

**SPECIES OF THE MONTH****RUSTY BLACKBIRD****MAY 2026**

The avian family Icteridae includes blackbirds, orioles, cowbirds, and meadowlarks, and is only found in the Americas. Many of the species are confined to the tropics. But 1 species, the Rusty Blackbird (*Euphagus carolinus*), only breeds north to the tree line in wet forests of Alaska, Canada, and the northeastern United States. It nests in swampy areas with live and dead trees, shrubs, and stumps, either above ground or over water. It uses tamarack (*Larix laricina*), spruce (*Picea* spp.), fir (*Abies* spp.), willow (*Salix* spp.), birch (*Betula* spp.), alder (*Alnus* spp.), and other tree species to nest, depending on location.

The Rusty Blackbird primarily migrates east of the Rocky Mountains and winters in the eastern part of the United States. However, a few individuals winter in the western states every year. Arizona has 35 records from 14 of the state's 15 counties. The first known report is from Grand Canyon National Park, Coconino County, 25 April 1968. The reports range from 7 October to 1 April, with most reports in November, December, and January. All reports are of 1 or 2 individuals.

The adult male in breeding plumage is overall black above with a blue-green to greenish gloss, and the adult female is slate gray, darker above with a bluish green gloss. Adult male Brewer's Blackbirds (*E. cyanocephalus*) are similar but have a purplish gloss and a longer tail. Males of both species have a distinct yellow eye, which may appear white in some lighting. Female Brewer's Blackbirds are gray-brown (not slate gray) and typically have dark eyes, whereas female Rusty Blackbirds have a yellow iris in all plumages.

Nonbreeding individuals, however, are more likely to be seen in Arizona. In fresh nonbreeding plumage, males display rust-edged tertials and rusty brown feathering on crown, nape, and back with lighter brown to buff over the eye and on cheeks, throat, and breast. They may be confused with male Brewer's Blackbirds, which can also have some rust-colored feather edgings in the fall and winter. However, the Brewer's Blackbird never has such coloration on the tertials, and its longer tail is distinctive. Fall females of both species are similar, but the Rusty Blackbird females have a conspicuous pale line above the eye and decurved bill. Immature Rusty Blackbirds resemble adults except that the rusty and light brown markings are farther apart, giving a browner appearance overall. Immature birds have brown irises until fall, when their irises become pale yellow and remain yellow throughout the year. At all ages, the narrow bill is shorter than the head.

There is considerable evidence from recent studies that Rusty Blackbirds are undergoing a decline in their numbers, possibly due to loss of wetlands used by wintering populations and increasing disturbance of boreal wetlands.



Rusty Blackbird (male), Sweetwater Wetlands, Pima County, 2 January 2022. Photo by Shawn Cooper