



WESTERN CUYAHOGA AUDUBON SOCIETY

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BIRD OF THE MONTH: Red-winged Blackbird

By Nancy Howell, Board Member, WCAS

“OH-KAH-REEEE!” The song of the Red-winged Blackbird is a sound of spring, but this is a bird of all seasons and many habitats. Red-winged Blackbirds are denizens of marshes, wetlands, wet brushy fields and roadside ditches. Around neighborhoods, Red-winged Blackbirds come to feeders consuming cracked corn, seeds and peanuts.

The name of the bird, Red-winged Blackbird, is pretty close to what the male looks like, a black bird with red and pale yellow at the wrist or bend of the wing. Some field guides call the bright areas “epaulets”. It is not the entire wing nor the bird’s shoulder that is red. Female Red-winged Blackbird coloration more resembles a large striped sparrow, but her beak is a blackbird beak, long and pointed. Why the color difference? The male’s coloration makes him stand out as he perches on tops of cattails, shrubs or along freeway fences. When he sings, his body fluffs out, and the red and yellow “epaulets” on the wings flare out like beacons. This behavior sets territories and attracts females. An activity that one can “play” while driving the freeways in the spring, is to note how often a territorial male Red-wing is perched. Every 10th of a mile? Closer or farther apart? Maybe this is better for the passenger in the car to keep track of while you keep your eyes on the road!

The striped female is perfectly camouflaged for nesting in marsh vegetation, cattails, grasses and shrubs. Every year during bird walks people get confused by female Red-winged Blackbirds thinking they are some type of sparrow. While they are described as brown and striped, they usually have a whitish to buffy stripe above the eye and may have a wash of yellow or peach

under their throats. Older females may even have a few dull red feathers on her wings as well. Worth looking at the subtleties of color and pattern.

Male Red-winged Blackbirds tend to arrive in appropriate habitats in March in northeast Ohio, despite the weather. Females arrive a little later and hopefully the males have already staked out claims on territories. Nesting takes place in early summer and by mid-July young Red-winged Blackbirds are busily being fed by both male and female birds. A male may have numerous females in his territory, but research seems to indicate that the “home life” of this species is more like a soap opera with young being sired by males outside of the territorial male. Red-winged Blackbirds feed their young insects and other invertebrates gleaned from marsh vegetation. Young Red-wings look like females and may have shorter tails since they are still growing in. Some even sport some downy feathers on their heads. In August and into the fall, Red-winged Blackbirds begin to congregate in wetland areas in the evenings to roost. Mixed flocks of Red-wings, Common Grackles, Brown-headed Cowbirds and sometimes European Starlings (which are not in the blackbird family) spend nights in wetlands and head out during the day to forage, returning to the wetlands at night. These wetland roosts are very important not just to many blackbirds, but also other migrants, such as American Robin, several species of swallows and sparrows. As fall progresses, the blackbirds begin to move southward in large flocks. Some Red-winged Blackbirds overwinter in northeast Ohio as the Christmas Bird Counts attest. Mild winters and well-stocked bird feeders may also play a factor.

While Red-winged Blackbirds are one of the most abundant birds in Ohio, throughout the U.S. the bird’s population has dropped by 30% in the last 50 years according to Breeding Bird Surveys. Habitat loss or major changes in the habitats the birds need may be one of the main reasons. Despite them being common, don’t overlook Red-winged Blackbirds when out birding or if some visit your feeder. They can be appreciated for their beauty, easily observed behaviors and their importance to wetland ecosystems.