



Bird Notes

From Northeast Kingdom Audubon
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For Immediate Release

Blackbird Singing in the Dead of Night

I wonder if the Beatles really listened to blackbirds at night. I know mockingbirds sing at night. But for sure, if we “are only waiting for this moment to arise” ...it must mean SPRING. Even though we may still be looking upon a wintry environment this month, we know the signs of spring are there, too. And in my view, red-winged blackbirds and their black companions, grackles, starlings, cowbirds and turkey vultures, are the markers, the vernal benchmarks. For some of us, changing the time in March reminded us that we are into a new season, springing ahead earlier than in years past. For others, when the sap is flowing or the mud oozing, spring is here. When we keep track of such moments, we can also start keeping track of the birds. We passed the equinox on March 20, but the spring “black birds” had already made quite an appearance by then.

Red-wings or “chewinks” (named for their calls), are probably the most conspicuous of Vermont’s bird breeders. Not being a long distance migrator, they have been spending the winter in the marshes, swamps, pastures and wet and dry meadows across the southeastern U.S. A few may stay in the Champlain lowlands. Territorial males appear in Vermont in mid March, displaying in early morning and evening (Paul McCartney was right). The females will show up in early April. Once thought of as birds of wetlands, red-wings are known to breed in upland fields as well. And so the story goes.

But what of another blackbird in our midst, a species once numerous and now in decline and unfamiliar? A cousin, more closely related to the common grackle, the rusty blackbirds, or rusties, are named for a their color in non-breeding plumage. We display no flashy red coverts. Next month, they will take on a slate or glossy black look. When the spring migrants are heading north, rusties can be seen in flocks with grackles, cowbirds, starlings and red-wings. However, this bird will not be found nesting in the inhabited areas like red-wings. Selecting wetlands such as stream and lake edges in the boreal forest, this swamp lover will look for open pools and the willow and alder shrubs of remote beaver ponds. In small groups or solitary pairs, their sound may help you locate, as well as remember their name- think of a creaky, rusty hinge.

While redwings may be adaptable and the most abundant blackbird, the rusties are showing signs of decline with loss of habitat. For more information on the population trends of these birds, go to www.ebird.org, or the National Audubon, Cornell Lab of Ornithology and Smithsonian National Zoo websites.

Stop waiting and go birding!

Carolyn E. Boardman is a board member of NEK Audubon living in Brownington, Vermont. NEK Audubon is one of 8 chapters of Audubon Vermont and part of the National Audubon Society. NEK Audubon is a non -profit organization that encourages people's enjoyment of birds, wildlife and natural habitats through field trips, programs and publications. For more information about meetings, field trips and special events visit www.nekaudubon.org.
Art work by Robin Rothman.