



Songbirds

of Missouri

Red-winged blackbird

Red-winged blackbirds belong to the bird family Icteridae. This is a varied group of species with conical, sharp-pointed bills and flat profiles. Some species in the family are black and iridescent while others are highly colored.

If you think you see a lot of red-winged blackbirds in the spring and summer, national bird surveys show you're not imagining it. North America is home to many bird species, both exotic and native. But few are as numerous as the red-winged blackbird.

With a population of approximately 190 million, most bird experts believe this bird is one of the most abundant native bird species on the continent. Two other highly abundant bird species in North America – the starling and the house sparrow – are exotic species that were introduced here in the 19th century.

Missouri reflects the national picture, as red-winged blackbirds are common throughout the state. They are frequently seen around marshes and low-lying grassy areas, but they can also be found in rural and urban settings. This adaptability is one of the reasons there are so many of them. Unlike some birds, red-winged blackbirds have a knack for adjusting to changing land-use practices and varying amounts of human disturbance.

The abundance of this bird has its scientific benefits, too. Red-winged blackbirds have been the subject of many studies about bird behavior that have helped us

learn more about the life cycles of birds and how humans can co-exist with them.

The red-winged blackbird gets its name from the male, which is completely black except for a red shoulder patch underlined by a narrow, yellow horizontal bar. The female bears little resemblance to the male, having brown on the top part of her body and vertical and buff streaks below. As is the case with many species, the female's drab coloring helps camouflage her from predators in spring and summer when she's sitting on the nest.

In Missouri, the red-winged blackbird's breeding season begins in spring and continues throughout much of the summer. Males establish territories, within which females will nest. The males defend their territories fiercely and aggressively. In fact, they have occasionally been known to swoop down on humans, livestock and other creatures that they think may be a threat.

Females raise two to three broods each year. The birds commonly nest in marsh or grassland habitat. The female builds a cup-shaped nest about three to six feet above the ground or water. She usually uses grass and reeds

for nesting material and weaves them into upright plants for support.

The female lays three to four eggs that are usually greenish-blue with brown spots. She incubates the eggs for 11 days. Once hatched, the babies eat insects for approximately 14 days. Then the young fledge and leave the nest.

After the breeding season is complete, red-winged blackbirds gather with other blackbirds, and sometimes starlings, to form enormous flocks that can number into the hundreds of thousands.

For farmers and landowners, the red-winged blackbird's abundance can be both a benefit and a problem. By consuming large amounts of insects and weed

seeds, red-winged blackbirds benefit farmers by ridding them of things that damage their crops. On the other hand, the birds have also been known to do considerable crop damage, particularly when they gather in large flocks.

Solving the occasional problems red-winged blackbirds cause isn't easy because, like all songbirds, they are federally protected under the Migratory Bird Treaty Act of 1918. Your nearest Missouri Department of Conservation office can offer advice on how to solve these problems.

(Missouri Show-Me Standards: S.3, S.4, S.8)



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Be a Bird Watcher!

Look...

Year-round residents in Missouri, red-winged blackbirds are most visible in spring and early summer when they are heavily involved in courtship and mating activities. They can generally be seen near marshes, swamps, grassy meadows and pastures, but they have adapted to a number of rural and urban environments, too.

...and Listen

Red-winged blackbirds have several calls, but the most commonly heard ones are the familiar "oak-a-LEEEEE" and a short "check" or "chip" call.

