

March 2010: Meditations on Red-winged Blackbirds

When we think of harbingers of spring, most of us think of crocuses, robins, or peepers. For my husband, it's the onset of fishing season. For me, it's the return of turkey vultures, which seem to arrive back in Camden about a week before the official first day of spring (or Vernal Equinox), which falls on March 20 this year. My mother, however, marks the season with the re-appearance of red-winged blackbirds at her feeder. Ornithologist Peter Vickery estimates that blackbirds should arrive in the Camden area by the second week of March, perhaps even earlier depending on weather patterns. So get the feeders ready, Mom—they're on their way!

Red-winged blackbirds are considered short-distance migrants, rarely traveling more than a few hundred miles south of their breeding territory. Birds in warmer regions may not even migrate, and even in southern Maine a handful may sometimes winter over. On a breeding map, Maine is a red state just north of a sea of purple—in this case, red indicating summer breeding range and purple indicating year-round territory. Because they don't have far to go, they're among the last to linger in the fall, though dispersed from their nesting area, and the first to return. And when they do, I know it, because my mother immediately calls me up to ecstatically inform me that “her” blackbirds are back.

As songbirds go, the male blackbird is not subtle. He's larger than a sparrow, shiny black, and in the spring—when he's staking out his territory and advertising for a mate—he flashes those bright red epaulettes all over the place. In my yellowed edition of *A Popular Handbook of the Ornithology of Eastern North America* by Thomas Nuttall (revised and annotated by Montague Chamberlain in 1896), Nuttall describes blackbirds as moving about the southern rice fields in winter flocks “like blackening clouds, rising suddenly at times with a noise like thunder, and exhibiting amidst the broad shadows of their funereal plumage the bright flashing of vermilion with which their wings are singularly decorated.” But by the time they're back with us, they're already shifting from flock mentality to pairing off.

The red-winged blackbird's loud and distinctive song—described by one friend as “Walter Leeeeee!”—rings out repeatedly in the spring air. (To get herself through the blackbird-less winter, my mother has a little stuffed toy blackbird that repeats this song when it's squeezed.) A marsh or wetland large enough to comprise many blackbird territories echoes with a near-constant cacophony as each male claims his space and engages in various skirmishes. As he sings, he fans his tail and flashes his shoulder patches, but in a less passionate mood, he can also make the red feathers less conspicuous. In the fall, when he's no long posturing, it may sometimes take a minute to figure out what that black bird with the buffy wing bar is: it's simply a red-wing that's tucked away his red for the winter.

Nuttall, who says blackbirds can be heard from two miles away, describes their songs with particularly poetic language: “This music seems to be something betwixt chattering and warbling,—jingling liquid notes... then complaining

chirps, jays, and sounds like saw-filing, or the motion of a sign-board on its rusty hinge; the whole constituting a novel and sometimes grand chorus of discord and harmony, in which the performers seem in good earnest, and bristle up their feathers as if inclined at least to make up in quantity what their show of music may lack in quality." Granted, blackbirds can make some crazy sounds, but to my ears, the simple, trilling song of a single blackbird perched on a cat-tail in my parents' backyard heralds spring's return with as much poignancy as a bog full of spring peepers. And the two sounds together fully encompass the range of spring's glorious chorus.

With those sounds in my head, I can't resist sharing Nuttall's description of a duet between a bullfrog and a blackbird: "The great bull-frog elevates his green head and brassy eyes from the stagnant pool, and calls out in a loud and echoing bellow... which is again answered... by the creaking or cackling voice of his feathered neighbors. This curious concert, uttered as it were from the still and sable waters of the Styx, is at once both ludicrous and solemn." This passage has certainly inspired me to listen more carefully to the vocal interactions going on in a nearby marsh this spring.

During breeding season, the male blackbird is constantly vigilant, ever ready to launch a charge in defense of his territory. According to the Cornell Lab of Ornithology, he spends more than 25% of his daylight hours defending his turf, fending off encroaching males, predators, and other birds and beasts. That doesn't leave a lot of time for important activities like eating and mating.

But he apparently has great cause for his overly aggressive stance. One of the things I remember best from a college ornithology class was that red-winged blackbirds are primarily polygynous, meaning one male may have more than a dozen female mates. I remember this so well because the guys in my ornithology class naturally made a big deal about the benefits of this type of breeding behavior. For those considering this as a lifestyle option, however, they should also know that DNA-testing has shown that 25 to 50% of all nestlings hatched within a particular territory were fathered by a bird other than the territorial male. I don't think the guys in my ornithology class really put much thought into what it would mean to have to actually defend and keep in line that many women all at once.

The streaky brown female blackbird almost looks like a different species from the male, and is frequently mistaken for a big sparrow. Because she's brooding eggs and guarding the nest, she doesn't want to draw attention to herself or her young. While the male flies his red flags overhead, she skulks in the reeds, generally blending in well with the brown stalks of marsh grasses and sedges. Blackbirds may raise two broods in a season—clearly there's a lot of love going on in those noisy marshes. So keep your eyes open, because it's coming soon to a wetland near you.