LIVING with WILDLIFE

Blackbirds

Red-winged blackbird
Agelaius phoeniceus

IDENTIFICATION

The term blackbird refers to about 10 species of birds. The various species have several traits in common. The males are black or iridescent in color. Not all blackbirds are black in color.

All blackbirds are omnivorous. They eat grains, weed seeds, fruits and insects. Food for young birds are worms and bugs which are high in protein. Adult birds eat mostly seeds.

When it is not nesting season, these birds feed in flocks and roost at night in groups varying from a few birds to over a million birds. Sometimes a single species will roost together but often several species mix together when roosting. Roosting together in winter is for warmth and protection from enemies.

The average age for a blackbird is two years.

Common Name	Scientific Name	Identification	Range and Habitat	Habits and Biology	Type of Damage
Red-winged Blackbird	Agelaius phoeniceus	Male is smaller than robin. It is black with red and yellow shoulder patches. Female is smaller and brownish.	All of North America in hayfields, marshes & ditches.	Eats insects and seeds. 50% mortality rate.	Damage corn, sunflowers, sorghum, oats and rice
Common Grackle	Quiscalus quiscula	Iridescent blackbird larger than a robin. Has a long keel-shaped tail.	Common east of the Rockies. Nest in shelterbelts, farmyards & towns.	Same as above plus eats fish, mice, songbird young & eggs.	Same as above but will also pull up sprouting corn.
Great-tailed Grackle	Quiscalus mexicanus	Similar to common grackle but with larger tail.	Year-round resident of Texas. Feed at farms & parks.	Eats insects, eggs, frutis and grains.	Damages fruits and melons.
Brown-headed Cowbird	Molothrus ater	Smallest blackbird. Male is black with brown head. Sparrow like bills.	Found throughout North America especially where livestock live.	Eats weed seeds and grains. Female lays eggs in other birds' nest.	Eats livestock feed and contaminates livestock feed.
Yellow-headed Blackbird	Xanthocephalus xanthocephalus	Male is black with yellow head. Female is smaller and browner.	Found in Great Plains & western North America in deep-water marsh areas.	Diet similar to Red-winged blackbird.	Minor damage to crops.
Brewers' Blackbird	Euphagus cyanocephalus	Robin-sized bird. Male is black with whitish eyes; female is brownish-gray with dark eyes.	Found in northern Great Plains and western North America. In winter is found in Mexico.	Eats grains and weed seeds and insects.	Minor damage to grains and fruit crops.
European Starling	Sturnus vulgaris	Short-tailed, stocky blackbird with gold and white speckled body and yellow bill	Introduced from Europe and now found nationwide.	Competes with native birds for nesting cavities.	Causes urban health problems from droppings.

The red-winged blackbird is the most abundant bird in North America.

Living in Harmony, Living in Conflict

Living in harmony . . .
Most of the time, blackbirds and humans live in harmony.

- *blackbirds eat insects and noxious weed seeds*
- *people enjoy watching blackbirds*
- *blackbirds are traditional birds of the marsh that have moved into other areas*

Living in conflict . . .

- *blackbirds can do extensive damage to crops like sunflowers, corn and rice*
- *blackbirds roost in large numbers and their droppings can produce an unpleasant odor and often carry diseases*
- *blackbirds can be a threat to aircraft*
- *large numbers of migrating blackbirds will compete with resident species of birds*
- *cowbirds are parasitic nesters that lay their eggs in other species of birds' nests and threaten the survival of the some threatened and endangered species. (Kirkland's warbler, vireo and Willow flycatcher)*

Preventing Damage Done by Blackbirds

Most damage done by blackbirds to crops is within five miles of where they roost. Farmers can lessen damage by planting crops as far away from roosting sites as possible. It also works to provide alternate feed (lure crops) for the blackbirds to lure them away from crops. Varying planting and harvest dates also helps.

Removing roosting and nesting habitat near crops also lessens damage. For example, removing cattails in marshes reduces blackbird habitat and increases habitat for other waterfowl.

Frightening devices can work well to scare blackbirds away from crops. Propane exploders make a loud bang. These devices produce the best results when used early in the morning and in the evening. Other devices include helium-filled balloons, radio-controlled planes, various types of scarecrows, pyrotechnics and tape-recorded distress calls for birds.

Aversive agents are something that animals don't like. Thus they stay away from an area that has been treated with the aversive agent. Avicide is a chemical that results in the death of birds. A treated bait that makes some of the birds fly erratic then die scares other birds from the area.

If blackbirds roost on or near airport property, they can cause a plane to crash. For this reason, it is advisable to thin or remove roosting vegetation to prevent a wildlife hazard. In the long term this may be the most economical solution to this danger.

Alarm call means "look around — there may be danger", distress call means "I am in pain".

Economics of Damage

Blackbirds cause damage to fields of corn, sunflowers, sorghum, oats and rice. During the nesting season, blackbirds mainly feed on insects. In the fall they form large flocks. As they prepare for fall migration, they eat many ripening grain crops resulting in millions of dollars of damage each year. It is estimated that $30 million in damage is done to both sunflower and corn crops.

Total damage done to crops reaches over $100 million annually.

Legends and Folklore

Why did cowbirds become parasitic nesters?
Cowbirds followed the great herds of bison feeding on the insects that are attracted to the bison. The herds moved almost constantly. The birds did not have time to build nests and rear their own young and still keep up with the bison. Thus they started laying their eggs in the nests of other birds.

Blackbirds are also remembered because of their use in stories and nursery rhymes. Such an example is “Sing a Song of Sixpence.”

