

To the death: A Red-winged Blackbird defends his territory

John Sabean and Carol Sabean



Male Red-winged Blackbird displaying.
Photo by Eleanor Kee Wellman

To observe a red-wing pursuing another red-wing to its death is a rarity and has not, to our knowledge ever been reported in the literature.

Red-winged Blackbirds (*Agelaius phoeniceus*) are well known as fierce protectors of their territories and nests. Males will attack other males of their own species, American Crows (*Corvus brachyrhynchos*) and Red-tailed Hawks (*Buteo jamaicensis*) among other bird species; they will also attack animals such as raccoons (*Procyon lotor*) and even humans (Knight and Temple 1988, Piunno 2015). The intention, however, is usually to drive these intruders away from the territory. In a study conducted in the 1950s, Nero (1956) found that “Resident males responded to strange males by first giving song-spread, then bill-tilting, and then flying to attack (but usually displacing the intruder without actual contact).” To observe a red-wing pursuing another red-wing to its death is a rarity and has not, to our knowledge ever been reported in the literature.

On Wednesday afternoon, 19 April 2017, at about 15:30, we set out to walk our daughter’s dogs. We chose this day to walk along the boardwalk that follows the barrier beach that separates Lake Ontario from the Hydro Marsh at the south end of Liverpool Road in Pickering, Ontario. The sky was overcast, there was a slight breeze and the temperature hovered about 7° C.

About 100 m along the boardwalk east of Liverpool Road, we spotted a male Red-winged Blackbird aggressively attacking another male of the same species. No females were observed in the immediate vicinity and there was as yet

no sign of females in the marsh, although they were expected any day. Like all birders, over the years we have seen red-wings protecting their territories against a variety of intruders. They can be very aggressive, indeed.

When first observed, the birds were locked in an aerial combat that did not immediately cause us to pay special attention. When the bird assumed to be defending its territory forced another bird (assumed to be an intruder) down and into the water of the marsh, we began to pay them more attention. The intruder was clearly in some difficulty. He was on his back struggling to get out from under the territorial defender. The aggressor was stomping on the intruder with his feet and pecking him repeatedly with his beak. The intruder was forced under water several times.

Our concern was such that we threw a stick and a few stones in the water to attempt to scare off the aggressor and our action convinced him to fly off to a nearby tree. The other bird struggled to rise from the water, flapping his wings but to no avail. In about 30 seconds, the dominant bird returned to continue its attacks. After a few more vigorous attacks with his beak, and after forcing his opponent under the water again, it was only a matter of seconds before the latter was completely overcome. After the defender flew off to a nearby tree, we watched for several minutes to see if the intruder would recover, but it showed no signs of life and its body drifted away.

Having never experienced such behaviour before, despite many years of observation, we were curious to know whether this battling to the death was common among Red-winged Blackbirds. After talking to a couple of other birders, we thought the matter significant enough to pursue it further. Stokes (1979) has a chapter on red-wings but does not make any reference to fatal territorial disputes. Apart from that, we found three articles that discussed red-wing behaviour relevant to our incident. Knight and Temple (1988) are concerned more with call types as defensive manoeuvres and the intensity of defense in the success of breeding. Nero (1956) is more to the point, but he cites no record of red-wings pursuing defense to the death. Moskoff and Sundberg (2002) report an incident where a male red-wing attempted to drown another bird, but a bird of a different (and smaller) species, a male Common Yellowthroat (*Geothlypis trichas*). The red-wing knocked the yellowthroat into the water and, "As the yellowthroat struggled in the water, the blackbird pecked at it and then began to attack with its feet, using them to push the yellowthroat underwater." These were exactly the manoeuvres we observed. In this previous case, however, the yellowthroat was able eventually to gain its freedom and was able to fly away, while the red-wing "flew back into the reeds without giving further chase."

In a personal comment to us, R.J. Robertson stated: "In my own red-wing studies I would often witness vigorous chases, and some to the point of vigorous physical attacks, but never to the extent that you describe." He also contacted

one of his former Ph.D. students, P.J. Weatherhead, who worked with him on red-wing research in the 1970s; he confirmed that "he, too, has never seen such an incident, nor heard of one reported." At this point we can find no precedent for a Red-winged Blackbird actually pursuing another bird of its own species to its death.

Acknowledgements

Agreeing that the occurrence was unusual, Dennis Barry and Barry Kent MacKay spurred us to report this sighting to *Ontario Birds*. We thank the editors for their assistance in locating pertinent literature.

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John Sabean and Carol Sabean
928 Reytan Blvd.
Pickering, Ontario L1W 1Y7
E-mail: johnsabean88@gmail.com