



by Christine Petersen

# Songs of **Spring**

**Red-winged** blackbirds are an unmistakable sign of the season all across Minnesota.

ACCORDING to the calendar, spring begins in late March. But Minnesota's weather doesn't always show it. One day may be sunny and warm, and the next cold and windy. When the weather is so mixed up, how can you be sure the season is changing? Listen for the red-winged blackbird.

*Ooo-kuh-REEE!*

The singer appears suddenly, perched atop a tree like a king on his throne. Fluffing out his feathers, the bird gazes around and sings again. His voice carries loud and clear. A second red-winged blackbird lands nearby, then another and another. Soon the air is filled with the hopeful songs of spring.

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*A male red-winged blackbird sings from atop his perch.*



## Bold and beautiful

Red-winged blackbirds are closely related to orioles, bobolinks, meadowlarks, and other American blackbirds. Brown-headed cowbirds and grackles are also in this family. All of these *species* have strong feet and legs, perfectly suited for pacing the ground in search of food. Their cone-shaped bills are sharply pointed. And these handsome birds often have black feathers mixed with yellow, orange, or red.

The red-winged blackbird is named for

the male's fancy feathers, or *plumage*. He is mostly black, with a blaze of red and yellow on each wing. Those bright feather patches are called *epaulets*, like the shoulder ornaments on a soldier's dress uniform.

The female is smaller than the male, with no black feathers at all. Her brown plumage is striped with beige, and above her eyes is a pale mark that resembles an eyebrow. At first glance, she seems like an entirely different species. Look for the long bill and sturdy



A male red-winged blackbird (left) displays the bright red patches that give the species its name. Females (above) are striped brown and beige, with a patch of rusty brown instead of red on each wing.

legs, which set blackbirds apart from sparrows, finches, and similar brown songbirds. Female red-wings also have rusty brown epaulets that become brighter with age.

This species nests across North America, from southern Alaska to Mexico, Costa Rica, and the Bahamas. In Minnesota, red-winged blackbirds are among the most common and familiar songbirds. See red-wings at Lake Bronson or Gooseberry Falls state parks in the north. Find them

around Rice Lake or Blue Mounds in the south. Listen for their calls in busy city parks, beside highway drainage ditches, and along the edges of remote wetlands.

Red-winged blackbirds can live almost anywhere in the state. But they especially need large, healthy wetlands. Minnesota has lost about half of its wetlands since settlers arrived. Protecting this habitat allows red-wings and many other animals to flourish.

TRAVIS BONOVSKY



## Early birds

Like many birds, red-winged blackbirds usually *migrate* between southern wintering grounds and northern nesting sites. They follow routes called *flyways*, traveling up to 800 miles in each direction. Their movements aren't aimless. Individual red-wings seem to return to the same places year after year. Some spring migrants stop to rest and feed in Minnesota before heading even farther north. Many others stay here to breed.

**A territory of one's own.** Male red-wings arrive in Minnesota before most other songbirds—often when there's still snow on the ground. These early birds have only one thing in mind: impressing the females that will show up a few weeks later.

Red-winged blackbirds often live in large *colonies*, but not side by side. Suitable habitats are divided into many *territories*, each ruled by one male. A good territory contains plenty of hiding and nesting places, with nearby sources of food. Because the male knows every inch of his chosen kingdom, he notices anything new or dangerous. Dividing up the landscape also puts space between nests, reducing the spread of disease through the colony.

Territory size depends on the location. A large and healthy wetland can support about 30 territories per acre. (That's a block of land about the size of a football field.) If his territory is outside a wetland—such as in a park or

Red-winged blackbirds often live in healthy wetlands (top). In the spring (bottom left), the birds return. They often perch on tall cattails (bottom middle) swaying in the wind. A bird (bottom right) calls out Ooo-kuh-REEE.

farmland—a male red-wing might need more space to provide everything his family will need.

**Showing off.** Instead of battling for territory, red-winged blackbirds put on a show. Early in the morning, the male leaves his sheltered *roost* to perch atop cattails or tree branches. These high spots allow his voice to carry far and wide across the landscape.

Singing isn't enough to ensure a male's success. He must also show off his size and beauty. Bird biologists call this performance a *song spread*. The male fluffs his body feathers, spreads his tail, and opens his wings. The brilliant red epaulets flash at his rival. Pointing his bill at the sky, the

male tops off his show with a melody of *Ooo-kuh-REEE* and other notes.

The epaulets are such a powerful signal that red-wings will chase almost anything red. Even a person in red clothing may be targeted. When the males are not competing, their epaulets are hidden under black feathers to keep the peace.

Male red-wings sing hundreds of times every hour while moving along the edges of a territory. This behavior continues day after day, as the snow gradually melts and milder weather arrives. Challengers display back and forth until one gives up. The loser may wind up with a lower-quality territory on the edge of the colony.

