bird flies away from the territory. If any fights occur, the birds would start wrestling each other on the ground (Fig. 3). In the fight they would flap up their wings and start using their bill and claws to attack the intruder (Derrickson et al. 1992).

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Posted online: 2012

Fig. 2. A northern mockingbird feeding its young.

[http://www.greglasley.net/northernmock.html, downloaded 12 November 2012]

Fig. 3. Two northern mockingbirds fighting.

[http://stevecreek.com/an-amazing-fight-between-2-mockingbirds/, downloaded 12 November 2012]

Fig. 4. A northern mockingbird feeding on a berry.
[http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10000872396390444734804578062831318272660.html, downloaded 12 November 2012]

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