

Red Winged Blackbirds- Messengers of Spring

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Ahem. He said, "AHEM!"

Even if someone were to miss the bright red shoulders as this bird sits among cattails or in a tree overlooking a meadow, the loud call should be music to the ears. The message is unmistakable. "Spring is here. And so am I." For folks tired of winter and eager for spring, the message is most welcome.

Red winged blackbirds are among New England's most common summer residents. In much of the US, these birds are present year-round, but in New England, they are fair-weather residents only. The males are the first to arrive in spring so they can stake out their territories. Defending territory takes a lot of effort and time, up to 25% of daylight time. The older, more brightly colored males can successfully fend off lesser competitors and attract up to fifteen females.

Female red winged blackbirds are neither red-winged nor black. In fact, they resemble large, brown-streaked sparrows. While the showy males broadcast their presence, each female secretly builds an extravagant nest, weaving bark strips and long grasses among a framework of upright reeds or shrub stems. Over this, she places wet leaves and mud. To make it warm, she adds dry grasses to the inside. The finished nest can be 4-7" across and 3-7" deep. This will be the home to one brood, but she often will raise 2 or 3 in a season. Each brood requires a fresh nest.

Like many other songbirds, red-winged blackbirds depend on insects for food in the summer. They spread out in an area and have limited social interaction with others of their kind. In winter, they gather in sometimes huge flocks with other blackbird species and starlings to feed on field seeds and left-over grains. Seeing a million birds at once must be amazing, but seeing that first single male along the Lamprey in the spring is pretty awesome, too.