TOP: RICHARD HAMILTON SMITH; BOTTOM, LEFT TO RIGHT: BILL MARCHEL, TRAVIS BONOVSKEY, BILL MARCHEL

## Family life



BILL MARCHEL

Females arrive after males have divided up the habitat. They explore available territories or head straight to nest sites they've used before.

To attract a female, the male comes close and performs a song spread. The birds might sing a duet, her gargling notes overlapping his bubbly tune. If all goes well, she stays and begins to build a nest. A male with good territory can attract several mates. Each defends her nest zone by chattering and chasing when others come too close.

**Hidden away.** Territories go quiet when red-winged blackbirds begin to nest. Because flying might attract attention, females climb through the plant cover. Their brown plumage is good *camouflage* from predators that might hunt eggs or young birds. Males make slow patrols overhead while their mates work.

The female hangs her nest like a ham-

mock between several plant stems. In a wetland, the nest is raised a foot or two above the water. On dry land, it might be tucked among thick-growing shrubs, grasses, wildflowers, or vines. She weaves together dozens of dried plants, strips of bark, and leaves to form a bowl about five inches wide and three inches deep. When it's complete, the bird may line the nest with mud. Her last step is to add a layer of soft grasses.

All this work can be finished in a single day. Soon after, she lays the first of three or four eggs. Barely an inch long, red-winged blackbird eggs are pale green with purple or brown splotches. Like many birds, the mother loses belly feathers before *incubating* her nest. The bare skin warms her fragile eggs.



BILL MARCHEL

**Welcome to the world.** Chicks are ready to hatch in about 12 days. Each has a temporary tooth at the end of its bill. It pecks a hole in the shell and pushes from within. The egg cracks in half, freeing its

tiny occupant. Suddenly, the nest is no longer silent. The hatchlings immediately begin to call and beg for food.

Mother bird carries away the eggshells. She returns with the chicks' first meal, a soft ball of insects. Over the next few days, her time is divided between incubating the featherless, blind babies and hunting for their food. Papa bird fearlessly attacks minks, hawks, crows, and other animals that pose a danger. He even chases much larger animals, like horses and people.



BOB DUNLAP, DNR

**Open wide!** A female calls quietly as she approaches her nest with food. The babies chirp and squeak in reply. Red-wing chicks are small but strong. They raise large, wobbly heads and open wide to get their mother's attention. The chick's bill looks like a target, outlined with red, white, and yellow. Mother bird makes many trips back and forth, feeding each chick many times a day.

In summer, red-winged blackbirds eat a wide variety of insects. Mother bird plucks

caterpillars off plant leaves and spiders from tree trunks. She hunts dragonflies, caddisflies, and other insects emerging from the water. Several items can be squashed together in her bill. The bites become larger as her babies grow.



BILL MARCHEL

**Out and about.** The chicks' eyes open within a week of hatching. They begin to fatten up and gain a fluffy covering of speckled, brown feathers.

Just a few days later, the youngsters are ready to explore outside the nest. They hop around and stretch their wings to build muscle. This can be a risky time for red-wing chicks, since they might fall into the water or be spotted by a predator.

Two weeks after hatching, the chicks are ready to fly. Both parents lead them around the territory, then beyond. Young birds see what is best to eat and how to use their long bills to reach hidden food. Males learn songs by listening to nearby adults. They practice and practice until it sounds right.



## Changing with the seasons

Red-winged blackbirds seem to disappear in early August. This is when they *molt*, shedding old feathers and growing new ones. Red-wings can't fly well during the molt. They hide until it's complete.

Autumn brings the birds out again. Females and young birds gather together, while adult males usually form separate groups. Red-wings also mix with large numbers of grackles, starlings, and related birds. By November most *flocks* have left Minnesota, heading south for the winter.

Flocking protects the birds. There

are many eyes to watch for danger, and many voices to call out a warning. When startled, the group bursts into flight to confuse or mob the predator. Naturalist Alexander Wilson watched one of these huge flocks in 1832. It reminded him of "an enormous black cloud ... varying its shape every moment."


**Winter food.** Insects are not easy to find in winter. Red-winged blackbirds solve this problem by switching to plant foods in their southern winter-

*Red-winged blackbirds flock together for protection.*

ing grounds. Flocks often settle in large wetlands. Cattails provide a safe place for so many birds to roost overnight. By day, they fly as much as 50 miles each way to feed on the waste of crops like corn, rice, or sunflowers.

A muscular pouch in the bird's body, called the *gizzard*, is designed to handle tough foods. The red-wing's gizzard grows larger in winter. It can grind

hard, dry seeds and other plant foods into small, digestible pieces.

Farmers may feel frustrated by huge flocks in their winter fields. But they can be grateful in other seasons, when red-wings eat insects that would damage crops, gardens, and woodlands. Red-winged blackbirds and their relatives are part of a healthy environment in Minnesota and elsewhere. 

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