

# BIRD OF THE MONTH

## RED-WINGED BLACKBIRDS

### OUR TRUE HARBINGERS OF SPRING



February seems to be a time when we begin to question the length of our winter. Will Punxsutawney Phil see his shadow on February 2? Will we have 6 more weeks of misty skies and crystalline trees? One of the reassuring events of this month is the reliable return of the Red-winged Blackbirds—Flathead County's true harbingers of spring.

The Red-winged Blackbird (red-wing) is a common summer resident and uncommon winter bird in the Flathead Valley. It is somewhat smaller than an American Robin (approximately 7.5 to 9.5 inches in length). Males are glossy black everywhere except on the epaulets, or shoulders, of the wing. The epaulets are blazing scarlet bordered with a yellowish band. The pointed bill, eyes, and feet are black. Male red-wings do not completely attain full adult plumage until their third year. Females and young look completely different from the dazzling males; they resemble oversized sparrows. The back of a female is blackish brown streaked with buff and chestnut. The head is streaked with buffy eyebrows, brown cheeks, and darker eye stripes. The throat is pale, the breast and belly are whitish with heavy dark streaking.

According to Cornell Ornithological Laboratory, the red-wing's body is adapted to its lifestyle here in marshy areas. Red-wings have sturdy legs with muscles designed to allow them to do the "splits" if they are perched on two different cattails at once. Their feathers are hardy and resist wear and tear as they move about in cattail blades. They have a relatively long intestine, allowing them to digest a wide variety of foods, from grains to slugs.

Red-wings have many vocalizations. The common "okalee" song is to warn other males off the territory and to attract mates. The "chip" call is given by males and females in many situations as a general contact call and alerts group members to danger. There is also the "chop" call, "sputter" call, "twitter" call, and whistle. By logging onto Journey North ([www.learner.org/jnorth/tm/spring/WelcomeRWBB.html](http://www.learner.org/jnorth/tm/spring/WelcomeRWBB.html)) you can hear these interesting vocalizations and track the annual return of the red-wings.

In January most red-wings are still on wintering grounds in the Southern and Central U.S., putting on fat for the coming spring migration. In February male red-wings that breed here start to migrate north. This is when we will hear the first trumpets heralding spring ("O-KA-LEEE") and see the characteristic territorial displays as they balance on the highest marsh plant and spread their tail and wings, exposing their scarlet epaulet feathers. Early March is the peak male migration with females arriving later in the month. In April we can observe extravagant male territorial behavior while the females are nesting and first eggs are hatching. The open-cup nest is built low to the ground. An average of 3 eggs are laid and are incubated for 10-12 days. Birds are exceptionally wary when crows or hawks fly over nesting marshes at this time. Cornell Ornithological Lab reports that the Red-winged Blackbird is a highly polygamous species, with one male having up to 15 different females making nests in his territory. The females are also not bound to one mate; many of the eggs in a nest so fiercely defended by a territorial male may actually be sired by neighboring males. By May, many young are hatching and will fledge by 14 days old. Re-nesting and rearing young keep red-wings very busy the whole month of June. Nesting is finishing up by early July, and adults are starting to molt. By August, most young have fledged and are on their own. This is the peak month for molting body and flight feathers. The birds will remain inconspicuous during this vulnerable time. In September birds gather in large feeding flocks, putting on fat in preparation for migration and winter. And in October, migration is complete. In November and December, "our" red-wings are back in the Great Plains feeding in huge flocks, though some stragglers may remain. According to Dan Casey, these wintering birds are usually in flocks around reliable food sources such as feedlots and consist mostly of juvenile males. Over the past 10 years, Flathead Audubon members have found an average of 215 red-wings on the Bigfork Christmas Bird Count, with a high count of 519 in 1999.

The mature males will be returning to the wetlands of the Flathead soon. If you are fortunate to have a wetland close by, listen for their proclamations and be assured that spring is in the air.

By Linda de Kort