

Montana Outdoors PORTRAIT

Yellow-headed Blackbird

(*Xanthocephalos xanthocephalos*)

By Ellen Horowitz

Few birds have names descriptive of their appearance, but the yellow-headed blackbird is one that wears its name boldly. Acquaintance with yellowheads, as they are commonly called, provides a visual treat, an audio surprise, and a springtime introduction to the world of marshes.

Range: Yellow-headed blackbirds breed throughout western North America, from the Midwest to the West Coast and from Canada to the southwestern states. In winter, these neotropical migrants travel as far south as southern Mexico. Found across Montana from April to November, yellowheads are easy to see and hear during their breeding season in May and June.

Look and Listen: Its bright yellow head, neck, and chest, jet-black body, and bright white wing patches make the flamboyant, robin-size male yellowhead unmistakable. The smaller and much less conspicuous female has a dull yellow face, throat, and breast, and a brown body. The bird's scientific name, *Xanthocephalos*, is Greek for "yellow head."

Unlike the melodic song of meadowlarks, another member of the Icterid family to which blackbirds belong, the yellowhead's song resembles a metallic buzz. This resonant sound adds to an unusual wetlands orchestra. It complements the rattling, whirring, croaking, booming, and gurgling notes and voices of other, more secretive avian marsh

musicians, such as the Virginia rail and American bittern.

Ecology: "Yellow-headed blackbirds rely on deeper, permanent wetlands with tall emergent vegetation," says Dan Casey, Northern Rockies coordinator for the American Bird Conservancy. Casey notes that waterfowl management activities, which often target these lake-like marshes, indirectly benefit the nesting territories of yellowheads, one of the few songbirds using this habitat type.

Yellow-headed blackbirds, which are larger than their red-winged cousins, dominate in areas where both species live. Redwing blackbirds appear early in spring. They make use of all areas of the marsh until their larger cousins arrive. Then the yellowheads take over the prime real estate, chasing the redwings to less desirable areas where the water is shallower and vegetation shorter.

Nesting: Yellow-headed blackbirds establish colonies where dense cattails and bulrushes grow in 2 to 4 feet of water and where insect life is rich. Some colonies contain as many as 25 to 30 nests within a 15-square-foot area. Each adult male stakes his claim within the larger framework of the colony. A polygynous breeder, he mates with several females who nest within his territory.

The female weaves wet grass leaves around cattails and other tall aquatic plants to form a nest. As the basket-like structure dries, it pulls the supports taut. The nest hangs 10 to 30 inches above the deep water, where it and its occupants stay safe from prowling skunks, raccoons, and foxes. The tall,



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thick vegetation provides extra security by hiding the nest from northern harriers and other raptors.

Foraging: During the breeding season, yellow-headed blackbirds eat primarily insects and spiders. The birds glean these foods from the ground or plants, or they "hawk" (snatch with their mouth) them from the air. Seeds, including grain, form a major portion of the birds' diet during the rest of the year. Like all Icterids, the yellowhead has a strong, straight, pointed bill that it opens and closes with powerful jaw muscles. After inserting its bill into the ground or matted vegetation, the yellowhead forces the substrate apart to form a cavity. The behavior, known as "gaping," provides access to foods not easily reached by other animals.

During winter and the spring and fall migrations, yellow-headed blackbirds feed in freshly plowed lands, cultivated fields, and pastures. Although they cause some damage to agricultural crops by pulling up seedlings and eating grain, the harm is more than offset by the benefits these birds provide by eating insects and weed seeds. ■

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