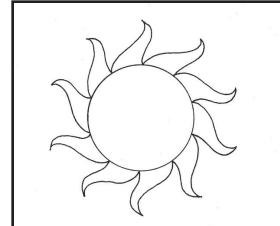
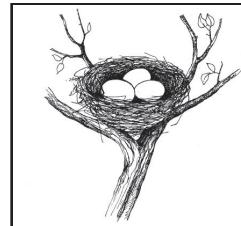
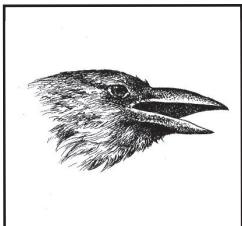
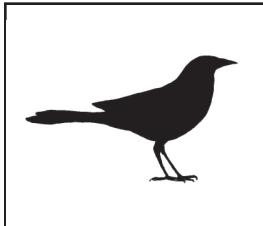


Blackbirds

Order Passeriformes

Family Icteridae



Blackbirds – who are certainly not all black – belong in the **Icteridae family**, which refers to a new World family. Meaning these birds are **only found in the Americas**. When they are not raising their young, blackbirds are very social birds and can often be seen moving and feeding together in large, mixed flocks. In summer they feed mostly on insects, providing a great service to us. But in winter they turn to a diet of seeds & grains and have been known to strip farm fields. **Their amazing ability to take flight in huge flocks, undulate through the sky together and swiftly turn direction as a single unit is still the subject of much study** by ornithologist trying to determine how they avoid colliding with one another. Blackbird flocks are a sight to behold.



Eastern Meadowlark

Sturnella magna



Both the male and female Eastern meadowlark can be identified by bright yellow breasts marked with a large bold black V. Their backs are brown with soft streaking. When they are flushed into the open they show distinct white outer-wing patches.

True to their name, these plump birds with short barred tails **need open meadows and old pastures in which to live**. The old fenceposts in such habitats serve as perfect perches for their flute-like song. And the males **sing with enthusiasm to establish his territory and protect his family** - which may include two or three females and their nestlings.

After arriving in spring they **feed** during the warmer months on a **variety of insects**, seeds and grains. Meadowlarks rarely come into backyard feeders, but if you live near a farm or an open meadow you may be able to attract one with some scattered grain left on the ground.



The female builds a hidden, grassy nest on the ground usually in fields about 10-20 inches high. The nest is woven into a **dome shaped with a side entrance**. Because of their nesting preferences, meadowlark nests are often accidentally mowed over in the farmer's fields. Three to five eggs are laid in late May - early June - prime harvest time. As development has overtaken farmland, meadowlark populations have been on the decline for some time.



Common Grackle

Quiscalus quiscula



Common Grackles are large birds - almost a foot in length. Their iridescent black plumage shimmers with purple, blue-green and bronze tints, and they have a long keeled or rudder-like tail. Grackles eat insects, seeds and fruits, but they are **big and tenacious enough to take a small mammal like a field mouse on occasion**.

They tolerate other grackles throughout the year and will even **nest together in colonies**, often found in evergreen trees. Males put on a display for females by fanning their wings and tail, ruffling feathers and tilting their bills. Females quiver their wings in response. Their twig nests are loose, bulky and large – up to 8” high. **She lines the nest twice, once with mud and then with fine grasses and feathers.** A typical clutch has 4-6 eggs.

As much as red-winged blackbirds herald spring, **the gathering of grackles in late August and early September is a sure sign of autumn**. Moving through the woods in large flocks, the sounds of their “rusty-hinge” squawks and their wings swooshing in unison as they maneuver through the branches is an experience not soon forgotten.



Brown-Headed Cowbird

Molothrus ater



Brown-headed cowbirds are common backyard birds often seen in mixed flocks with red-wings, grackles and starlings. They are **called cowbirds for their habit of following cattle, or historically, bison, in search of the insects kicked up by the shuffling hooves of the large, slow-moving mammals.** Cowbirds are black with a distinct brown head, and while they may not stand out with attractive plumage, **they do have one of the most peculiar nesting behaviors of any of our birds.**



Cowbirds are called “brood parasites.” This means they do not raise their own young. They let other birds do that for them. After breeding, the female finds the nests of other species of birds in which to lay her eggs. She will deposit one of her eggs while the other female is away. No species is safe from cowbirds since they have been known to lay eggs in the nests of over 200 species. **Most females of other species accept this new, larger egg, and continue their incubation.** When hatched, the cowbird chick is often larger than the other birds. The larger nestling often gets more food since the noisiest, most active chick in the nest is often the one fed first and most often.

Some studies show the cowbird’s behavior has little effect on the decline of parasitized bird species, while others suggest that cowbirds, along with the loss of habitat, play a large role in the decline of small songbirds – whose nests are most often parasitized. Nevertheless it certainly is a successful evolutionary tactic for these birds and their number continue to flourish.



