

Bobolink *Dolichonyx oryzivorus*



Folk Name: Ricebird, May Bird, Reed Bird, Butter Bird, Cottontail, Ortolan

Status: Migrant

Abundance: Uncommon to Fairly Common

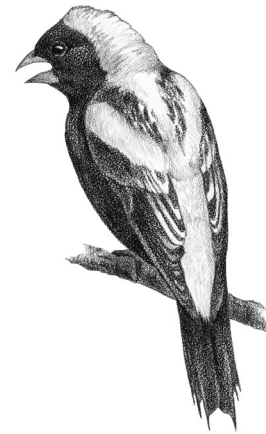
Habitat: Extensive fields

The male Bobolink is a distinctive, 7-inch-long songbird of open meadows and grassy fields. During the spring, no other member of the blackbird family can be confused with this lovely bird. He is easily recognized by his black face and underside, his creamy buff-colored nape, white back (scapulars), and bright white rump. In the fall, the post-breeding males look quite different, almost like a large sparrow; their coloring more similar to the plain, buffy-brown streaked females and young birds. Bobolinks have pointed tail feathers in all plumages.

Male Bobolinks are known to sing a cascade of jumbled musical notes as they fly about fields searching for insects, clover seed, and ripening oats in the spring. These spring migrants have been described as “travelling minstrels,” and their song has been variously described as a “bubbling,” “tinkling,” or a “jangling” warble which sounds to some “like sparkling champagne.” A.C. Webb remarked: “The great length of their song, the immense number of short and variable notes, and the rapidity with which they are poured forth, all unite to form a general result to which no parallel is found in the performance of our other songbirds.” In addition to their song, Bobolinks have a distinctive flight call that has been described as sounding like *pink*, *zwick*, *bwink*, or perhaps, simply just “ink.”

Bobolinks are strictly migrants in the Carolina Piedmont; appearing here only during the spring and fall. Flocks of males arrive in mid-April, usually a week in advance of the females, and almost all Bobolinks have departed this region by mid-May. Our extreme spring dates are 6 April and 29 May. They return in late August and depart by mid-October. Our extreme fall dates are 1 August and 28 October. We have no reports in this part of the Piedmont from November through March or during the months of June and July. A “noteworthy” count of over 1,500 birds was tallied in Iredell County on May 6, 1972. However, most flocks found in this region number between 20 and 200 birds.

Bobolinks nest primarily in our northern states and Canada. They have been sporadically found during breeding season in meadows in some North Carolina mountain counties including: Transylvania, Buncombe, Ashe, Alleghany, Haywood, Henderson, Watauga, and Wilkes. Confirmation of breeding in the state, however, has been limited. Most Bobolinks spend the winter in



J F M A M J J A S O N D

South America.

In the early 1880s in Chester County, Leverett Loomis observed the Bobolink to be an “abundant” bird during the spring in ripening oat-fields. In the fall, he designated it as “common” in overgrown grain-fields filled with ragweed and in the bottomlands around Chester. On August 22, 1887, Loomis reported finding the largest flock of Ricebirds “ever witnessed here in southward migration” 2 days after a major storm had made landfall along the coast.

During the nineteenth century, most Carolinians knew the Bobolink by a different common name: the “Ricebird.” On September 19, 1890, *The Charlotte Democrat* carried this short piece mocking the Pennsylvania state legislature about a recent law they had passed regarding the Bobolink. The piece describes a few of the various common names given this bird which, at the time, was considered to be quite a tasty treat for one’s dinner table:

Reed birds on a skewer will not be a popular delicacy among Pennsylvania gourmets this season if due regard is had for the game law of that State. At the last session of the Legislature a law was passed forbidding the killing of bobolinks or having the bird aforesaid in one’s possession. It has just come to the knowledge of the law makers that the bobolink, the reed bird, the rice bird, and the butter bird are all one and the same bird. ...The male bobolink dons a showy garb of black, white, and yellow feathers in the springtime, and is known as the bobolink, but in early fall he wears a more sober livery, and then he is known as the reed bird or butter bird. Later in the autumn he descends on the rice fields of the South, and he is known as the rice bird. It would be well for the Pennsylvania legislature to study up on ornithology before they tackle the game laws again.

During this period, the Ricebird was regular fare at many restaurants. In 1905, Charlotte's Gem Restaurant advertised: "RICE BIRDS! OYSTERS! SHRIMPS! Always in the lead. The best meals. The best service in Charlotte. Everybody comes to 'The Gem.'"

In 1917, A.C. Webb shared this explanation of the local name of the Bobolink in fall:

About the first of September, old and young collect in flocks and start southward to spend the winter in Cuba or other islands of the West Indies. They are not commonly called Bobolinks now. They have not only changed their feathers, but their name and food, also. They are now called "Ricebirds," and, instead of living on insects as they did in spring and summer, they now subsist mainly on seeds. The millet fields of Kentucky and Tennessee have a special attraction for them, and in the Carolinas the fields of rice supply them with an abundance of food. They become fat and lazy and often stay for several days near the same place. Their only note now is a chirp. We can hardly believe them to be the songbirds we saw going north in the spring, so different in appearance and habits have they become.

During the late nineteenth century and very early twentieth century, "Ricebirds" were considered to be serious pests that wreaked havoc on the rice industry each fall in the Coastal Plain of both Carolinas. Plantation owners hired "Bird Minders" to protect their fields from them. Up to 10% of their crop or five bushels per acre

were estimated lost annually to these ravenous birds. "Bird Minders" used guns and other scare tactics in their attempts to drive away these fall Bobolink flocks. By the 1930s, rice plantations had largely become a relic of the past in both Carolinas and migrating Bobolink flocks had to rely on other seeds and grain like those of our native marsh grasses.

Regrettably, today the Bobolink has declined throughout its breeding range. Habitat loss, habitat degradation, disturbance from cows, and earlier hay cutting have all contributed to its decline. This species is now listed on the Yellow Watch List of birds of the continental United States. It is a species with both "troubling" population declines and "high threats." It is in need of conservation action.



Male Bobolink. (Jim Guyton)