

# NATURE DETECTIVES



Summer 2020

## The Screechy Red-Winged Blackbird

A red-winged blackbird balanced on top of a swaying cattail stalk and looked around Cottonwood Marsh. His nickname was Red, and it was the second year Red had claimed part of the marsh as his territory. He spread his tail, and hunched his wings to show off vivid red shoulder patches. He called, "My territory-eee!" His voice was screechy, sounding like a squeaky machine.

Red was a mature adult male, about the size of a robin. He looked really fine with glossy black feathers. His shoulder patches were eye-catching red feathers, bordered in yellow feathers. He flashed the bright shoulder colors to advertise his vigor and his confidence as he patrolled his claim.

Weaker and younger red-winged blackbird males understood Red's signals and moved away. Red's appearance signaled to red-winged blackbird females that he'd likely be a strong protector of nests and baby birds. The females were most impressed with the territory's good nesting spots and food choices. Red's fitness and experience at finding and holding a quality territory meant at least five females had chosen to nest in his area.

Pull Out and Save

## Danger from the Sky

Red saw a hawk flying in, low and fast. Mates and babies were in danger! Calling out an alarm, Red shot off his perch and flew directly at the predator bird. Red instinctively knew he had to stay above the hawk or risk becoming its snack himself. If the hawk got above Red, it could dive down with sharp talons ready for capture.



The hawk circled up and up, and Red beat his wings hard to stay even higher. Finally, the hawk was well out of Red's territory. Red broke off his attack, and fled home as fast as his wings could flap. Red's luck held. The hawk didn't counter attack, and kept flying away.

Red rested at the top of a willow bush and surveyed his area in Cottonwood Marsh. He shrugged his shoulder patches wide and forward. "My territory-eee!" he sang to a neighboring male red-winged blackbird.

## It's Red-winged Blackbird Time

Red-winged blackbirds are common in marshy habitats during spring and summer nesting season. The birds prefer areas with swamp vegetation such as cattails. Other habitats include wet fields or soggy roadside ditches with tall weeds.

Females look nothing like the males, and are often mistaken for a kind of sparrow. Unlike loud, flashy males, females creep among the plants to avoid attracting the attention of hungry predators. Drab coloring helps them hide.



Female red-winged blackbird

## Males Claim Territory Loudly

Late winter marks the arrival of male red-winged blackbirds on their nesting territory. The males flaunt their red shoulder patches and call raucously. As they flit from tall plant to tall plant to stake their claim on a plot of wetland, they show off and sound off from their various perches, and while in flight.

An individual bird's claim will be respected by red-winged blackbirds that flew to the wetland with him, if he spends enough time on his plot threatening rivals with his colors and calls. The birds seldom physically fight with familiar neighboring males in their flock. If a red-winged blackbird stranger intrudes on the territory, the defense can be a fierce battle with beaks and claws. Several males may work together to chase off an intruder blackbird and other birds such as crows.

## Females Claim Nesting Space Quietly

The females arrive after the males. They seek a small nesting area with good food nearby. They sneak quietly through vegetation collecting nest materials. If another female comes near, they spread their wings and tails to signal "back off." They build their nest and raise the young with little or no male help.

Nests start with long, thin plant leaves wound around cattails or weeds to make a platform. A cup is woven on the platform, plastered with mud and lined with soft grasses. The safest nests for the eggs and nestlings are hidden, down low over water.



After hatching, three or four babies grow rapidly on a diet of flies, moths, butterflies, dragonflies, and snails. In a dozen days, nestlings become fledglings. They hide down among the marsh plants until they become strong fliers.

The male blackbirds have few rivals to chase now so they may help feed fledglings. Youngsters leave the marsh to join flocks of other juvenile blackbirds once their flying skills improve.

## Communicating by Sight and Sound

In Spanish the red-winged blackbird is called *sargento alirrojo*, which means “red-winged sergeant” because the bird’s red shoulder patches resemble an epaulet (pronounced **ep-uh-let**), a colorful patch marking the shoulder of some military jackets.

Red-winged blackbirds on patrol aggressively fluff their red and yellow feathers, but at the end of each day, they hide their colors. They fly off to a nearby location to flock together with the same male neighbors they’ve eyed with suspicion all day. Hidden red colors signal comradery among the flock while the males roost together for the night. They return to their own wetland plots each morning, with red feathers flashing and raucous calls sounding.



After the nesting season, these birds don’t migrate south. Neighboring male and female red-winged blackbirds will leave the marsh to join up with other types of blackbirds such as grackles and cowbirds. Juvenile blackbirds join the flock too. Next year, many of the same red-winged blackbirds will return to claim a territory in the same area, and the nesting cycle will begin again.

### Big Menu for Red-wing Blackbirds

Mixed blackbird flocks can number in the hundreds in fall and winter. The flocks swarm animal feedlots and farmers’ fields to find weed seeds, seed crops, and grain. They inflict lots of damage if they arrive before sunflower, wheat, and corn fields are harvested. They also walk open spaces such as lawns, gardens, and golf courses to forage for anything that might be food.

Food for the blackbirds is nearly anything they can swallow, after they manage to spear, pick up or pry it open with their tough, cone-shaped beaks. Insects are a favorite during the summer. Berries, spiders, and small animals such as worms, snakes, snails, and more are on their large menu.

### Threats and Dangers

Despite the watchful care by female birds and the marsh patrols by male birds, predators often snatch eggs, nestlings and fledglings. Snakes and minks can reach nests built over water. Raccoons, weasels, and foxes can grab fledglings and raid nests built over land. Magpies, crows, ravens, jays, owls, and hawks strike unguarded nests and wandering fledglings. People exasperated with large flocks also try to reduce the birds’ numbers in many ways.



Group nesting, roosting, and flocking increase safety from predators. Individual alarm calls warn the whole group, and birds work together to mob and chase away threats. The same camouflage colors help hide juvenile birds and females. Nevertheless, numbers of red-winged blackbirds are dropping, but for now the birds are still abundant, and individual birds can live more than 15 years.

## Spying on Red-winged Blackbirds

Head out to a marsh or pond inhabited by a lot of noisy red-winged blackbirds. A good place to find the birds is an area with lots of cattails like Walden Ponds Wildlife Habitat. Find a comfortable place where you are not too noticeable to the birds and where you can observe the whole area quietly for a while.



Listen to the blackbirds making different sounds. Besides the screechy territory call, red-wings use soft chatters, whistles, alarm calls, and more. They have a different warning call for danger from the sky than if the danger is on the land. Males even have a call to say they are about to leave their territory.

If you watch long enough you might be able to map an individual male bird's plot. Keep track of all the perches where the same bird lands and connect the places in your head with imaginary lines.

## Red-winged Blackbird Observations

Use this chart to keep track of your observations. Use tic marks to show how many times you see these signals. Just like people, birds have many signals, sounds, and movements that help them communicate with other birds.

Male perched, calling and displaying red shoulder patches	Male slowly flying over and showing red shoulders	Male landing near another male
Male chasing another blackbird (male or female?)	Male or female eating something	Male chasing a crow or hawk or other bird
Male chasing an animal that's not a bird	Female doing something—write down what she's doing	How many red-winged blackbirds do you see?
How many different calls do you hear red-winged blackbirds making? (loud "auk au leeee" or soft "chek chek" are examples)	How many other different types of birds do you recognize? List them.	Other interesting observations