

# RED-WINGED BLACKBIRD - AGELAIUS PHOENICEUS

**Taxonomy:** Kingdom: Animalia Phylum: Chordata Class: Aves Order: Passeriformes Family: Icteridae Genus: Agelaius  
Species: A. phoeniceus

## **Habitat:**

**Biomes:** Red-winged Blackbirds spend the breeding season in wet places like fresh or saltwater marshes and rice paddies. You may also find them breeding in drier places like sedge meadows, alfalfa fields, and fallow fields. Occasionally, Red-winged Blackbirds nest in wooded areas along waterways. In fall and winter, they congregate in agricultural fields, feedlots, pastures, and grassland.

## **Distribution:**

**In US:** The range of the red-winged blackbird stretches from southern Alaska to the Yucatan peninsula in the south, and from the western coast of California and Canada to the east coast of the continent. Red-winged blackbirds in the northern reaches of the range are migratory, spending winters in the southern United States and Central America. Migration begins in September or October, but occasionally as early as August. In western and Central America, populations are generally non-migratory.

**In Other Countries:** ^^^^^^

**Holistic Description:** One of the most abundant birds across North America, and one of the most boldly colored, the Red-winged Blackbird is a familiar sight atop cattails, along soggy roadsides, and on telephone wires. Glossy-black males have scarlet-and-yellow shoulder patches they can puff up or hide depending on how confident they feel. Females are a subdued, streaky brown, almost like a large, dark sparrow. Their early and tumbling song are happy indications of the return of spring.

**Species Richness:** 22 SUBSPECIES

**Population Dynamic:** CHECK THREATS

## **Evolution and Systematics:**

**Evolution:** Numerous late Pleistocene (Rancholabrean North American Land Mammal Age [NALMA], < 400,000 years before present) and Holocene records from North America, Bahama Islands, Cuba, and Yucatán Peninsula.

**Systematics:** Both sexes vary geographically in size and shape; the female also varies in plumage color, with variation tending to follow Gloger's rule, although variation is complex across the species' wide geographic range. Body size varies clinically across northern North America, decreasing from Alaska to eastern Canada, and from eastern Canada to the Southeast. In the Great Plains, the bill varies from stout and long in central Canada to slender and short in the shortgrass prairie.

**Number of Species:** 22 SUBSPECIES

**Number of Genera:** 22 SUBSPECIES

## **Physical Characteristics:**

**Size and Length:** Length: 6.7-9.1 in (17-23 cm) Weight: 1.1-2.7 oz (32-77 g)

**Wingspan:** 12.2-15.8 in (31-40 cm)

**Coloration:** Male Red-winged Blackbirds are hard to mistake. They're an even glossy black with red-and-yellow shoulder badges. Females are crisply streaked and dark brownish overall, paler on the breast and often show a whitish eyebrow.

**General Body Features:** A stocky, broad-shouldered blackbird with a slender, conical bill and a medium-length tail. Red-winged Blackbirds often show a hump-backed silhouette while perched; males often sit with tail slightly flared.

**Special Features of the Body:** Female RWBs are brownish to drab in coloration which makes them difficult to be spotted when they are in their nests.

**Special Features of the Head and Sensory Organs:** NONE

**Dentition:** BEAK/LAMELLAE/GIZZARD

**Special Features of the Limbs and Digits:** NONE

**Any Special Internal Anatomy:** Red-winged blackbirds often tend to build their nests at a height of one to two meters above water in order to save their eggs and fledglings from predation.

**Sexual Dimorphisms:** At rest, the male also shows a pale yellow wingbar. The female is blackish-brown and paler below. The female is smaller than the male, at 17–18 cm (6.7–7.1 in) long and weighing 41.5 g (1.46 oz), against his length of 22–24 cm (8.7–9.4 in) and weight of 64 g (2.3 oz). The smallest females may weigh as little as 29 g (1.0 oz) whereas the largest males can weigh up to 82 g (2.9 oz). The males of the bicolored subspecies lack the yellow wing patch of the nominate race, and the females are much darker than the female nominate.

*Differences Between Juvenile Stage and Adult:* Young birds resemble the female, but are paler below and have buff feather fringes. Both sexes have a sharply pointed bill. The tail is of medium length and is rounded. The eyes, bill, and feet are all black.

#### **Behavior:**

*Diurnal, Nocturnal, or Crepuscular:* Diurnal

*Activity:* Male Red-winged Blackbirds spend much of the breeding season sitting on a high perch over their territories and singing their hearts out. Females tend to slink through reeds and grasses collecting food or nest material. Both males and females defend nests from intruders and predators. Red-winged Blackbirds nest in loose groups in part because appropriate marshy habitat is scarce. Typically five or more (up to 15) females have to crowd their nests into any one male's territory. They typically mate with the territory holder, though many also mate with nearby males. In fall and winter, Red-winged Blackbirds flock with other blackbirds, grackles, cowbirds, and starlings, feeding on open ground and roosting in flocks of thousands or millions of birds. Red-winged Blackbirds are strong, agile fliers.

