

blue-gray gnatcatcher *Polioptila caerulea*

Kingdom: Animalia

Division/Phylum: Chordata

Class: Aves

Order: Passeriformes

Family: Polioptilidae

ILLINOIS STATUS common, native

FEATURES

The blue-gray gnatcatcher averages about four and one-half inches in length. It has blue-gray feathers on the upper body and white feathers below. It has a white eye ring. The tail feathers are black with white outer feathers that can be seen when the bird flies. In spring, the male has a black line over each eye that extends to the forehead.

BEHAVIORS

The blue-gray gnatcatcher is a common migrant and summer resident statewide in Illinois. It winters from the southern United States to Guatemala and Honduras. Spring migrants arrive in Illinois from late March through April. Nesting occurs from May to June. The nest is placed high in the tree (four to 70 feet above the ground) and is built over a horizontal branch. Spider webs are used to hold this cup-shaped nest of plant fibers together. Both the male and female work to build the nest over a one- to two-week period. Three to five blue eggs with red-brown spots are laid by the female. The male and female take turns incubating the eggs over the 13-day incubation period. Fall migration begins in August. The blue-gray gnatcatcher makes a high, thin call (“zpee” or “chee”) and a warbling song. It can be seen in trees flicking its tail, moving it from side to side and cocking it upright. This bird lives in bottomland forests, forest edges, residential areas, open woods, pine woods and thickets. It feeds from mid-height to high in trees, eating insects and their larvae.

HABITATS

Aquatic Habitats

bottomland forests

Woodland Habitats

bottomland forests; coniferous forests; southern Illinois lowlands; upland deciduous forests

Prairie Habitats

none

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