Sing a song of sixpence,
A pocket full of rye;
Four and twenty blackbirds,
Baked in a pie.

When the pie was opened,
The birds began to sing;
Wasn’t that a dainty dish,
To set before the king?

The king was in the counting house,
Counting out his money;
The queen was in the parlor,
Eating bread and honey.

The maid was in the garden,
Hanging out the clothes;
When along came a blackbird,
And snipped off her nose.

Write your own rhyme about blackbirds.

Your turn . . .

OBSERVING . . .

Bird watching is a favorite pastime for many people. Observe the birds around you. You will need binoculars and a good bird book. Identify the bird, describe when you saw it and describe the bird. For example:

Steller’s Jay - observed mid October - early morning eating sunflowers at a feeder
The bird has blue body and black head.

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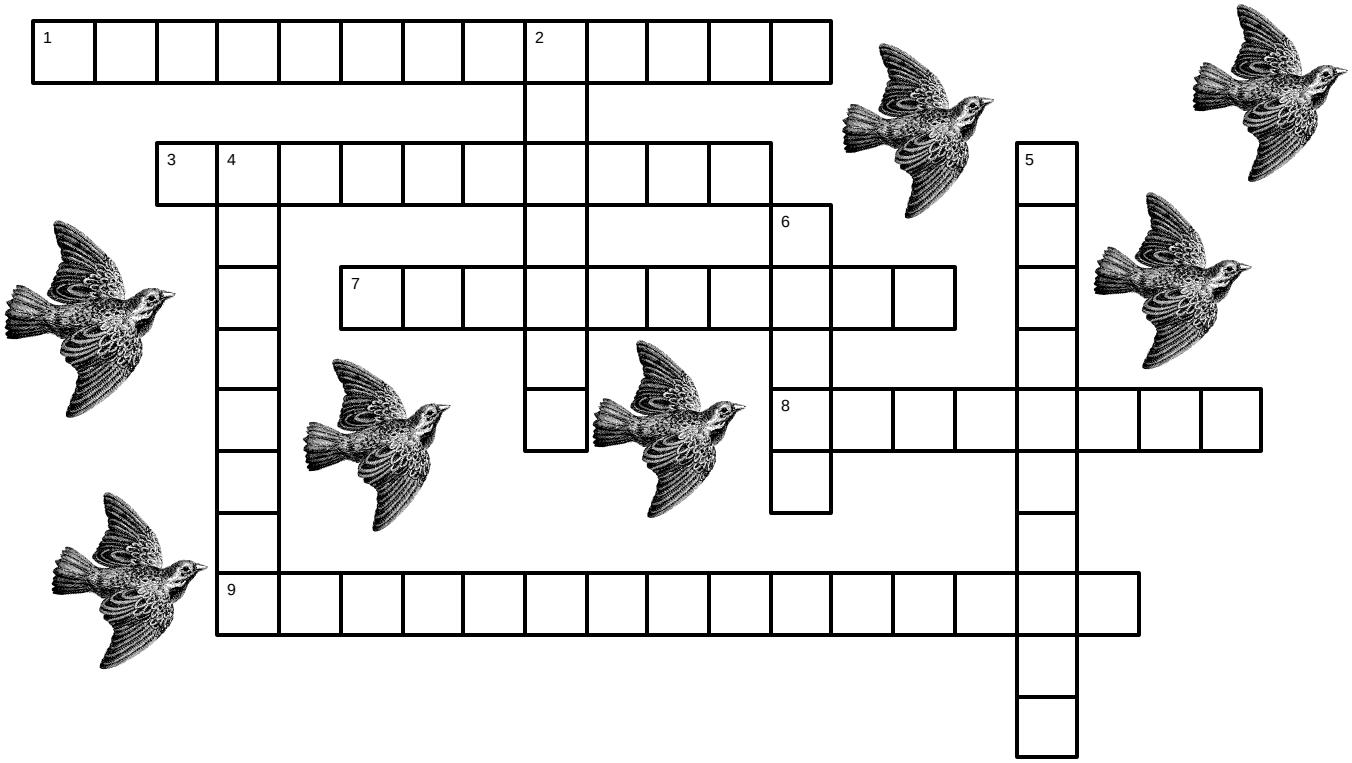
ACROSS: 1 – aversive agent, 3 – blackbirds, 7 – omnivorous, 8 – starling 9 – parasitic nester
DOWN: 2 – avicide, 4 – lure crop, 5 – sunflowers, 6 – roost

CROSSWORD REVIEW



ACROSS

1. Something birds do not like so they stay away from an area
3. Group of about 10 different birds that are mostly black in color and omnivorous
7. Animals that eat both plants and animals are . . .
8. A short-tailed, stocky blackbird that is not native to the U. S.
9. Cowbirds are this type of nesting bird and it means they lay their eggs in another bird's nest

DOWN

2. Chemical that causes birds to die
4. Planting this helps keep blackbirds away from crops
5. Crop often damaged by blackbirds
6. Where birds gather to rest at night

Additional Resources

Wildlife Activity Book and
1998 Wildlife Issue of the
Colorado Reader
Colorado Foundation for
Agriculture
P.O. Box 10
Livermore, CO 80536

Prevention and Control of
Wildlife Damage CD ROM
or Handbook
202 Natural Resource Hall
University of Nebraska
P.O. Box 83819
Lincoln, NE 68583

Jack H. Berryman Institute
for Wildlife Damage
Management
Utah State University
Logan, Utah 83431-5210

This activity sheet has been developed by USDA Wildlife Services. For more information about blackbirds contact your state's Wildlife Services office or USDA Wildlife Services at 301 734-7921.