

Orchard Oriole *Icterus spurius*



Folk Name: English Mockingbird

Status: Breeder

Abundance: Uncommon to Fairly Common

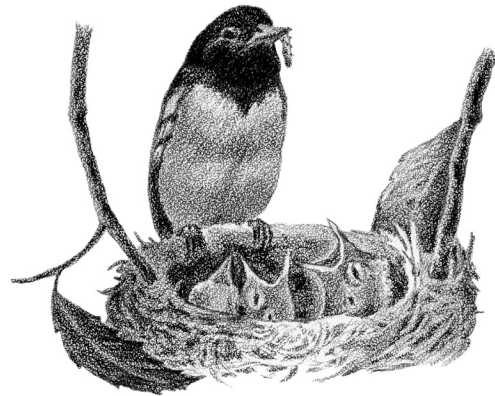
Habitat: Scattered hardwoods in open country, farmyards, woodland edge

The Orchard Oriole is a bright chestnut-orange-and-black songbird of our open fields, orchards, farms, golf courses, and woodland edges. It is our smallest Icterid, only 7 ¼ inches long, just a quarter-inch shy of the average size of a Yellow-breasted Chat. Females and young males are yellow green. Like other orioles, this bird is primarily an insect eater, although they will also often eat ripe fruit and berries. The fruit of the mulberry tree (*Morus* spp.) is a particular favorite here in the Carolinas. Occasionally, they are known to take nectar and spread pollen. The famous ornithologist William Brewster observed Orchard Orioles in South Carolina hover like hummingbirds at trumpet creeper flowers “sipping honey.”

Orchard Orioles are neotropical migrants that return to the Carolina Piedmont each spring from their wintering grounds in the Caribbean, Mexico, and Central America.



First-spring male Orchard Oriole (Bill Archer). Adult male Orchard Oriole (Chris Talkington).



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

Our earliest arrival date in the region is 12 April, and usually all are gone by the end of August. A few may be found lingering into September, and our extreme departure date on file is 6 October. We have no records of this bird in the region from November through March. Our peak count is a tally of 38 birds counted on the Spring Bird Count in Stanly in 1963.

The earliest evidence of this species in the region is a specimen of Orchard Oriole collected in Rossville, Chester County, SC, on May 22, 1880, and later deposited in the ornithological collection housed at Harvard University. This specimen was in all likelihood collected by Leverett Loomis, but the name of the collector is no longer attached to the label. Loomis had reported the Orchard Oriole as a “very common” summer resident at the time.

In the early 1900s, the Orchard Oriole was recognized as one of man’s important “bird allies” in the war against the dreaded boll weevil which was infesting cotton fields throughout the south. An announcement in a *Bulletin* of the Biological Survey noted: “The orioles are the greatest destroyers of weevils in the summer, and their near relatives, the blackbirds, meadow larks, in winter.” Many newspapers urged the adoption of additional legal protections for orioles and other insectivorous birds.

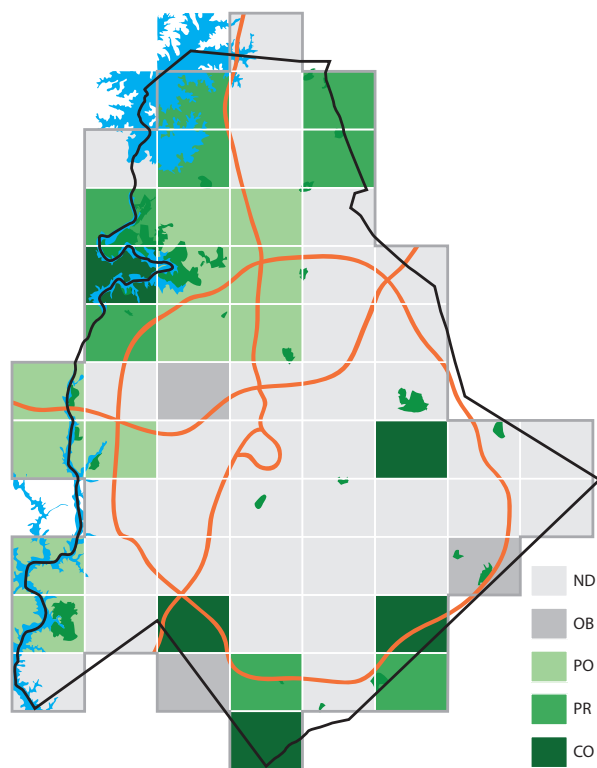
In May 1928, Charlotte’s William McIlwaine wrote:

In Rankin’s Woods, down by the creek, I saw an exquisite scarlet tanager and an adult orchard oriole, both males. Also there were immature orioles. Many of our brilliantly plumaged birds do not get their splendid coats until the second year. If you hear a loud song, ten or twelve notes, over and over repeated, and up in the top of a high thick tree, and if you catch a glimpse of him you find that it is a greenish yellow with black face and throat—that is

an immature orchard oriole. (We admit, somewhat grudgingly, that he does not always confine himself to high, thick tree; but we have gotten more than one neckache from trying to locate him.)

The Orchard Oriole generally nests from May through June throughout the Piedmont of both Carolinas. Both adults help build the hanging nest. They are known to occasionally raise two broods, and they construct a second nest for the second attempt. In the summer of 1932, three pairs of Orchard Orioles were observed nesting in Oakwood Cemetery in Statesville, raising two broods each. In March 1949, Mrs. Olin Griffith of Fort Mill, York County, SC, wrote: "I find each different species has its own favorite nook. The Orchard Oriole swings her nest from a high bough in [our] persimmon tree."

Urban sprawl and fragmentation have eliminated much of the breeding habitat of the Orchard Oriole from parts of the Carolinas including the Charlotte area. The breeding status of this bird in Mecklenburg County changed from a "plentiful" breeder in the 1940s to a "somewhat local" breeder today. Breeding Bird Atlas volunteers found this bird in only 13 of 62 blocks surveyed.



Mecklenburg County Breeding Bird Atlas:
Somewhat Local (PR/8, CO/5)