

North Carolina Partners in Flight Conservation & Management Fact Sheet: Rusty Blackbird (*Euphagus carolinus*)

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Rusty Blackbirds are members of the New World blackbird family, the Icteridae. They are most closely related to the Brewer's Blackbird (*Euphagus cyanocephalus*). The genus *Euphagus* is, in turn, closely related to the grackles (genus *Quiscalus*). Although many species of blackbirds have an affinity for aquatic habitats, the Rusty Blackbird is perhaps the blackbird species that is most faithful to such habitats year round.

Description

Rusty Blackbirds are medium-sized blackbirds that lack distinctive markings in their breeding plumage, but which have rust-colored edges to their feathers in their non-breeding plumage. In North Carolina, their rust-colored markings in winter make them easy to distinguish from other blackbirds. However, as spring approaches these rust-colored markings wear off, leaving an all-black plumage in males and a dark brownish-gray plumage in females. So, in late winter and early spring they could be confused with other all-black blackbirds such as Common Grackles. However, Common Grackles have large, wedge-shaped tails unlike the smaller tails of Rusty Blackbirds. Also, male Rusty Blackbirds in breeding plumage have a

greenish gloss whereas Common Grackles have a purplish gloss (see Sibley 2003 or Jaramillo and Burke 1999 for more identification tips). In mixed flocks, Rusty Blackbirds will be conspicuous as they appear to be roughly half the size of Common Grackles.

Voice

Few blackbirds are considered musical, and the Rusty Blackbird is no exception. Although named for their coloration, it is perhaps also fitting that their songs are considered by some to resemble the sound of a rusty hinge. Males possess two song types (Avery 1995), which are described as a soft gurgle followed by a high whistle and a soft descending gurgle (Sibley 2003).

Range

Rusty Blackbirds breed in boreal forests in Canada and in northern US states. They migrate to the southeastern US to spend winter months. Their winter range is broad, extending from Texas to Florida, and northward to central Nebraska and southern New England. Highest concentrations are found in the Mississippi river basin. In North Carolina they occur statewide, although they are less numerous in the mountains

than in the piedmont and coastal plain (see Figure 1).

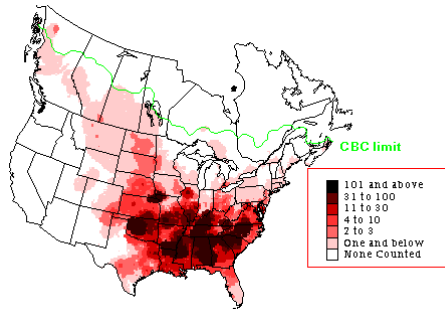


Figure 1. Distribution map for Rusty Blackbirds during winter in the US and Canada. From Christmas Bird Count data 1959-1988 (Sauer et al. 1996).

Conservation Status

Population declines in Rusty Blackbirds are among the most alarming of any bird species in North America: annual losses are estimated at over 5% per year (Niven et al. 2004), and Greenberg and Droege (1999) estimate total losses of ~90% between the early 1960s and the mid 1990s. Moreover, Rusty Blackbirds were declining for decades prior to the 1960s (Greenberg and Droege 1999). Despite these drastic declines, only recently have scientists become aware of the magnitude of the problem. Loss of habitat tops the list of causes for the decline, although other factors are likely at play as well (International Rusty Blackbird Technical Group 2005).

Habits & Habitat

Groups of Rusty Blackbirds begin arriving in wintering areas in October and migration peaks in November (Jaramillo and Burke 1999). They persist in North Carolina until April (Potter et al. 1980), although their northward migration begins as early as late February (Avery 1995).

While in North Carolina, Rusty Blackbirds are highly gregarious; they form large flocks that forage together during the day and roost together at night. Rusty Blackbirds are closely tied to aquatic habitats, more so than other blackbirds. They are particularly fond of aquatic habitats with still water, and so are often found in swamps or near ponds (Avery 1995). Their preferred food includes aquatic invertebrates and plant matter. In winter, they are reported to eat more plants (including acorns, pine seeds, and fruits) whereas in the summer they shift to include more arthropods in their diet. In winter, they occasionally join flocks of other blackbirds, including Common Grackles and Red-winged Blackbirds to forage in agricultural fields, where they will consume leftover grains.

Management Recommendations

Landowners that wish to adopt practices that will help Rusty Blackbirds should consider the following:

- Refrain from draining wetlands that host Rusty Blackbirds in winter. The Rusty Blackbird is unable to utilize alternative habitats as effectively as other blackbirds, so habitat preservation is key to their continued presence in North Carolina.

- Plan carefully prior to any efforts to kill blackbirds on agricultural land. Surveys prior to such efforts can reveal if Rusty Blackbirds are present. In the event they are in a target area, then non-lethal methods should be utilized.
- Avoid poisoning in habitats that are likely to be used by Rusty Blackbirds – aquatic habitats such as creeks or flooded areas should not be sites for poisoning.
- Pay careful attention to the bait used in poisoning efforts. Rusty Blackbirds are attracted to protein-rich food sources, so these should not be used for poisoning.
- Try not to disturb Rusty Blackbirds that may be using your land to forage or roost. In particular, avoid disturbing roosts at the end of winter, as Rusty Blackbirds are more likely to join large roosts then.
- Purchase products that do not contribute to deforestation of the Rusty Blackbird's breeding habitat, the boreal forest. Visit <http://www.borealbirds.org/> for more information.

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