

BLACKBIRDS: THE CHARISMATIC HARBINGER

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OF *spring*

Spend any time near a wetland and you're sure to hear the vociferous call of the red-winged blackbird. We've all heard the unmistakable conk-la-reeee! as the charismatic male protects his favorite perch. Red-winged blackbirds are a mainstay of reed-filled ponds and marshes throughout North America. These birds are one of the most widespread species on the continent, and are found from southern Alaska, Canada, across all 48 states of the continental U.S., and into central America and parts of the Caribbean. This of course includes Ohio, where blackbirds inhabit wetlands, ditches, pond edges, and other watery spaces.

Red-winged blackbirds are one of the true harbingers of spring, as these hardy birds are among the first to fly back as daylight hours increase in February and March. As soon as they return north, males begin to establish territories among the reeds and cattails and can defend potential mates. Females build their nests near the ground, hidden among the vegetation. Be careful to steer clear of a red-winged blackbird's nest. Males boldly defend them and will dive-bomb any would-be intruders, including humans. This behavior lasts into the summer.

continued on page 8



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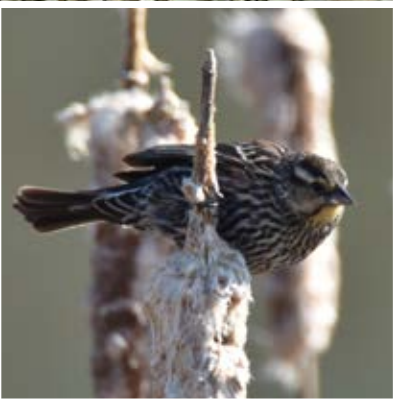


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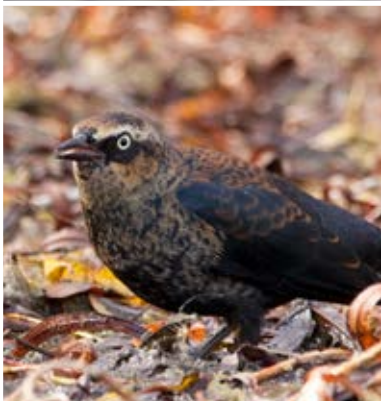


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MALE EPAULETS

SYMBOLS OF AGE AND EXPERIENCE, THE MALE'S BRIGHT RED EPAULETS HAVE A ROW OF BOTH YELLOW AND WHITE FEATHERS THAT ADD TO THEIR BRILLIANCE DURING COURTSHIP AND TERRITORIAL DISPLAYS.



FEMALE

THE FEMALE RESEMBLES A LARGE SPARROW WITH HER INCONSPICUOUS BROWN COLORATION. THE HUES BLEND WITH HER SURROUNDINGS DURING NEST-BUILDING, INCUBATION AND BROODING.

MALE PLUMAGE

THE MALE RESEMBLES A FEMALE UNTIL THE SECOND YEAR, WHEN HE ATTAINS THE GLOSSY BLACK FEATHERS AND FULL SHOULDER PATCH.



RUSTY BLACKBIRDS

WHILE THE RED-WINGED AND YELLOW-HEADED BLACKBIRDS LEAVE OHIO FOR THE WINTER, THE RUSTY BLACKBIRD FINDS THE EASTERN US A PERFECT WINTER HOME.

With their boisterous personalities, jet-black plumage, and prominent red and orange shoulder patches, male red-winged blackbirds have a unique and unforgettable look. Female blackbirds, on the other hand, are one of the most frequently misidentified birds. Be it novice or veteran, most birders have misidentified a female red-winged blackbird at least once. Unlike males, female blackbirds are not black and are missing the distinctive red feathers on their wings. Instead, a female resembles a large sparrow with a variable gray and brown streaked body, a light eyebrow stripe, and a buffy face and throat.

Females don't sing and prefer to skulk among the low, emergent vegetation where they feed on insects. The key to correctly identifying female red-winged blackbirds is to become familiar with their size, shape, and slender, conical bill, as well as the marshy habitats they call home.

Each winter, a few hardy red-winged blackbirds may brave the cold, but most migrate south — some traveling up to 750 miles. As the days shorten and the leaves change colors, blackbirds congregate in agricultural fields and grasslands. These congregations can number in the millions of birds and include other blackbird species and European starlings. The birds then head south to escape Ohio's winter and complete the migration route.

Although hardy and abundant, Ohio's resident populations of red-winged blackbirds are thought to have declined because of wetland loss. According to The Second Atlas of Breeding Birds in Ohio and Breeding Bird Survey results, Ohio red-winged blackbird populations have declined by about two-thirds since 1966. The H2Ohio program was launched by Governor Mike DeWine in 2019 and is committed to creating new wetlands as part of an initiative to improve Ohio's water quality. Wetlands act as watershed kidneys, helping to clean the water entering our taps. They also provide habitat for wildlife such as blackbirds and many other water-loving animals. You can improve habitat for blackbirds and other wildlife by protecting wetlands near you. Learn more at h2.ohio.gov.

The red-winged blackbird isn't the only blackbird species native to Ohio. Red-winged blackbirds belong to the Icteridae family with the bobolink, eastern meadowlark, western meadowlark, common grackle, orchard oriole, Baltimore oriole, and brown-headed cowbird. All are found in Ohio. Here, we focus on wetland-specific species.

YELLOW-HEADED BLACKBIRD • Across much of the western U.S., the larger and even more striking yellow-headed blackbird is a common compatriot of the red-winged blackbird. Yellow-headed blackbirds are a rare migrant and breeder in the coastal wetlands of northwest Ohio. In the western U.S. and Canada, where their breeding ranges overlap, the yellow-headed blackbird is dominant and outcompetes the smaller red-winged blackbird for the best nesting habitats. Yellow-headed blackbirds migrate to the southwestern U.S. and into Mexico during the winter.

RUSTY BLACKBIRD • While red-winged blackbirds and yellow-headed blackbirds leave Ohio for the winter, the rusty blackbird finds the eastern U.S. a perfect winter home. These blackbirds, with their rusty-tipped feathers and pale eyes, breed in the boreal forests of Canada and are visitors to Ohio during migration and the winter. Populations are in steep decline. Scientists estimate their population has dropped by as much as 99% in the last 40 years. The cause for this decline is not well understood, but wetland loss is at least partially to blame. Rusty blackbirds sometimes mix with red-winged blackbirds, making identification tricky. ♡



THE NONBREEDING PLUMAGE OF A MALE RED-WINGED BLACKBIRD WILL APPEAR SCALY OR BROWNISH.

THE RED-WINGED BLACKBIRD HAS ANSIODACTYL FEET, WITH THREE TOES POINTING FORWARD AND ONE BEHIND, AS IN MOST PERCHING BIRDS.

YELLOW-HEADED

THE YELLOW-HEADED BLACKBIRD IS DOMINANT AND WILL OUTCOMPETE THE SMALLER RED-WINGED BLACKBIRD FOR THE BEST NESTING HABITATS.



WESTERN MALE

THE RED-WINGED BLACKBIRD RANGE STRETCHES TO CALIFORNIA. WESTERN MALES LACK THE YELLOW BAR ON ITS WING.



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