

THE GREAT OUTDOORS



The bright red patch on the red-winged blackbird is iconic. Their common habitat is wetland and marshy areas but they also frequent field, prairies and meadows. Photo: J. Morton Galetto

Marshland Spirit

The red-winged blackbird is an iconic species of the Delaware Bayshore in spring and summer.

By Tony Klock, CU Maurice River

During your visit to any Down Jersey saltmarsh or freshwater wetland in early spring through midsummer, you are likely to encounter one of our most abundant North American bird species, the red-winged blackbird. Many of us consider its distinctive “konk a ree” call to be a sure sign of the impending spring season on the marsh.

This call that the male emits, often from a prominent perch, is quite distinctive and easily recognized even by the most novice of bird enthusiasts. The “konk a ree” call is also accompanied by an insistent flaring of the male’s bright red shoulder patches as it displays from an exposed reed. When visiting the marsh, from the early morning to evening, one may encounter multiple males calling from their perches, with their bright red patches edged with yellow glowing in the sun. The intent is to lure potential mates and discourage rivals from entering their territory.



A male red-winged blackbird selects a prominent perch to declare his territory and attract mates with his distinctive "konk a ree" call. Photo: J. Morton Galetto

Red-wings are members of the icterid family; a New World group of passerines (perching birds) which includes orioles, meadowlarks, grackles, and of course blackbirds. Their scientific classification, *Agelaius phoeniceus*, refers to the bird's flocking behavior as well as to the prominent red area on its upper wing, often referred to as an epaulet - an ornamental and showy shoulder patch associated with military uniforms.

Adult males are glossy black with the red shoulder; females are more cryptically colored, being straw brown and streaky, with a pale reddish or pinkish throat, and juveniles most often resemble females. The size of a robin, they are slimmer and have a conical black bill. There are two subspecies of red-winged blackbirds found in the West - bicolored blackbirds that lack the yellow edge on the shoulder patch, and the tricolored blackbird which sports a white edge in lieu of the more predominant yellow one.

Red-winged blackbirds are one of the most widespread bird species in North America, often identified as among the top five to seven most abundant types. They range all across the contiguous United States and

southern Canada. While many populations are year-round residents, particularly in southern New Jersey, populations breeding in Canada will migrate to the southern United States. They often begin their migrations in August and conclude by early December.

Like many of our year-round species, red-winged blackbirds may also be short distance migrants with populations shifting south or north following food supply and weather conditions that are more favorable to them. Some populations may even migrate as far south as Mexico for the winter.

These are wetland birds and are found in salt marsh areas as well as near freshwater. In wintertime flocks may join other groups of birds in large congregations and will often be seen feeding in fallow farm fields and parks. While they remain one of our more abundant species they have been shown to be in a slight decline, although they only rate an eight out of 20 on a scale of conservation concern. The estimated population in North America ranges from 150 to 180 million birds. Winter flocks can number into the millions and may also travel 50 or more miles in search of food in a day. They sometimes perform a feat called *murmuration* – flying, in large groups,

in a distinctly synchronized way and swirling together in a lovely choreographed pattern.



Male red-winged blackbird perches on cattails above a marsh plain. Photo: Steve Gifford

Here in Southern Jersey, the songs of the red-winged blackbird may also be heard early in the spring, or even in late winter on milder days. Males will return to their breeding grounds before the females arrive, to establish and to attract potential mates to their selected areas. Though they are fiercely territorial they will nest within sight of each other, and often males will attract up to 15 individual females to establish their nests.

They are notorious polygamists and studies have shown that even within a particular

male's territory, nestlings are as likely to be sired by different males than the one defending the area. Their nests, constructed by females, consist of leaves, marsh vegetation, or strips of bark, lined with mud, and positioned low among vertical wetland plants like phragmite or cattail just above water level.

The species is omnivorous, meaning that they will consume both insect protein as well as seeds, depending upon the season. In spring and summer their diet consists mostly of spiders and small insects found in and among the dense marsh vegetation. After the growing season they will forage around farm fields; they also use seeds from the plants on the marsh, including spartina and phragmite.

While the young are still in the nest and dependent upon the parents for food they are fed almost exclusively on insect protein, but as they fledge they are introduced to seeds and grains, eventually becoming omnivorous like their parents.



A female red-winged black bird feeds its young an invertebrate. Seeds are rarely fed to baby birds. Photo: Steve Gifford.

Red-wings may produce one to two broods in a season; each brood may contain two to four eggs, take about two weeks to hatch, and require an additional two weeks to fledge. The primary caregiver for the young is the female although a male may help out, particularly with the first brood, and he is

often there with the female to defend the nest and nestlings with vigor. Males are also known to assist adolescent birds by training them on how to survive. The extent of a male's involvement with raising young may depend upon the number of females in his territory.

By their very nature they are an iconic species.

For those of us who grow weary of the long and harsh winter, the return of that familiar call and the flashes of black, red, and yellow bring comfort, and remind us of the cycle of seasons that guide our lives.

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Some Folklore

In Native American folklore blackbirds were thought to bring good luck; they also served as messengers from the ancestors as well as harbingers of plenty and good times to come.

The story behind their distinctive red shoulder patch involves an angry man who was intent on burning down the world.

As a blackbird attempted to warn the people of this impending disaster, the man hurled a shell at the bird and, striking it in the wing, caused it to bleed. This act of bravery and protection imbued the red-winged blackbird with noble traits in the eyes of the people.

Photo: J. Morton Galetto

