



## BIRDS

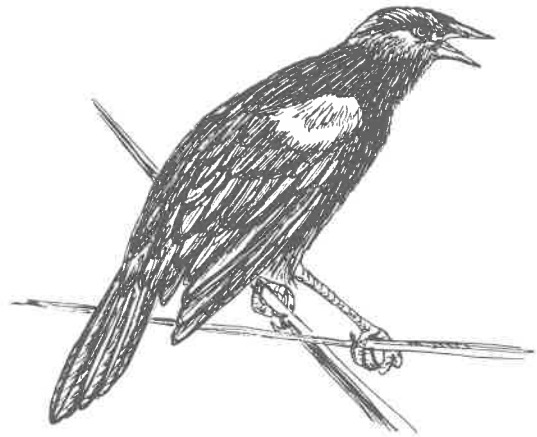
Status: Common, Native Summer Resident

# RED-WINGED BLACKBIRD

(*Agelaius phoeniceus*)

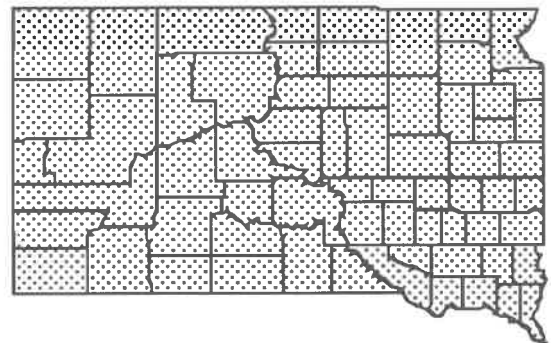
## Description

The genus name of the red-winged blackbird, *Agelaius*, is Latin from the Greek word, *agelaios*, meaning belonging to a flock. The species name, *phoeniceus*, is Latin for deep red. The red-winged blackbird is smaller than a robin, about 7 to 9 inches (17-24 cm) in length with a wingspan of 12 to 14 inches (30- 37 cm). The adult male bird is black with a distinctive red patch located on the shoulder of the wing. Female and young birds are brown above and heavily streaked dusky brown below. Novice bird watchers often mistake the females for large sparrows because of this streaky plumage. However, the blackbird's larger and more elongated bill is distinctively different from the stubby, triangular bills of sparrows and finches.



## Distribution

Red-winged blackbirds are found throughout the state during the summer. In mid-March the birds begin arriving in the state, the males slightly in advance of the females. They remain here in large numbers until the fall migration, which usually starts in mid-October and extends through mid-November. In the winter red-wings generally migrate south, although some birds do attempt to winter in the state.



More remain in the eastern part of the state during the winter, few are found at that time in western South Dakota.

Interestingly, an unusually high number has been seen in the Madison area during the annual Christmas Bird Count.

## Natural History

The red-winged blackbird is one of the most commonly found songbirds in North America. They are generally found along the edges of wetlands, but they will frequent road sides, feed lots, and feeders that are stocked with corn and millet seeds.

During the mating season, male birds set up territories and attract females by singing and displaying their red wing patches. The males are generally *polygynous*, usually with two mates. The nest is a loosely woven cup of dried cattail leaves attached to plants by plant fibers. The birds line the nest with fine grasses. Females lay 2 to 7 pale bluish-green eggs with darkish spots on the larger end. Incubation is 10 to 12 days. The young birds remain in the nest 10 to

11 days, but still are dependent on their parents for some time afterwards.

The diet of the red-wings is a mixture of seeds and fruit (73%) and insects (27%). Food items include mayflies, caddisflies, caterpillars, moths, grasshoppers, snails, weed seeds, grain, and various berries.

## 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.

## Glossary

**Polygynous** - refers to males that mate with more than one female.

## References

- Bull, John and John Farrand Jr., 1977, *The Audubon Society Field Guide to North American Birds Eastern Region*, Alfred K. Knopf: New York.
- Johnsgard, Paul A., 1979, *Birds of the Great Plains Breeding Species and Their Distribution*, University of Nebraska Press: Lincoln and London.
- SDOU, 1991, *The Birds of South Dakota*, NSU Press: Aberdeen, SD 57401.
- Terres, John K., 1980, *The Audubon Society Encyclopedia of North American Birds*, Alfred A. Knopf: New York.

### Written by:

John Neff, Pierre, SD 57501. ©1997.

### Illustrated by:

Kathy Colavitti, independent artist, Green Bay, WI.

### Reviewed by:

Dan Tallman, Northern State University, Aberdeen, SD 57401.

Publication of the *Red-winged Blackbird* fact sheet was funded by the South Dakota Department of Game, Fish and Parks, Division of Wildlife, Pierre, SD.