

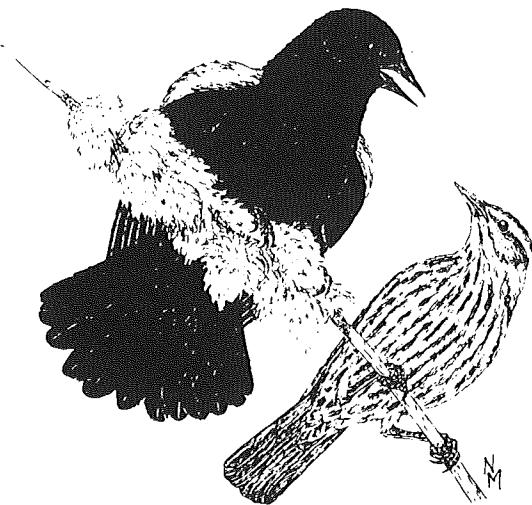
Red-winged Blackbird

Agelaius phoeniceus

The Red-winged Blackbird is one of the most recognizable and conspicuous of Vermont's breeding birds. Red-wings were located in 99% of the 179 Atlas Project priority blocks. The species was only absent from 2 priority blocks, in the wilds of Essex County. The Red-wing has apparently been common as far back as there are avian records for the state. Thompson (1853) alluded to crop damage by Red-wings, implying a Troublesomely abundant species.

The Red-winged Blackbird inhabits open areas with tall, dense, grassy vegetation and, often, scattered shrubs. Abundant food resources in areas surrounding the territory are prerequisite (Orians 1961). The Red-wing has traditionally been considered a bird of marshes and other open wetlands. In the 1930s and 1940s observers noted that Red-wings were beginning to breed in drier habitats in uplands, such as hayfields, abandoned pastureland, and fallow fields. The species still occurs in higher densities in wetlands, where its territories are smaller, ratios of females to males are higher, and breeding productivity is apparently higher than in upland situations (Case and Hewitt 1963; Robertson 1972, 1973a, and 1973b). Albers (1978) found that consistent characteristics of Red-wing territories include tall, dense vegetation, the presence of habitat edge, and trees or tall shrubs for song perches.

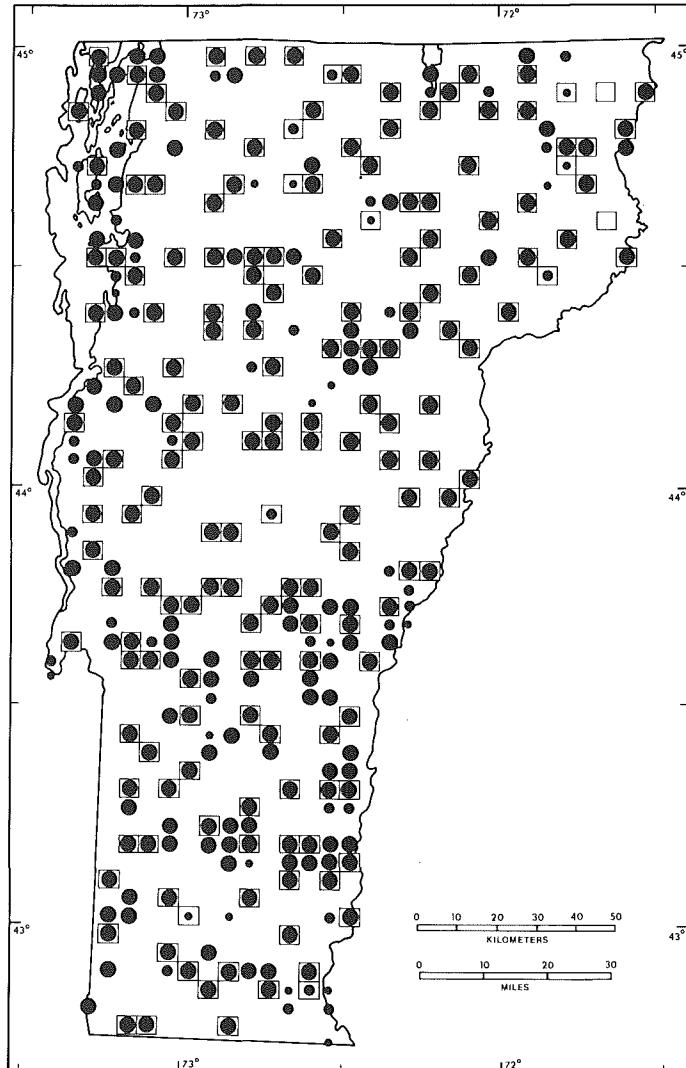
Territorial male Red-wings usually appear in Vermont during mid March. Territorial behavior is limited to the early morning and evening in late March and April; during midday, Red-wings gather in wide-ranging foraging flocks. Conspicuous territorial displays include song spread—spreading the wings and tail and exposing the vermillion lesser coverts while emitting a characteristic, harsh, trisyllabic song; song flight—a fluttering flight with the coverts exposed, often ending with a short glide that is usually accompanied by the primary song; and bill tilting—a behavior typical of the



Icterinae in which birds elevate their bills while facing each other (Nero 1956).

Females return to breeding territories in early April. Females apparently select breeding locations according to habitat quality rather than the behavior of males (Orians 1980). Nest building commences in early May. Dates for 89 nests with eggs in Vermont range from May 14 to July 3, with a peak in nesting activity indicated for the fourth week in May. The eggs are pale blue with dark scrawling usually concentrated at the large end; sets number from 1 to 6 eggs. The average number of eggs in 83 Vermont clutches was 3.9; most studies have found averages from 3.5 to 4.0 eggs (Orians 1980). Incubation normally takes 11 days. A small proportion of the females have second broods; many late clutches probably result from renesting, which is frequent (Nero 1956; Case and Hewitt 1963).

Red-winged Blackbirds are polygynous; ratios of females to males in marshes range from 1.9 to 7.6 (Orians 1980). Nests with young have been reported in Vermont from May 30 to July 2 (16 nests). Active nests provided 37% of the breeding confirmations in Vermont. The young fledge most often at 10 or 11 days. Dependent young have been reported on 11 dates from June 12 to July 28 in Vermont. Fledglings accounted for 16% of the confirmations. Females, and males when the young have fledged, are



No. of priority blocks in which recorded

TOTAL 177 (99%)

Possible breeding: 5 (3% of total)

Probable breeding: 5 (3% of total)

Confirmed breeding: 167 (94% of total)

Physiographic regions in which recorded

	no. of priority blocks	% of region's priority blocks	% of species' total priority blocks
Champlain Lowlands	31	100	17
Green Mountains	54	100	30
North Central	19	100	11
Northeast Highlands	14	87	8
East Central	19	100	11
Taconic Mountains	16	100	9
Eastern Foothills	24	100	14

often encountered with food for their young; parents with food for young accounted for 39% of the confirmations.

The Red-winged Blackbird's nest is a deep structure of sedge, grasses, cattails, and rootlets twined around supporting vegetation. The nest is built in tall, sturdy vegetation, and early nests are placed in dead emergent or woody vegetation. Red-wings also utilize a wide variety of weeds, trees, and shrubs for nest sites. The nest is strengthened with mosses and lined with fine grasses and sedges. Thirty-nine Vermont nests were placed at an average height of 38 cm (15 in.).

In late July and early August Red-wings

gather in large roosts in preparation for the autumn migration. Migration peaks in October. Most Red-wings winter in the southeastern U.S., but a few remain in Vermont for winter, especially in the Champlain Lowlands.

WALTER G. ELLISON