



Winter female/credit ©Tom Benson



Winter male/credit ©Laura Meyers



Summer female/credit ©Christian Artuso



Summer male/credit ©Daniel W. Clark

# Rusty Blackbird

## *International Rusty Blackbird Working Group*

### The Background

Known for its vivid rust-tipped fall and winter plumage as well as its squeaky-hinge song, the Rusty Blackbird breeds deep within the boreal forests of northern North America and winters in the wooded wetlands of the southeastern United States. Difficult to study due to the inaccessibility of these remote, forested habitats, Rusty Blackbirds were frequently overlooked by scientists and birders until the mid-1990s.

Two decades ago, Rusty Blackbirds, or “Rusties,” earned the unfortunate distinction of being one of the most steeply declining landbirds in North America, losing 85-95% of their population in just 40 years. Spurred by this alarming crash, scientists strive to understand Rusty Blackbird ecology in order to conserve this vulnerable species.

### The Habitat

Rusty Blackbirds are associated with shallow water throughout their life cycle. In winter, they prefer flooded woods, swamps and marshes. They can also be found in open pastures, agricultural areas, and pecan orchards. In the summer, they breed in the boreal forest wetlands of northern North America, preferring wetland mosaics with patches of short conifers. During migration, this species continues to associate with shallow water; look for Rusties in flooded forests, wet fields, at the edges of ponds and lakes, or even in roadside ditches or on neighborhood lawns.



Rusty Blackbirds prefer shallow, flooded habitat in winter, such as this Louisiana swamp/credit Emma DeLeon.



### Identification

- Medium-sized blackbird, smaller than a Common Grackle
- Both sexes have bright yellow eyes
- Rust-tipped feathers on males and females in fall and winter
- Over spring migration, namesake rusty plumage fades
- By summer, males are a glossy black and females a charcoal gray



Male Rusty Blackbird, summer plumage/  
credit ©Christian Artuso



Male Brewer's Blackbird/credit Bill Bouton



Common Grackle/credit Ken Hansen



Boreal forest wetland breeding habitat/credit Shannon Buckley Luepold

### Look-Alikes

**Brewer's Blackbird:** overlaps only in southern and western portion of range.

- Very difficult to differentiate males in summer; male Brewer's are an "inkier," more iridescent black
- Plumage of female Brewer's drab brown, eyes usually dark

### Common Grackle

- Grackles are longer overall and bills are thicker than Rusties'
- Male Grackles have shiny purple-blue feathers on head
- Female Grackles also have iridescent head plumage but are generally browner than female Rusties
- Both sexes have long, graduated tails

### Other potential look-alike species:

Red-winged Blackbird, Brown-headed Cowbird, European Starling

### Rusty Blackbird Spring Migration Blitz

Over the last two decades, scientists have made huge strides in understanding Rusty Blackbirds on their breeding and wintering grounds. However, we still know surprisingly little about Rusty Blackbird migration. In 2014, the International Rusty Blackbird Working Group launched a three-year Rusty Blackbird Spring Migration Blitz to learn more about northward migration.

The Rusty Blackbird Spring Migration Blitz has four key objectives:

- Determine important migratory stopover sites for Rusty Blackbirds;
- Assess the consistency of habitat use and migratory timing;
- Use the Blitz process to strengthen relationships between partners in order to promote Rusty Blackbird conservation;
- Engage the birding community and create increased awareness of Rusty Blackbirds and their conservation

The Blitz challenges birders to seek the elusive Rusty Blackbird throughout its migratory range, from the southeastern United States, through the Midwest and along the East Coast, and up into Canada and Alaska. The Spring Migration Blitz runs from **1 March through 15 June** from 2014 to 2016; visit our website to see when you might expect to see Rusties passing through your region. To participate, bird as you normally do, focusing on wet habitat, and report your data to eBird using the "Rusty Blackbird Spring Migration Blitz" protocol. Even if you don't find Rusties, it's important for us to know when and where you looked, so please report your searches within Rusty Blackbird habitat under the special Blitz protocol regardless of whether you observed this species.

### How You Can Help

- Enter your Rusty Blackbird sighting into eBird! If you're confident you've seen a Rusty, even if you're not within the Blitz window, please report your observation to [www.eBird.org](http://www.eBird.org). Every sighting counts!
- Not sure of your Rusty Blackbird ID skills? Tell a birder friend about the Blitz, or ask your local ornithology group or Audubon chapter to participate in the Blitz. Help to spread the word about our data collection effort!

### Rusty Blackbird Spring Migration Blitz International Partners



eBird



The Cornell Lab of Ornithology



For more information, please visit [rustyblackbird.org](http://rustyblackbird.org) and <http://rustyblackbird.org/outreach/migration-blitz/>