

Conservation Corner

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*Sing a song of sixpence, a pocket full of rye.
Four and twenty blackbirds baked in a pie.
When the pie was opened, the birds began to sing.
Wasn't that a dainty dish to set before the king?*

Though the blackbirds in the English king's pie were undoubtedly Old World, nonetheless this familiar nursery rhyme will introduce this week's wetland friend, the New World *Xanthocephalus xanthocephalus*, the yellow-headed blackbird.

Yellow-headed blackbirds belong to the *Icteridae* family of perching birds that are noted for their strong, direct flight and pointed bills. Their plumage varies from iridescent black to yellow to brilliant orange as worn by bobolinks, meadowlarks,

blackbirds, cowbirds, grackles, orioles, and tanagers. The coloring of yellow-headed blackbirds also sets them apart. Mature males have bright yellow or orange-yellow head and breast feathers and in flight show a white wing patch. The smaller females and immature males are browner in color overall. Most of their yellow coloring is confined to their throat and chest, their lower breast is streaked, and their wing patch is small and insignificant.

In marshes, yellow-heads are dominant over red-wings and will take all the prime nesting spots. Each male may attract and mate with up to eight females in his territory. Each female lays 2-5 eggs and raises one brood per summer. To help prevent nest predation, the nest is built in cattails or reeds over open water. And even though a nestling may occasionally fall in, they are able to swim to safety.

Yellow-headed blackbirds eat mostly insects in the summer and seeds the rest of the year. They are not picky eaters, gobbling up aquatic insects, beetles, grasshoppers, dragonflies, caterpillars, flies, ants, and spiders. Yellow-heads overwinter in Mexico where they forage on farm fields in "rolling flocks" as they leapfrog from the back of the flock to the front. Did you know they will flip over stones to unearth food?

Red-winged blackbirds are known for their lilting song with its liquid, gurgling *konk-la-ree* that ends in a trill. In contrast, the song of the yellow-headed blackbird begins with a harsh, rasping note and ends with a long, descending buzz that has been described as sounding like a rusty hinge.

Throughout the summer months, yellow-headed blackbirds may be found feeding and nesting in wetlands across Canada and the United States. Here in Pocahontas County you may see and hear them at Little Clear Lake, Lizard Lake, Sunken Grove, and Swan Lake.

Even though yellow-headed blackbird populations are holding their own, loss and degradation of habitat is always a concern, especially drainage projects and exposure to herbicides and pesticides.

I'll close with the rest of the rhyme which includes one of my dad's favorite tricks to play on unsuspecting grandkids.

*The king was in the counting house, counting out his money.
The queen was in the parlor, eating bread and honey.
The maid was in the garden, hanging up the clothes.
When down swooped a blackbird and snipped off her nose.*

Happy Father's Day!

