



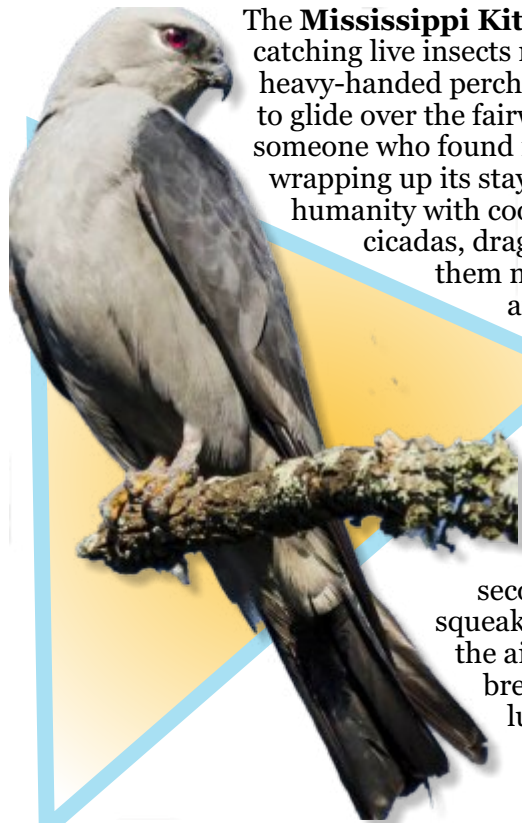
BIRD BREAK

Ah, October on the lanai. There is a faint, fleeting suggestion of autumn in the morning air, or at least humidity dropping down to double digits, punctuated by the usual suspects: the odd bullfrog, a NAS JAX flyover, a leaf blower starting five minutes too early, and those birds! With over 520 recorded species in our neck of the woods, fall brings a fresh seasonal shuffle: migrants passing through, winter visitors arriving, and year-round locals holding down the fort with unbothered attitude. Armed with a fresh cup of coffee and open ears, let's meet two aerial icons taking center stage this month.

The **Northern Mockingbird** is the neighborhood's unhinged midnight DJ, a hyperactive sonic plagiarist who has never once respected quiet hours. It holds the official title of Florida's State Bird, a distinction it uses as legal immunity to torment every living thing within a three-block radius. It doesn't merely sing; it performs a relentless, non-stop mashup of every sound it has ever overheard, from Blue Jays and tree frogs to car alarms, squeaky lawnmower wheels, and cell phone ringtones. It perches at the topmost twig of your oak tree, or the peak of your roof, flashing its white wing patches like a frantic traffic cop directing a multi-car pileup. If a male is single, it will happily perform a 2:00 a.m. acoustic solo set directly outside your bedroom window with the unearned confidence of a garage band frontman. It will dive-bomb housecats, walking dogs, postal carriers, and its own reflection in your car's side mirror without a second thought. You do not own your yard; you are merely renting space on the mockingbird's current concert tour.



Song and Call: The song is a dizzying, virtuosic medley of stolen phrases, with one strict rule: it repeats each stolen snippet three to five times before jumping to the next track on its stolen playlist. A typical performance goes: **"car-alarm car-alarm car-alarm, jay-call jay-call jay-call, whistle-tone whistle-tone whistle-tone."** It is the ultimate karaoke flex, though it would thoroughly humiliate anyone attempting it on a Wednesday night at Saloon 17. When it isn't plagiarizing others, its native call is a sharp, scolding **"chack!"** or a raspy **"cherrr,"** which sounds suspiciously like a game-show buzzer announcing that your presence in its yard was a wrong answer.



The **Mississippi Kite** is the effortless aerial acrobat of the raptor world, a bird that makes catching live insects mid-air look like a casual trip through a drive-thru. While hawks do all that heavy-handed perching, tree-screaming, and territorial posturing, the Mississippi Kite prefers to glide over the fairway with the sleek, silent elegance of a stealth fighter jet engineered by someone who found red-shouldered hawks entirely too dramatic. It is a summer visitor wrapping up its stay in October, catching thermals over Oglebay and looking down on humanity with cool detachment. It doesn't bother hunting on the ground; instead, it snatches cicadas, dragonflies, and June bugs straight out of the sky with its yellow feet and eats them mid-flight like a bag of movie theater popcorn. It swoops low over rooftops and lawns with long, pointed wings, performing physics-defying banking turns just to show off. It has never once flapped its wings in anger, and it considers gravity to be merely a polite suggestion.

Song and Call: For a bird that looks like a high-performance jet, its vocalization is delightfully ridiculous. Like other raptors, it lacks the complex vocal apparatus (syrinx complexity) of songbirds, skipping the concert entirely. Its signature call is a high-pitched, two-note whistle, a smooth, squeaky **"phee-phew"** or **"pee-tee"** dropping sharply on the second syllable. It sounds less like an apex predator and more like a rubber squeaky toy or a high school referee calling a minor personal foul from 200 feet in the air. It uses this call to keep tabs on its mate while drifting effortlessly on a breeze, reminding you that while you're stuck in morning traffic, it's having lunch at 500 feet without ever breaking a sweat.

Full disclosure: my thanks to the Cornell Lab of Ornithology for their brilliant 'Merlin Bird ID' app, which uses your phone to identify the birds in your backyard by their calls! You gotta try this! The rest I noodled up on my own. You know, before coffee when I have no sense!

EDITOR

