

## ABOUT THE COVER: RED-WINGED BLACKBIRD

The Red-winged Blackbird (*Agelaius phoeniceus*) is well-known as a harbinger of spring. Flocks of male Redwings begin to appear in Massachusetts by the first week in March, and by the end of the month, males are on territory in marshes and females have arrived. Redwings are among the most abundant birds in North America and perhaps the best studied. Nearly one thousand studies, including about a hundred master's theses and doctoral dissertations, have been conducted on Red-winged Blackbirds. Clearly the Redwing is no ordinary bird!

Male Redwings are easily identified with their glossy black plumage and bright red shoulders, or epaulets, edged with yellow. Occasionally, however, such as while feeding on the ground, they cover the epaulets with black feathers, and their "coverable badges" all but disappear. Since Redwings use these badges in territorial advertisement, covering them serves to reduce aggression when the birds are feeding in flocks. The females, which are about two-thirds the size of males, are cryptically colored, tawny, and heavily streaked with brown. Immature birds resemble females, but immature males have red shoulders.

Redwings breed throughout North America wherever suitable habitat occurs. They nest from the salt marshes of both coasts to prairie sloughs and upland meadows, most typically inhabiting cattail-choked marshes. Male Redwings are highly territorial, as everyone who has visited a marsh in spring knows. The male Redwing perches on a cattail stalk in his song-spread posture, with his body arched forward, tail spread, wings drooping to the side, red epaulets flashing, and bellowing forth his territorial song, "kong-qur-eeee." Males also have a song flight in which they flutter, tail and head drooping, again fully displaying their bright red epaulets, as they fly from one perch to another in their territory. At territorial boundaries you may witness two males in "bill-tilt" or "bill-up" posture, facing one another with bills pointing to the sky. Redwings will defend territories against hawks and crows, and have even been known to strike human intruders.

Redwings have a polygynous mating system in which one male may have as many as twelve females nesting in his territory, although two or three is the more usual number. Females are also territorial and squabble with other females while defending their turf. Field studies suggest that females choose territories on the basis of habitat characteristics, not the attractiveness of males. Males, however, compete for the best territories and thus indirectly compete for females. They usually produce a single brood and have a nest of woven reeds and grasses suspended from clumps, cattails, or other emergent vegetation. The nest, lined with fine grass, may be only a few inches above the water, but nests as high as thirty feet in trees have been reported. The usual clutch is three to five pale bluish-green eggs, blotched or spotted brown. Incubation is by the female alone for ten to twelve days. The young are fed a diet of insects provided mostly

by the female and fledge in ten to fourteen days. The male plays a greater role in feeding the young after they have fledged.

During the breeding season Redwings forage largely on emergent insects from the marsh, which they capture by gleaning foliage or by hawking. Outside of the breeding season they subsist mainly on vegetable material, such as weed seeds and crop residues. By forcibly opening their beaks, Redwings are able to prize apart vegetation or overturn stones, a process called gaping, which aids in finding prey in a wide variety of circumstances.

In August all the Redwings seem to disappear, as they undergo their annual molt inconspicuously, deep within the marshes. In the fall flocks of females and young forage in the uplands separately from the flocks of males, and all return to roost in marshes. The northern populations of Redwings are migratory and join huge mixed species flocks of blackbirds, some containing several million birds. They may do considerable damage to crops, particularly in the Midwest. Winter roosts of well over a million birds in the southern states have also caused a variety of problems, resulting in control measures and heated controversy.

Despite the economic problems which the vast numbers of these birds have caused, they remain a favorite with most people, their cheery song and handsome territorial displays epitomizing the vitality and productivity of the spring.

W. E. Davis, Jr.

### MEET OUR COVER ARTIST

Barry Van Dusen's artwork has frequently appeared on *Bird Observer* covers, most recently for the December 1991 issue. He lives in Princeton, Massachusetts, and has been an independent professional artist for nearly fifteen years. For the past eight years, he has worked closely with Audubon societies and conservation organizations throughout New England, and he was named the Audubon Alliance Artist of the Year for 1992. His work has been featured in books, magazines, posters, and brochures involving many aspects of natural history, although his favorite subjects are birds.

Barry is currently working on a pocket guide for beachcombers (a Massachusetts Audubon Society project). The guide will include drawings and information on shells, seaweeds, and seabirds. His artwork will also be featured at two upcoming shows. He will have a special one-person art show, "Natural Impressions," at the Sterling Mill Works from May 2 through May 31, 1992. The Sterling Mill Works is located at 15 School Street, Sterling, Massachusetts, telephone 508-422-3200. He will also have artwork exhibited at the Lyme Invitational Wildlife Art Show, to be held on June 6 and 7, 1992, at the Lyme Art Association Gallery in Old Lyme, Connecticut, telephone 203-434-7802. For future scheduled exhibits or additional information, Barry can be reached at 13 Radford Road, Princeton, Massachusetts 01541.

M. Steele