



Male

Red-winged Blackbird

Red - the shoulders

Yellow - the band just beneath the red shoulder patch is golden yellow

Black - every other part of the body

Red-winged Blackbird

Length: 7 $\frac{1}{2}$

Habitat: Marshes and fields

Field marks: Black bird with bright red patch on shoulder

The Red-winged Blackbird might be the most abundant bird in North America. It is also one of the most fascinating to watch during the nesting season. These blackbirds nest in marshes: stands of cattails will almost always have Red-winged Blackbirds in the spring. The males set up their territories and spend lots of time singing and displaying to one another and to females. In all displays, the bright orange-red "epaulette" on the shoulder is conspicuous.

In one display, the male spreads its wing and sings. In another, it lifts its bill and exposes the epaulettes. In the most spectacular, the male flies up and does a slow stall flight over its territory with the red epaulettes shining like headlights. Dramatic chases are quite common as a male drives other males out of its territory.

Ornithologists have studied the importance of the epaulettes by capturing the birds, quickly dyeing their epaulettes black, and releasing the birds. Without the bright shoulder patches, most of these males lost their territories. Ornithologists also took dead, stuffed blackbirds and mounted them in other blackbird's territories. If these mounts had blackened

epaulettes, they were ignored. If they had normal epaulettes, they were challenged and attacked. If their epaulettes had been made larger, they were violently attacked. This is interesting because male Red-winged Blackbirds can cover up their epaulettes. If they want to move through, or sneak into, another male's territory and not want to be attacked, they can cover up their epaulettes.

Similar studies have revealed that the brightness of the black and white stripes on a White-crowned Sparrow or the redness of an American Robin's breast influence their status within a flock.

While all this male activity is going on, the females quietly set up their own nesting territories within the male territories. A male will mate with many females. The larger and more desirable the male's territory, the more females that will nest within it.

Red-winged Blackbird Challenges

Put a check mark in the box when you have completed the challenge.

- Identify a male Red-winged Blackbird.
- Identify a female Red-winged Blackbird. Females are brown and heavily streaked with a yellow wash around the bill.
- See a male Red-winged Blackbird chase a crow or a hawk out of the nesting area.
- See males doing their territorial displays. Morning and late afternoon are the best times to see this fascinating behavior.
- Figure out the best territory from a blackbird's point of view by noticing where the males with the brightest red epaulettes are.
- See a male moving about with covered-up epaulettes.
- See several females within the territory of a single male.
- After the breeding season, see an all-male flock.
- After the breeding season, see an all-female and juvenile flock.
- In winter, see huge mixed flocks of blackbirds, cowbirds, and starlings.