FRIENDS of Sax-ZimBog

BOGDIVERSITY THURSDAY

—from Head Naturalist Clinton

Red-winged Blackbird

POST #67—April 6, 2023

Believe it or not, spring is on its way! While there might be 30 inches of snow on the ground (at least!), temperatures are on their way up, which means birds are on their way. One of the first breeding bird species that migrates back to the region is our species of interest to today: Red-winged Blackbird!

A ubiquitous and incredibly common bird of wetlands, parks, prairies, and waterways across the US, Red-winged Blackbirds are really an interesting species that doesn't get enough credit. This could be said about any number of dark colored blackbirds. Blackbirds, as a whole, are part of a very diverse family Icteridae. This family includes orioles, blackbirds, cowbirds, meadowlarks, and oropendolas. These species vary in size and color, from bright and gaudy orioles to the mostly cryptic and crow-sized oropendolas. The life histories of these species are quite variable, with some species being obligate nest parasites, others building colonies of hanging nests in forests, and still others preferring prairies.

Red-winged Blackbirds are maybe one of the more frustrating birds to ID for new birders. Female Red-winged Blackbirds are very different than males and look a little like sparrows and finches, with the dark streaking and brown colors. Male Red-winged Blackbirds also get confused with other, similar looking blackbirds (especially Tri-colored Blackbird) as they don't always show their red shoulder patches. However, their constant vocalizations are common place and most readers will recognize them by call.

The biology of Red-winged Blackbirds is really fascinating. For example, Red-winged Blackbirds are a polygynous species. This means one male has a single territory, in which he attracts, mates with, and defends multiple females. The one male will defend his territory aggressively from other blackbirds, but even birds as large as herons and Sandhill Cranes! Typically, Red-winged Blackbirds choose to nest in cattail marshes, closer to shore, but often over water. This habitat could be as small as a ditch or pond in a housing development or a cattail marsh in the prairies of the western US. Female Red-winged Blackbirds build a tall, cup nest that binds together strong stems of bulrushes, cattails, or shrubs. Females will lay around 3-4 beautiful blueish and black speckled eggs.

As noted at the start, Red-winged Blackbirds are one of the earliest arriving breeding species to northern Minnesota. After Ring-billed Gulls and Trumpeter Swans, Red-winged Blackbirds typically arrive to sometimes frozen marshes around the 2nd-3rd week of March (and even if this year seems off, the first Red-

winged Blackbirds have already arrived to the Bog!). If you like seeing spectacles of migration, early spring and fall in the southern parts of Minnesota often hold enormous flocks of these birds, as they are preparing to continue their migrations south into Texas and beyond. These flocks roost in the evenings and can showcase flights as impressive as Snow Geese or Sandhill Cranes!

More information included in the photos below!

(Photos below by Sparky Stensaas)

The red and yellow shoulder patches of Red-winged Blackbirds are called epaulets! The feathers around these patches are mobile and can hide or display any amount of red or yellow on their shoulders.

Female Red-winged Blackbirds are cryptic, hiding their nests amongst cattails. This species can be very hard to ID, especially considering females!

Territories of Red-winged Blackbirds often include prominent perches for males to broadcast calls and display to females.

If you have trouble IDing female Red-winged Blackbirds from sparrows or finches, take a look at their bills! Blackbirds have very pointy bills, that are especially narrow towards the tip.

Red-winged Blackbirds don't always show their red shoulder patches! Other field marks, like call, foraging behavior, and habitat type might come in handy when IDing this species over other blackbirds.