



## BIRDS

Status: Common, Native Summer Resident

# YELLOW-HEADED BLACKBIRD

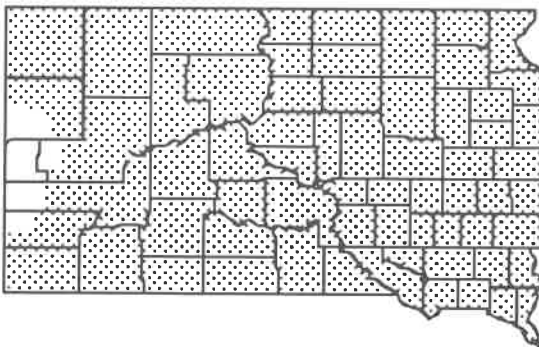
(*Xanthocephalus xanthocephalus*)

## Description

The yellow-headed blackbird genus and species name, *Xanthocephalus xanthocephalus* literally means yellow head, yellow head. *Xanthos* and *cephalus* are Latin from the Greek with *xanthos* meaning yellow and *cephalus* meaning head. The yellow-headed blackbird is about the size of a robin, 8 to 11 inches (20-28 cm) in length with a wing span of 13 to 15 inches (33-39 cm). The males are slightly larger than the females. The head, neck and upper parts of the breast are yellow in the male. The plumage is black elsewhere, with conspicuous white markings on the wings. Female birds are duller and lighter, with no white wing markings.



## Distribution



The yellow-headed blackbird is a common resident in the eastern part of the state during the summer. In the winter it migrates to the southern part of the United States. Spring arrivals typically start in mid-April and continue through the first week of May. The earliest migrants arrive in early March. Some yellow-headed blackbirds may move to the western part of the state for breeding in suitable habitat, but this species does not generally nest in the Black Hills. Fall migration starts in late September and

continues into October. A few birds may attempt to winter in the state as indicated by sightings on Christmas Bird Counts.

## **Natural History**

Yellow-headed blackbirds, like red-winged blackbirds, prefer to nest in marsh areas, but unlike red-wings, yellow-heads nest deeper in the marsh. This leads the yellow-heads to depend more on the area around the marsh for food. Their diet consists of more than aquatic insects. In fields they eat beetles, weevils, grasshoppers, dragonflies, spiders, ants, and seeds of panic grass, ragweed, smartweed, and pigweed. Occasionally, yellow-heads will come to bird feeders that are stocked with millet and sunflower seeds.

During breeding season, males set up territories and attract females through songs and displays. The females build deep, woven basket-type nests using water-soaked dead grasses. Nest sites are always among plants over standing water, with the nests sometimes placed

only a few inches above water level. In contrast to the red-wings, the male yellow-heads help with brood care. Eggs are off-white with spots of brown and gray. Usually 3 to 7 eggs are laid in a nest. The incubation period lasts 12 to 13 days. The young generally leave the nest between 9 and 12 days of age, but are unable to fly until they are about 21 days old.

## **Conservation Measures**

All migratory song birds are protected by federal law. It is illegal to harm the birds or disturb their nests. However, an exception to this law has been made for blackbirds. Because large flocks of these birds sometimes disturb seed crops, farmers have special permission to kill these species if they are disturbing their crops. Non-lethal methods of discouraging blackbirds from cropland are preferred. Some of these control methods include using loud noise-making machines and placing scarecrow-type structures in the fields.

## **References**

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