*Locomotion:* Walking is well developed. Red-winged Blackbird frequently forages on the ground. Can also hop backward ("double scratch") when foraging. Sidling on small branches is also well coordinated. Flight is agile and slightly undulating. Contour feathers are sleeked, tail is held out directly behind body, and epaulets may be exposed in males. They are strong fliers and can travel great distances.

*Communication and Perception:* The male Red-winged Blackbird's konk-la-ree! is a classic sound of wetlands across the continent. The 1-second song starts with an abrupt note that turns into a musical trill. Males often sing from a high perch while leaning forward, drooping their wings, spreading their tail feathers, and fluffing their bright shoulder patches to show them off. Females give a very different song in response to a singing male, a series of three to five short chirp or check notes.

*Home Range:* Males establish and defend territories with clearly delineated boundaries during the breeding season, but boundaries may shift within a breeding season. All activities occur within territories, but males and females also forage, engage in sexual chases, seek extra-pair copulations, and prospect for other breeding opportunities outside territorial boundaries. Extent of off-territory foraging varies among nesting habitats and locations.

*Degree of Sociality:* The Red-winged Blackbird is often described as a "colonial" nesting species, especially in marshes, but its spatial distribution is probably the result of nesting-habitat distribution rather than gregariousness. Aggression toward conspecifics and other species is common during the breeding season, though usually restricted to the territory. Red-winged Blackbirds will forage in loose aggregations off territory during the breeding season.

*Level of Aggression:* Fighting is relatively rare; occurs on ground or in air. Males and rarely females grasp at each other's plumage and peck vigorously, or grapple and peck with bill and beat with wings. Males grappling on ground can roll over several times. Aerial grappling can progress from a flutter-up face-off in which combatants flail with their feet as they fly upward while facing each other. Aerial grappling can result in interlocked birds falling onto the ground or into the water. Vigorous grappling fights attract the attention of neighboring males, which trespass to perch nearby and watch.

*Migration:* Resident or short-distance migrant. Red-winged Blackbirds in northern North America winter in the southern United States, as far as about 800 miles from their breeding ranges. Southern and some western populations don't migrate at all.

#### **Predators:**

*Predators:* Virtually all of North America's raptors take adult or young red-winged blackbirds, even barn owls, which usually only take small mammals, and northern saw-whet owls, which are scarcely larger than a male red-winged. Accipiter hawks are among their most prolific predators and, locally, they are one of the preferred prey species of short-tailed hawks. Crows, ravens, magpies and herons are occasionally predators of blackbird nests. Additional predators of blackbirds of all ages and their eggs include raccoons, mink, foxes and snakes, especially the rat snake. Marsh wrens destroy the eggs, at least sometimes drinking from them, and peck the nestlings to death.

*Anti-Predator Defenses:* The red-winged blackbird aggressively defends its territory from other animals. It will attack much larger birds. Males have been known to swoop at humans who encroach upon their nesting territory during breeding season.

#### **Diet and Nutrition:**

*Adult Diet:* Red-winged Blackbirds eat mainly insects in the summer and seeds, including corn and wheat, in the winter. Sometimes they feed by probing at the bases of aquatic plants with their slender bills, prying them open to get at insects hidden inside. In fall and winter they eat weedy seeds such as ragweed and cocklebur as well as native sunflowers and waste grains.

*Juvenile Diet:* Nestlings are fed arthropods, especially odonates in marshes and lepidopterans in uplands (3). In a marsh in Washington state, 37% of items were Odonata, 30% Lepidoptera, and 13% Diptera, with smaller numbers of Araneae, Cicadidae, and Orthoptera.

**Special Adaptations for Getting Prey:** Known especially for feeding by gaping, i.e., by forcibly opening the lower mandible against resistance. Uses gaping to expose insects hiding in the sheathing leaf bases of aquatic plants, under sticks, reeds, or other objects on the ground or on floating vegetation, and under stones in stream riffles. Also captures food simply by picking up seeds and other items from ground and by gleaning insects from vegetation; occasionally by flycatching.

**Reproduction:**

**Mode of Reproduction:** Polygynous

**Mating System:** The social mating system of the Red-winged Blackbird is territorial polygyny, with individual males holding territories on which multiple females nest simultaneously. The degree of polygyny varies among populations, but is always high, with mean harem sizes ranging from a low of 1.7 up to a high of 5.0 females.

**Mating Season:** February to May

**Courtship:** Pairing is indicated by the female's continued residence and singing on the male's territory and vocal answering of male song. The female does not answer the male's song initially, but does so frequently once she becomes a regular resident. Sexual Chasing is common and probably involves paired individuals.

**Territoriality:** Male red-winged blackbirds exhibit important territorial behaviors, most of which provides them with the necessary fidelity for many years to come. A few important factors for male red-winged blackbirds' adherence to territories included food, hiding spaces from predators, types of neighbors, and reactions towards predators.

