

Rusty Blackbird *Euphagus carolinus*



Folk Name: Rusty Grackle

Status: Winter Visitor

Abundance: Uncommon

Habitat: Damp woods, wet thickets, forage in croplands

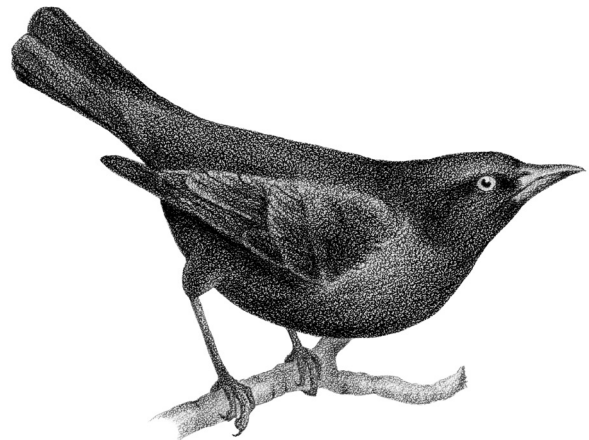
The breeding male Rusty Blackbird is glossy black with a purplish-blue head. The breeding female appears more charcoal gray and brown than black. In non-breeding (basic) plumage both acquire their “rusty” appearance from the extensive brown-rust tips of their fresh fall feathers. By the following spring, these rusty feather tips have completely worn off, leaving the glossy-black and charcoal gray-brown colors ready for breeding season. Adults show a distinct dull yellow iris in all plumages. The Rusty Blackbird averages 9 inches in length, just a quarter-inch larger than the abundant Red-winged Blackbird.

The Rusty Blackbird can be considered the “poster child” for the conservation of North America’s wooded wetlands. This unique blackbird nests in spruce trees in wet marshes and bogs throughout Canada’s boreal forest and our northeastern states. It winters in wooded wetlands throughout the central and southeastern states. It was once a common spring and fall migrant and winter resident in the wet forests and bottomlands of both Carolinas. Today, its population numbers have declined dramatically across the continent.

According to the International Rusty Blackbird Working Group: “Rusty Blackbirds have experienced one of the most significant declines ever documented among North American birds in recent times.” These scientists



Rusty Blackbird at Lower McAlpine Creek Greenway on January 17, 2004. (Jarrett Wyant)



estimate that 85–95% of the breeding population has been lost and that “loss of wooded wetlands in southeastern wintering grounds is a likely contributor as over 80% of this habitat has been converted to agriculture and other land uses. Other possible factors on the wintering grounds includes increased competition for food with other blackbird species.”

Scientists are now engaged in a variety of research projects in response to this tragedy. One, the national “Rusty Blackbird Blitz,” was created to collect data on the locations of wintering “Rusties” from 2009 to 2011 and spring Rusties from 2014 to 2016. Citizen scientists joined together to document numbers of this declining bird during the months of January and February (winter) and then later from March through June (spring). Many birders in the Carolinas participated and submitted data to this project. MCPRD staff participated and submitted several reports including one flock of almost 400 Rusty Blackbirds located at the McDowell Nature Preserve in Charlotte on February 4, 2010.

Most Rusty Blackbirds arrive in the Carolina Piedmont in late October and depart by April. In the Central Carolinas, our earliest arrival date on file is 7 October, and our latest departure date is 7 May. We have no acceptable records from the rest of May or from June through September. Most of our records come from the months of December, January, and February, when it is an irregular visitor here. Flocks have generally ranged from as few as 2 to as many as 300 birds. Occasionally, flocks in the region have been estimated at between 300 and 800 birds. One astounding count of 170,000 was estimated on the Charlotte Christmas Bird Count in 1971 when a mixed flock of more than one million blackbirds was discovered. Unfortunately, this number was later questioned as a possible misidentification. Another high count of 50,000

Rusty Blackbirds was estimated on the Chester CBC in 1977. Very respectable counts of over 900 birds were tallied on the Gastonia CBC in 2012, and over 1,300 birds were tallied on the Pee Dee NWR count in 2015.

Leverett Loomis reported the Rusty Blackbird as “rather common” in winter in Chester County in the late 1870s. Charlie Sellers was the first to formally report a Rusty Blackbird in Mecklenburg County. He observed a flock of 17 on April 4, 1939, and saw his last Rusty of the season on 25 April that year. In the winter of 1960–1961, Charlotte’s Joe Norwood reported “Rusty Blackbirds, never too common here, have shown up more than usual this winter. Mrs. Cobey has seen several large flocks.”

Since the turn of the twenty-first century, the Rusty Blackbird has been reported annually at a variety of locations throughout our region. However, overall numbers are down, and the frequency of reports appears down as well. Most are found feeding on the ground in

swampy woods (especially remnant mafic depressions), muddy pastures or mudflats (especially near trees), and on cattle farms. Small numbers can also be found in residential neighborhoods, at bird feeders, and near grapevines and ornamental and native holly bushes. At night, they roost in the treetops of wet woods. Robert Williams of Hickory provided a typical report from the twenty-first century on March 5, 2014: “A large noisy flock of approx. 95 birds was seen around 10:00 this morning at Murray’s Mill wetlands [Catawba, NC]... They alternated between ground feeding and roosting in the adjacent trees making their gurgling sound. This is the largest flock I’ve seen in years. The information has been submitted to the Rusty Blackbird Spring Migration Blitz via eBird.”

The Rusty Blackbird has been placed on the state Watch List in North Carolina because of the continued loss of its wintering habitat in the state.