

# Conservation Corner

By Corinne Peterson  
Pocahontas County Naturalist



May 30, 2018

“Keep a green tree in your heart and perhaps a singing bird will come.” Chinese Proverb

The trees have finally leafed out, their green banners welcoming songbirds back to Iowa, including a new visitor to our farm this spring. When we glimpsed the flash of orange and black, we first thought oriole, but this visitor was too chubby, too flighty, and too black. The bird book quickly pointed us to the correct id, the American Redstart.

Named after the European Redstart of the thrush family, the American Redstart is one of 50 species of New World wood warblers. Their breeding range covers vast areas of eastern and

northern North America while their overwintering range extends from Mexico into South America. Redstarts are one of our most stable and abundant species of warblers because they favor second-growth woodland. Like other highly migratory bird species, climate change is expanding their breeding range as far north as Alaska, the Yukon, and Northwest Territories. Currently Pocahontas County is on the western edge of their breeding range.

American Redstarts are medium-sized warblers, mostly black with a white belly, averaging 4-5 inches long with a wingspan of 6-7.5 inches and weighing a mere .2-.3 ounces. American Redstarts are often called the butterflies of the bird world. As they flit and flutter among the trees, they hold their wings and tail partly spread, allowing the males to display flashes of orange and black while females and immature males display flashes of yellow and gray.

Female redstarts, often called yellowstarts by birders, weave a cup-like nest of grasses and spider webs which holds one to five brown speckled eggs. After an incubation period of 12 days, both parents feed the growing youngsters who fledge and leave the nest in just 9 days. Like some of you, perhaps, female redstarts enjoy decorating their home nests with lichen, birch bark, and feather linings.

How can you attract and keep migrating warblers in your neighborhood? Simply put, what warblers want are the same things most of us want – food, water, and shelter. Like the Smooth Green Snake, American Redstarts are largely insectivorous but will also eat small berries in late summer. So instead of hanging seed feeders, make sure your yard is filled with the food they love most – insects – and lots of them. Favorites include beetles, moths, leaf hoppers, aphids, midges, and spiders, all of which they pick off leaves or capture in midair.

Warblers also love water. In the wild, look for them along small creeks and streams. In your backyard, provide flowing or moving water if possible. Warblers also need a wide range of natural green habitat, so plant a variety of species of tall trees, dense shrubs, and native plants, including some that will bloom or fruit when the warblers are passing through.

Do you have green leaves unfurling and warblers singing in your heart and home?

