

Rusty Blackbird

Euphagus carolinus

Birds of the blackbird family (*Icteridae*) are characterized by strong, direct flight and pointed bills. Although the name "blackbird" implies a dark appearance, members of this diverse family vary in plumage from iridescent black to yellow and brilliant orange. Rusty Blackbirds are so named for the rusty edging on their dark plumage.

Rusty Blackbirds are residents of wet boreal-coniferous forests, bogs and riparian habitats. These 23cm blackbirds have thin, slightly decurved bills, long, club-shaped tails and a dark eye-patch. Although their rusty feather tips are distinctive, many variations in plumage exist within this species. In fall, adult and immature birds display bright-yellow eyes and tertial feathers and wing coverts edged in rust. By spring, however, fall males lose their rusty feather tips, producing a dark, breeding plumage with a faint eyebrow. Fall females are buffy underneath, with a gray rump and characteristic broad, buffy eyebrow.

The song of the Rusty Blackbird is a soft gurgling or rustling alternating with a highly whistled and squeaky "ktr-tee." During flight, the call note is a harsh "tyuk."

Built by the female, the nests are placed in conifers or shrubs, usually near or over water. Bulky and cup-shaped, the nests are constructed of mosses, twigs, lichen, grasses and duff and lined with fine grasses. Clutch size varies from 4-5, 26mm, pale blue-green eggs, marked in brown and gray. The female alone incubates the clutch for 14 days and the young birds fledge in another 11-13 days. Both parents assist in rearing the young.

As their Latin name implies (*Euphagus* means "good eater"), Rusty Blackbirds are foraging generalists, consuming insects, spiders, seeds, crustaceans, snails, salamanders, fish and occasionally even fruits. As ground gleaners, they forage by picking prey and food from the ground and vegetation as they walk along the forest floor.

Rusty Blackbirds winter in loose flocks in North America in the southern and southeastern United States. During the breeding season, they range throughout most of mainland Alaska and Canada.