

Red-winged Blackbird *Agelaius phoeniceus*



Folk Name: Red-wing, One-One

Status: Resident

Abundance: Common to locally Abundant in winter

Habitat: Edges of marshes, lakes, and ponds; forages in open grassy fields; roosts in thick woodlands

The Red-winged Blackbird is arguably our most recognizable blackbird. Males are the same size as a Northern Cardinal. They are glossy black with often conspicuous bright-scarlet shoulder patches, edged in buff-yellow. Females are smaller and brown with heavy streaking below. The song of the male has been described as *conk-a-ree!*, *oak-a-lee!*, *quong-ka-ree!*, or in the case of our most southern birds: “Bob-by Lee!”

The Red-winged Blackbird is considered by many to be the most abundant bird in North America. It breeds in freshwater marshes and slightly brackish water habitats across the continent. In the Carolina Piedmont, any wet spot with cattails or bushes on the edge of a pond or drainage ditch will do as a nest site.

This bird is a year-round resident in this region. Numbers during migration and the winter months are augmented by birds that have moved south from their northern breeding grounds. Flocks numbering in the hundreds of thousands and even millions were estimated in some areas in the eastern Carolinas in the twentieth century. Today, winter flocks, though still large, are much reduced from their historic highs. One flock estimated to be 300,000 birds was reported on a Charlotte Christmas Bird Count in 1971, and a flock of 200,000 was reported on the Chester count in 1977. A flock estimated at almost 33,000 birds was reported at Pee Dee National Wildlife



Refuge in 2000, a flock of 31,000 birds was seen in 2007, and a flock of 20,000 was reported there in 2011.

Nesting in the Carolina Piedmont generally occurs from April through June. Nests are often built in small colonies. The female builds a deep cup grass nest in the dense grasses or cattails bordering a wetland. She lays between three and five eggs. They eat mostly insects during the nesting season. All the birds disperse from the nesting site once the young birds have fledged.

In June 1926, William McIlwaine found seven nests of Red-winged Blackbirds lined along Sugaw Creek in Charlotte. He believed they had a preference for building on a southern or eastern exposure, as six of the seven nests were on the west side of the creek (facing east). “The one on the eastern bank was in an elder berry bush.”



Red-winged Blackbird male. (Jeff Lemons)



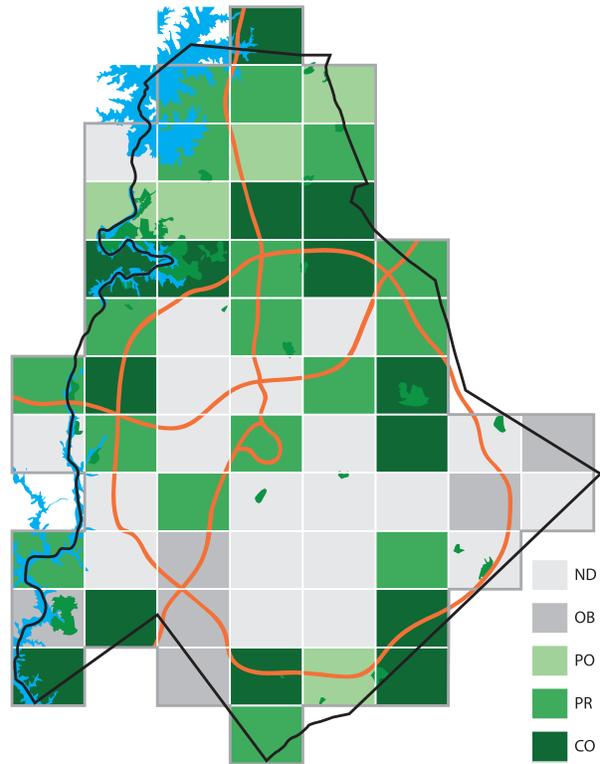
Red-winged Blackbird. (Jeff Lemons)

On April 2, 1928, along the Sugaw Creek bottom, McIlwaine found “a pair of red-wing blackbirds, the first I had seen this year. They say the male comes first, the female following some days later. Well, they are both here now. And in their proper habitat.” He found active nests on 15 May and 22 May, one “in an elder bush with four eggs that are only a few days from hatching.” He described the eggs as “bluish-white with spots and scrolls of black on the larger end.” He checked on this nest again 8 days later and found three hatchling birds.

Ernest Mitchell found Red-winged Blackbirds breeding at his “birding grounds” in south Charlotte in June 1948. Mitchell, who later worked as an ornithologist for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, wrote:

At first I found a single nest with a single egg. Later, as the birds were well on their way to raising their broods of the season, the beautiful male bird seemed to be the sole defender and mate of the four females. On explaining this circumstance to an ornithological authority in Washington, D.C., I was told that such polygamy was not an uncommon occurrence in this species.”

In 1956, Joe Norwood reported a flock in Charlotte on 22 February. Several of the males were already singing to attract a mate despite the fact that it was still winter, and the temperature was a chilly 44 degrees.



Mecklenburg County Breeding Bird Atlas:

Widespread (PR/17, CO/14)