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Yellow-headed Blackbirds Seek Local Marshes

By Joan Feather

Bird identification is easiest when the common name of the bird matches its most obvious physical features. The yellow-headed blackbird (scientific name *Xanthocéphalus xanthocéphalus*) is a good example.

No other North American bird has a yellow head and black body. The male shows white patches on the wing when it is perched or flying. This combination of gold, black and white is distinctive and conspicuous. And these birds are relatively large, about robin-size.

While the male is unmistakable, the female could be overlooked in a large flock of blackbirds. It is slightly smaller than the male, greyish brown overall, but with a yellow chin and throat and white streaking on the lower breast.

Yellow-headed blackbirds arrive in late April and early May from their winter homes in the southwestern United States and Mexico. Flocks of males appear on breeding marshes once the ice has melted and wetland insects have started to emerge. Females arrive a few weeks later.

Highly gregarious, yellow-headed blackbirds may gather in large numbers in dense cattails and bulrushes in marshes or at the margins of dams, dugouts and lagoons. As many as 1,200 adults have been seen in one colony in south-central Saskatchewan. In normal wet years they can be found in most deepwater marshes in the Saskatoon area.

While they may share freshwater marshes with red-winged blackbirds, yellow-heads occupy the centre of the marsh with the red-wings on the fringes. Yellow-heads, being larger and more aggressive, are able to exclude their cousins from the deeper water and more productive food and nest spaces for both closely related species.

Soon after he arrives, the male yellow-head will claim and defend his territory. You may see him perched on a swaying stem or displaying his white wing patches and golden head above the rushes. He may spread his tail, half opening his wings, or perform a display flight with his body cocked upward to show off his golden head.



Photo: May Haga

As a marsh resident, the male Yellow-headed Blackbird favours cattail as a perch.

His voice fills the air. To our ears it might sound like a rusty hinge. The low, rasping notes end in a long descending buzz. But it may be beautiful to a female yellow-head. A male, especially where he holds a high-quality territory, will mate with more than one female.

The female builds a nest like a woven cup of grasses and reeds, fastened securely to a cattail stem, bulrush or reed, over open water. She produces three to five dull white eggs heavily marked with brown and grey.

The location of the nest means the adult birds have easy access to insects such as dragonflies and damselflies emerging from the marsh. But they also search nearby fields and meadows for a mixed diet of seeds and beetles, weevils, caterpillars, grasshoppers, army worms and ants.

By late summer, yellow-headed blackbirds join other blackbirds in mixed flocks, visiting stubble fields by day, then roosting at night in the safety of the marsh. By the end of September, these colourful birds have departed for their winter homes.

Because of their restrictive nesting requirements, breeding colonies of yellow-headed blackbirds can be very localized and in drought conditions they may completely disappear. If in another year bulrushes and cattail reappear, they may return to a previous nesting site.

The conservation of healthy wetland habitat is vital to the survival of this strikingly beautiful prairie marshland bird.

Joan Feather is a member of the Saskatoon Nature Society. The best nature destinations in the area are described in the SNS publication *A Guide to Nature Viewing Sites in and Around Saskatoon* (3rd Edition).

The opinions expressed above are those of the writer, a long-term member of the Saskatoon Nature Society.