

MAY 15-31, 2022, NATURAL HISTORY NOTES  
By Dick Harlow

**RED-WINGED BLACKBIRD**



**Red-winged Blackbird, *Agelaius phoeniceus*, male,**  
© Dick Harlow

The Red-winged Blackbird, *Agelaius phoeniceus*, is considered the most abundant species in North America. Depending on where you live and the type of habitat near you, various censuses around the country, usually in the late Fall or Winter, have counted loose flocks of being in excess of a million birds. Estimating what would be the breeding pairs during their best years across North America it has been reported to be greater than 250 million. That is a lot of one species!



**Red-winged Blackbird, *Agelaius phoeniceus*, female,**  
© Dick Harlow

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As noted in the two pictures provided this species is sexually dimorphic, meaning they look entirely different.

The primary food for this species are plant seeds and insects.

This species tends to build its nest in marshy habitat. Although a wet field with high grass and shrubs will also be used.

Some birds like the Red-winged Blackbird are polygynous, when a male bird mates with a female that female is considered a spouse or wife, therefore, it is a form of polygamy. If the spouses were husbands, the term would be called polyandry. Red-winged males stake out a territory in an area such as a part of a marsh and try through plumage display and calls to entice one or more females to come and nest in his territory. A male will guard his territory tenaciously from other male interlopers and predators.

A male in a successful part of the marsh could have a number of females he is looking out for. The nesting strategy here is dependent on a male being dominant, aggressive, and successful in preventing other males from entering his territory as well as enticing females to come into his territory.

Nesting success is key to a female being enticed. Therefore, even though a female might be coerced into a male's territory, she needs to have minimal disturbance while nesting and raising her young for her to either stay for the season or to come back the following year. A particular male's territory has been reported to have up to 10 plus females nesting in it.



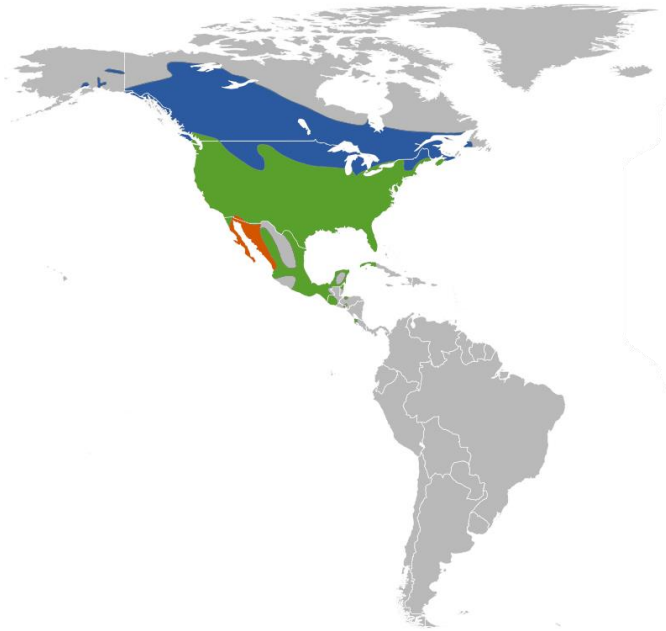
© Bob Dayle, Red-winged Blackbird nest with 2 eggs.

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For those that are interested the two ponds here at EastView are perfect spots to watch the behavior of Red-winged Blackbirds. Red-wings are polygynous where the male will mate with more than one female and usually up to three or more mates per breeding season. The male is very aggressive and territorial during the breeding season and spends a great deal of his energy defending his territory against all forms of possible intruders, including humans.

Red-wing males will begin establishing territories as early as February here at EastView and will continue until the end of August. However, their peak aggressiveness seems to be from May to July. It is very interesting to watch the overtime these males put into defending their small territories within the rather small ponds of South and North Ponds here at EastView.



Red-winged Blackbird distribution map, Green-Year around, blue-breeding.

- Breeding range
- Wintering range
- Year-round range

From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia

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As noted, Red-winged Blackbirds are polygynous, which means one male will have more than one mate. However, with Redwings the females will mate with other males other than their territorial male. This, of course, means that a female will have clutches of mixed paternity.

In a season a single female laying two to four eggs for each of two to three separate nests may very well have a mixed paternity in each new nest.

### OBSERVATIONS

#### MAMMALS

Eastern Cottontail Rabbit – 2  
Meadow Vole

#### AMPHIBIANS

Bullfrog  
Green Frog

#### BUTTERFLIES

Cabbage White

### WEATHER

*All Measurements taken at solar noon (1230 EST).*

#### PRECIPITATION

**Average May Precipitation for Vermont = 87.9 mm or 3.46 inches.**

**Total month of May precipitation was 51.9 mm or 2.0 inches. Using the 0.73 inches from the surplus gained in April we now have a 0.73-inch deficit for the month and year.**

**Overcast Days 1-31: We had 11 days of overcast skies. Of those overcast skies 7 days produced rain.**

**NOTE: Due to Vermont Fish and Wildlife concern for the general bird health and the spread of bird flu through outside feeders I have stopped feeding birds over the Summer into Fall. Vermont Fish & Wildlife feels strongly that this will prevent Bird Flu from spreading. Everyone must do what they think is best to help prevent the death of feeder birds from bird flu.**