**Mating:** Male pre-coition display is a full-intensity Crouch with Ti-ti-ti vocalization and rapid fluttering of wings. Epaulet feathers are erected and vibrated for maximum conspicuousness. In full expression, the male walks or hops toward the female while displaying. Female pre-coition display is typical of passerines. Legs are flexed, body is horizontal or tipped forward, tail is closed and elevated, bill is raised, and soft Ti-ti-ti vocalization is given. Copulation is also typical of passerines. The male mounts the crouching female, flexes legs, and flutters wings while twisting his tail beneath elevated tail of the female to bring cloacal vents into brief contact.

**Nest Placement:** Red-winged Blackbirds build their nests low among vertical shoots of marsh vegetation, shrubs, or trees. Females choose the nest site with some input from the male. Typically, she puts the nest near the ground (or water surface in a marsh), in dense, grass-like vegetation such as cattails, bulrushes, sedges, and Phragmites in wetlands; goldenrod, blackberry, or willow and alder trees in uplands; and wheat, barley, alfalfa, and rice plants.

**Nest Description:** Females build the nests by winding stringy plant material around several close, upright stems and weaving in a platform of coarse, wet vegetation. Around and over this she adds more wet leaves and decayed wood, plastering the inside with mud to make a cup. Finally, she lines the cup with fine, dry grasses. One nest picked apart by a naturalist in the 1930s had been made by weaving together 34 strips of willow bark and 142 cattail leaves, some 2 feet long. When finished the nest is 4 to 7 inches across and 3 to 7 inches deep.

**Egg-Laying:** Clutch Size: 2-4 eggs Number of Broods: 1-2 broods Egg Length: 0.9-1.1 in (2.2-2.7 cm) Egg Width: 0.6-0.8 in (1.6-1.9 cm) Incubation Period: 11-13 days Nestling Period: 11-14 days Egg Description: Pale blue-green to gray with black or brown markings.

**Hatching and Incubation/Gestation:** Blind, naked with scant buffy or grayish down, poorly coordinated.

**Development:** Altricial nestlings are blind, largely naked, and poorly coordinated at hatching. Mean mass of 29 neonates hatched in an incubator was 2.75 g.

**Parental Care:** Feeding begins with hatching of first nestling, but at a low rate on the first day. The female often visits without feeding early in nestling period.

**Lifespan:** The maximum longevity of the red-winged blackbird in the wild is 15.8 years.

**Conservation:**

**Official Federal Status:** Least Concern

**Special Statutes in Individual States:** NONE

**Threats:** Though they may be one of the most abundant native birds on the continent, Red-winged Blackbird populations declined by over 30% throughout most of their range between 1966 and 2014, according to the North American Breeding Bird Survey. Partners in Flight estimates a global breeding population of 130 million, down from 190 million in 1974. 80% of the population spends part of the year in the U.S., 14% in Canada, and 16% in Mexico. The species rates an 8 is not on the 2014 State of the Birds Watch List.

**Conservation Efforts:** ^^^^^

**Extra Facts:**

1. Different populations and subspecies of Red-winged Blackbirds vary markedly in size and proportions. An experiment was conducted that moved nestlings between populations and found that the chicks grew up to resemble

their foster parents. This study indicated that much of the difference seen between populations is the result of different environments rather than different genetic makeups.

2. The Red-winged Blackbird is a highly polygynous species, meaning males have many female mates – up to 15 in some cases. In some populations 90 percent of territorial males have more than one female nesting on their territories. But all is not as it seems: one-quarter to one-half of nestlings turn out to have been sired by someone other than the territorial male.
3. Male Red-winged Blackbirds fiercely defend their territories during the breeding season, spending more than a quarter of daylight hours in territory defense. He chases other males out of the territory and attacks nest predators, sometimes going after much larger animals, including horses and people.
4. Red-winged Blackbirds roost in flocks in all months of the year. In summer small numbers roost in the wetlands where the birds breed. Winter flocks can be congregations of several million birds, including other blackbird species and starlings. Each morning the roosts spread out, traveling as far as 50 miles to feed, then re-forming at night.
5. One California subspecies of the Red-winged Blackbird lacks the yellow borders to the red shoulders (epaulets) and has been dubbed the “bicolored blackbird.” Some scientists think this plumage difference may help Red-winged Blackbirds recognize each other where their range overlaps with the similar Tricolored Blackbird.
6. The oldest recorded Red-winged Blackbird was 15 years, 9 months old. It was banded in New Jersey in 1967, and found alive, but injured in Michigan in 1983. It was able to be released after recovering from its injuries.

**Notable Species:**

1. *A. p. aciculatus*
2. *A. p. arctolegus*
3. *A. p. arthuralleni*
4. *A. p. brevirostris*
5. *A. p. bryanti*
6. *A. p. californicus*
7. *A. p. caurinus*
8. *A. p. floridanus*
9. *A. p. fortis*
10. *A. p. grinnelli*
11. *A. p. gubernator*
12. *A. p. littoralis*
13. *A. p. mailliardorum*
14. *A. p. mearnsi*
15. *A. p. megapotamus*
16. *A. p. nelsoni*
17. *A. p. neutralis*
18. *A. p. nevadensis*
19. *A. p. nyaritensis*
20. *A. p. phoeniceus*
21. *A. p. richmondi*
22. *A. p. sonoriensis*