

## The Birds Are Back!

### A closer look at the common Red-winged Blackbird.

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The days are long, the ice is melting, and our feathery friends are starting to return from their wintering grounds. One of the earliest arrivals is the Red-winged Blackbird, which starts to appear in Ontario in February, returning from the United States or farther south. Millions of birds fly north to breeding grounds across Canada, even reaching large portions of the Yukon and Northwest Territories. These birds are commonly seen and heard throughout Central Ontario from March onward. Check out a cool animation of the Red-winged Blackbird's movements on [eBird's website here](#). Red-winged Blackbirds are often seen traveling in flocks with a slightly larger bird, the Common Grackle. These two species often breed in the same marshes (Wiens, 1965).



In spring, the male Red-winged Blackbird is easily recognizable with a solid black body, and bright shoulder patches (known as "epaulets") that are red and orange. They love attention, and can often be seen calling out while perched on a branch or tall cattail. Adult females arrive at their breeding grounds about 5 to 10 days later, giving the males enough time to establish a territory (Wiens, 1965). These birds are more subtle in both colouring and behaviour. The female Red-winged Blackbird's feathers are streaked with brown and white, and may have a faint



red or rust-coloured shoulder patch. See if you can spot them weaving in and out of marsh vegetation!

Upon arrival to their respective marshes or upland areas, Red-winged Blackbirds build a cup-shaped nest within clusters of cattails or shrubs. Watch [this cool video](#) to see Red-winged Blackbird parenting in action in a typical cattail nest. Both parents will help feed their young a range of insects and spiders. The adult diet contains more seeds, grains, and berries. The males will aggressively defend their territory against other birds.

### Breeding Displays

Many male birds perform dances, calls, or peculiar movements in the hopes of attracting a lady bird. In the spring the air is filled with different melodic (or somewhat screechy) sounds. If you hang around outside wetlands you may notice the male Red-winged Blackbird's conspicuous display. From a prominent perch, he will hold his wings outward, fluff up his bright red wing patches, and belt out a loud gurgling call - how attractive! [Click here](#) to see a video of this display. Red-winged Blackbirds are **polygynous** - meaning that one male breeds with multiple female partners. They often have up to 15 partners in one season!

While watching courtship displays can be fun for birders, it is important to remember to keep your distance. Interrupting a displaying bird could scare away potential partners, reducing their potential to have offspring. Give breeding birds some space, and keep your binoculars ready.

## Look out for these other early migrants in the Land Between:

- The **Common Loon** is starting to return to Ontario lakes. You can help monitor breeding rates of loons in a lake near you by volunteering with Birds Canada. Find out more on their [Citizen Science page here](#).
- Many birds of prey arrive in March including **Bald Eagles**, **Northern Goshawks**, **Sharp-shinned Hawks**, and **Turkey Vultures**.
- The **Great Blue Heron** starts arriving in the Land Between by the end of March.
- Many waterfowl like the **Green-winged Teal**, **Ring-necked Duck**, and **Wood Duck** come back to our wetlands in April. Ducks Unlimited Canada has some [good resources](#) to help you identify the waterfowl around you.
- The **American Woodcock** has also started to arrive. Read our [blog post](#) to learn about this cool bird.



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