

# Red-winged Blackbird

# Red-winged Blackbird

## Appearance

A stocky, broad-shouldered blackbird with a slender, conical bill and a medium-length tail. Sexually dimorphic.



Male

Glossy black with yellow-trimmed red epaulettes on the shoulders.



©Jacqueline Tilles

Female

Mottled brown above and heavily streaked below with a prominent pale eyebrow stripe. Females have orange epaulettes (much more subtle than the male's) and variable buffy coloration to the throat and sides of the head.

# Red-winged Blackbird

## Appearance

Immature plumage is similar to adult females.

Immature Red-winged Blackbirds look similar to the adult female, but the eyebrow and malar stripes, chin, and throat are washed yellowish, the underparts are often paler buffy or yellowish with narrower dusky streaks, and the lesser and median coverts are mottled brown and yellow or brown and buff, resulting in no discernible epaulet.

Upperwing coverts are uniformly fresh and are distinctly edged buffy brown.



Immature Red-winged Blackbird

The sexes are alike in plumage but differ in size, with males a bit larger.

# Red-winged Blackbird

## Sounds

From The Cornell Lab of Ornithology <https://www.birds.cornell.edu/home/>

### SONGS

The male Red-winged Blackbird's *conk-la-ree!* is a classic sound of wetlands across the continent. The one-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 *chit* or *check* notes.

### CALLS

The typical call of a Red-winged Blackbird is a distinctive, matter-of-fact *check* that's fairly easy to recognize. Males and females make these calls all year round—in flight and while feeding, when confronting rivals, and to raise an alarm. They also give a more intense alarm call, a fast, scolding *chak chak chak*.

Listen to the songs and calls at:

[https://www.allaboutbirds.org/guide/Red-winged\\_Blackbird/sounds](https://www.allaboutbirds.org/guide/Red-winged_Blackbird/sounds)

# Red-winged Blackbird

## Diet

Red-winged Blackbirds eat mainly insects while breeding, and feed on fruits, seeds, and grains when not breeding.



Female Red-winged Blackbird with damselfly



Male Red-winged Blackbird eating sunflower seeds.

# Red-winged Blackbird

## Diet

### Gaping

- Birds have muscles for opening and closing their bills.
- For some birds, the most-powerful muscles *close* the bill, because they grab or crush seeds.
- However, many blackbirds, like the Red-winged Blackbird, have stronger muscles for *opening* the bill. This allows them to feed by a process called *gaping*: After inserting their bill into soil, vegetation, mud, etc., blackbirds use their special muscles to forcibly open their bill, creating a hole that allows them to reach food otherwise hidden and inaccessible to other passerines (songbirds).
- Red-winged Blackbirds' slender, sharp-tipped bills are ideal for gaping.

