

Red-winged Blackbird

They flock to the San Pedro House

By

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Wintertime visitors to the San Pedro House often ask FSPR volunteers for information about the large flocks of female Red-winged Blackbirds. The flocks of these birds are conspicuous as they energetically fly around the San Pedro House and land in great numbers on bird feeders or on the ground near the feeders.



Female Red-Winged Blackbird near feeder at San Pedro House

Red-winged Blackbirds are common across much of North America (Farrand, 1989; Kaufman, 1996; Sibley, 2003). People who venture into marshes and wet fields frequently hear their nasal songs. These bold birds will often group together to attack larger birds, such as a hawk or crow, that enter into their nesting area. Red-winged Blackbirds breed from central Alaska and the southern Yukon

southward to Baja California, Central America, and the West Indies. They winter throughout much of the southern breeding range, as far north as southern British Columbia, Colorado, the southern Great Lakes, and coastal New England. Red-winged Blackbirds breed in marshes, brushy swamps, hay fields, and the upper edges of the salt marshes.



Male Red-winged Blackbird at feeder

The adults feed primarily on insects and seeds. During the summer, they eat small invertebrates such as beetles, caterpillars, and grasshoppers and may feed on spiders, millipedes, and snails. About 75% of the adults' annual diet is seeds such as those of grasses, weeds, and waste grain. The birds also sometimes eat berries and small fruits. They forage for food mostly by walking on the ground but sometimes also

seek food in shrubs and trees. After the breeding season, Red-winged Blackbirds usually forage in flocks and may be associated with other blackbirds and starlings.

Males defend their territory and attract mates by singing while perched on a high stalk with feathers fluffed out, tail partly spread, and the leading edges of the wings lifted to prominently display the red shoulder patches. They also sing while doing a slow, fluttering flight. A male often has more than one mate. The female builds the nest in marsh plants such as cattails or bulrushes, in bushes or saplings close to water, or in dense grasses in fields. The nest



Nest & Eggs (Photographed in Wisconsin)

is a bulky open cup lashed to surrounding vegetation and consisting of grasses, reeds, leaves and other plant material and often lined with fine grass. The female usually lays 3 to 4 eggs, less often 2 to 6. The eggs are a pale blue-green and have markings of black, brown, and purple that are concentrated at the

larger end. The female incubates the eggs for approximately 10 to 13 days. Both parents feed the nestlings, with the female doing more than the male. The young leave the nest about 11 to 14 days after hatching.

Recognition Characters: (Sibley, 2003). People sometimes mistake the female blackbirds for sparrows, but the former are larger (approximately 8.8 inches long from tip of bill to the tip of tail). Our most common sparrows are generally between 5.5 and 7 inches in length. The female Red-winged Blackbirds have a relatively thinner bill than sparrows, dark brown body above that is tinged with black and gray and that has a rufous color along the edges of the feathers, a light or pale yellow line extending backwards from the eye, and uniform blackish-brown streaks on their pale underparts.

Male Red-winged Blackbirds sometimes show up near the San Pedro House individually. They have a blackish body. When the wings are at rest, a red shoulder with a pale yellow border is often visible. Sometimes, only the pale yellow border and a little bit or none of the red patch are visible, as in the adjacent photo.

References

Farrand, J. Jr. (ed.). 1989. 3 Warblers to Sparrows. The Audubon Society Master Guide to Birding. Borzoi Book. Alfred A. Knopf, New York. 399 p.

Kaufman, K. 1996. Lives of North American Birds. Houghton Mifflin Co., Boston. xxv+675 p.

Sibley, D. A. 2003. The Sibley Field Guide to Birds of Western North America. National Audubon Society. Alfred A. Knopf, New York. Chanticleer Press, Inc. 471 p.