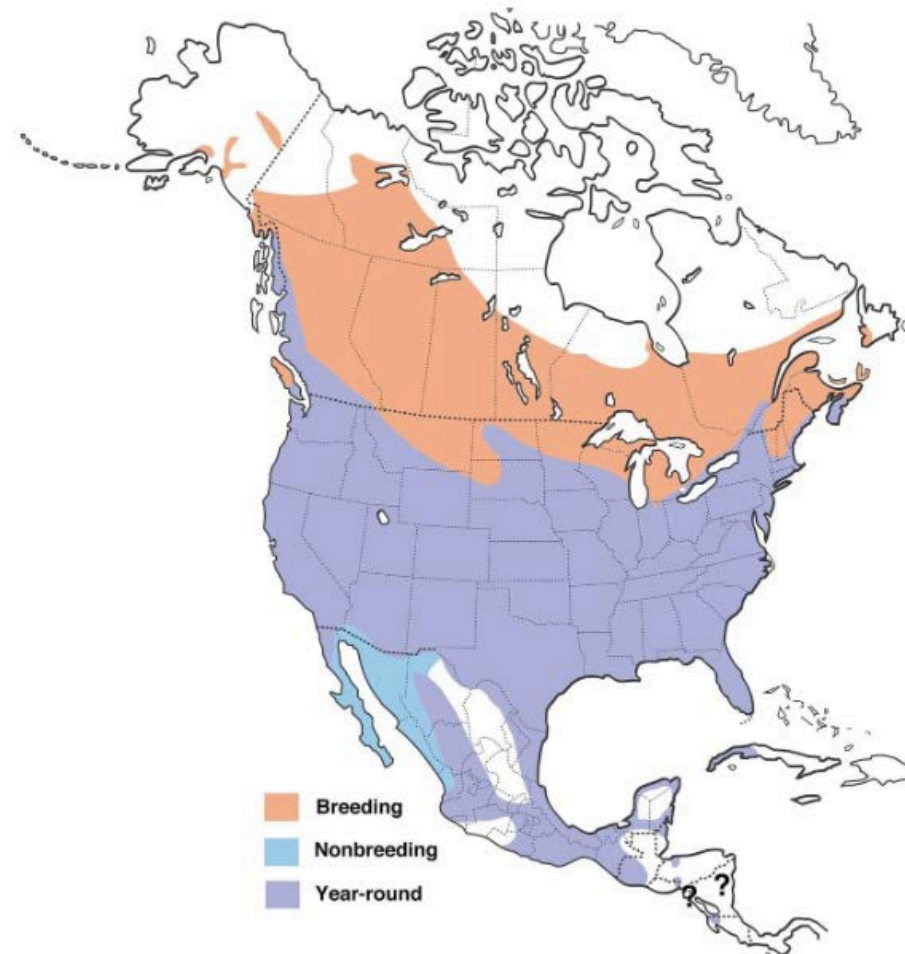


Red-winged Blackbirds often probe at the bases of aquatic plants with their slender bills, prying them open to get at insects hidden inside.

# Red-winged Blackbird

## Range

Occurs as an extremely common migrant and summer breeder in grassy areas and marshes. Flocks of several hundred can be seen in spring and fall migration, and small numbers can sometimes be found in DuPage County throughout the winter.



Map: Cornell Lab of Ornithology  
[https://www.allaboutbirds.org/guide/Red-winged\\_Blackbird/maps-range](https://www.allaboutbirds.org/guide/Red-winged_Blackbird/maps-range)

# Red-winged Blackbird

## Habitat

Red-winged Blackbirds nest in loose colonies in cattails, rushes, sedges, reeds, and bushes, preferably near or over water.



Male Red-winged Blackbird in cattails



# Red-winged Blackbird Habitat

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Red-winged Blackbird nests in cattails

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Fledgling Red-winged Blackbirds in cattails

# Red-winged Blackbird

## Habitat

Forages in open fields.



Female Red-winged Blackbird foraging in an open field.



Male Red-winged Blackbird in field

# Red-winged Blackbird

## Behavior

Female builds the nest; both male and female care for the young.



Female Red-winged Blackbird with nesting material

# Red-winged Blackbird

## Behavior

Female builds the nest; both male and female care for the young.



Female Red-winged Blackbird feeding nestlings.



Male Red-winged Blackbird feeding nestlings.

# Red-winged Blackbird

## Behavior

Can be found in flocks with other blackbirds and starlings.



Red-winged Blackbirds and European Starlings

# Red-winged Blackbird

## Behavior

Male Red-winged Blackbirds do everything they can to get noticed.

Male Red-winged Blackbirds do everything they can to get noticed, sitting on high perches and belting out their *conk-la-ree!* song all day long.

To defend his territory and attract a mate, the male perches on a high stalk with feathers fluffed out and tail partly spread, lifts the leading edge of his wings so that his red shoulder patches are prominent, and sings.

They are very aggressive in their nesting territory, attacking larger birds that approach and loudly protesting human intruders. Some will even dive at people who get too near their nests.



# Red-winged Blackbird Behavior

Red-winged Blackbirds will harass larger birds within their nesting area.

Sometimes, when an animal discovers a predator, instead of hiding or fleeing it does exactly the opposite: it makes itself conspicuous and moves towards the predator.

This type of anti-predator behavior is called “mobbing.” During mobbing, animals harass or even attack predators.

Red-winged Blackbirds will often mob a larger bird, such as a heron, eagle, hawk, crow, or vulture that flies over their nesting area.



Red-winged Blackbirds mobbing a Bald Eagle.



# Red-winged Blackbird Behavior

Red-winged Blackbirds will harass larger birds within their nesting area.



Red-winged Blackbirds mobbing a Turkey Vulture.



Red-winged Blackbirds mobbing a Turkey Vulture.

# Red-winged Blackbird

## Literature/Prose

“Konk-la-ree”

A flash of scarlet and gold

How can she resist

The paramour of the marsh?

From *Zen Birds*, by Vanessa Sorensen

Photo: Jay B. Packer



# Red-winged Blackbird Feeders

Red-winged Blackbirds may come to your yard for mixed grains and seeds, particularly during migration. Spread grain or seed on the ground as well, since this is where Red-winged Blackbirds prefer to feed.



Red-winged Blackbirds at feeder



Red-winged Blackbirds eating seed spread on ground.

# Red-winged Blackbird

## Names

### Common name

#### Red-winged Blackbird

*Red-winged* for the red (and yellow) epaulets of the male; refers to the patch of red on the bird's wing formed by red lesser coverts.

*Blackbird* refers to the bird's predominant color.



### Scientific name

#### *Agelaius phoeniceus*

*Agelaius phoeniceus*, describes the Red-winged Blackbird's raucous sound and red epaulets.

*Agelaius* Greek for "gregarious," formed from *agele*, "herd"; an allusion to their social nature.

*phoeniceus* Latin for "deep red" derived from the Greek *phoinikos* for "Phoenician," the people who introduced the color into Greece.