Red-winged Blackbird

Agelaius phoeniceus



We all have our harbingers of spring. The male bluebird scouting out a backyard nesting box. The first crocuses pushing up through the soil. Or the trilling of toads in a vernal pond. **For me it is the “ook-a-reeee” of the male Red-winged blackbirds.** Icy winds may still be blowing as they warble their song and wave their red epaults from atop a cattail reed, but spring is on its way!

Adult males are about nine inches long with solid black plumage and epaulets of brilliant red & yellow on each shoulder. The colorful patches are flashed when the male sings or defends his territory during breeding season. **Females**, who arrive at the marshlands, wetlands and damp meadows several weeks after the male, are **brown marked with streaks of buff**. The immature male looks like the female except for the telltale epaulets.

Females weave an open cup nest around cattails or other aquatics plant stems placed above the water. Sometimes nests are built on land, in which case they are well camouflaged in tall grasses or shrubs. The bluish eggs are streaked with dark markings and incubated for several weeks. Both parents feed the nestlings and usually only one brood is raised each year.





Baltimore Oriole

Icterus galbula



Baltimore orioles may be more familiar to your grandparents than to you. Like the Eastern bluebird and Eastern meadowlark, their **lyrical songs and vibrant colors** of these birds were a much more recognizable a generation or two ago when family farms and clusters of woodlands dominated the landscape of the southern portion of our state.

Sometimes called the Northern Oriole, the **male has a bold orange body and black head**. The **female's plumage is muted yellow with brownish wings**. Orioles feed on insects and fruits and can sometimes be coaxed to a backyard feeder with slices of fruit, like oranges, and sugar water stations.

Their nest is one of the recognized of all nests – even if you have never seen one yourself. Woven from plant fibers, the **gourd-shaped nest hangs from the end of a branch high up in a deciduous tree**. The female shapes the nest by moving around within it. When she is finished building, she lays 3-6 eggs that hatch within two weeks. Usually only raising one brood each season, orioles migrate back south as early as July or August.



Orchard Oriole

Icterus spurius



Orchard orioles are probably mistaken quite a bit for Baltimore orioles, but instead of bright orange, the **male is more the color of a dark pumpkin with a black head, wings and tail**. The **female (at right) is olive and yellow**. The habits of this robin-size oriole are similar to Baltimore oriole except its **hanging nests do not swing as freely as the Baltimore's**.



Joe Kosack/PGC Photo



Bobolink

Dolichonyx oryzivorus

Bobolinks prefer the cooler Northeastern and Northwestern portions of our state. Males are black, with white backs and a mustard-yellow patch on the nape of the neck; females are brown-streaked. They nest in damp meadows or farmer's hay fields. Adults **land near the ground nests and quietly walk to the nest**.



European Starling

Sturnus vulgaris

Family Sturnidae



Jake Dingle/WC Photo

Some animals have a bad rap, whether they actually do anything wrong or not. Such is the case with the European starling. Even their scientific name, *vulgaris*, suggests something ill-mannered. Introduced into New York's Central Park in the 1890s, starlings are a classic example of an **invasive species**. In their native Europe, starlings are not a problem at all. But when animals are introduced from one region to another, one of several things may occur. They may die off because of new parasites or diseases, to which they have no natural resistance. They may acclimate to their new surroundings successfully, eventually becoming a natural part of the habitat without causing any problems. Or they **succeed so well in the new habitat that they overpopulate, often driving native species into decline**. If this last scenario occurs, they are considered an invasive species – a serious threat to native species in habitats around the world. And keep in mind that invasive species are a man-made problem.

Despite a short, stubby appearance, starlings are quite attractive birds if you look closely. When the sunlight hits **their black plumage they are speckled with iridescent purples, blues and greens**. Their tails are short and the yellow bill is long and straight. **In flight they glide in a triangular silhouette.**

Starlings feed on insects, grains and fruits. They love to root through grass roots, **digging underground with their bills to pull up beetle larvae, which is certainly a benefit to us**. Starlings will even eat stinkbugs! This might actually put them in good favor with most people since stinkbugs are another invasive species starting to wreak havoc throughout the Northeast.

But it is their nesting habits that are cause the most harm.

From the small population of starlings released in Central Park over one hundred years ago, we now have over 200 million starlings living in North America. Good news for starlings. Bad news for many of our native birds, especially bluebirds.

Our Eastern bluebirds struggle each year to find nesting cavities, competing with the overly aggressive starlings.

Bluebirds have very specific nesting requirements: a cavity in an open field. Starlings don't need to nest in a cavity. They can build nests just about anywhere. This makes their preoccupation with cavities especially frustrating - the bluebirds need them, the starlings do not.

But starlings are could also be considered marvels at adaptation. Despite being placed in what could have been a hostile environment for them, they have thrived. You can't blame these colorful little birds for being survivors!





A Simple Review of Blackbirds

The first thing you may notice about blackbirds is that **not all blackbirds are black**. There is a wide variety of among these birds. The beautiful orioles are blackbirds, as are meadowlarks, red-winged blackbirds, cowbirds, grackles and bobolinks.

Eastern meadowlarks prefer to live on or near the ground. Known for their warbling song – often from atop a fencepost, meadowlarks are birds of open farmland. Even though meadowlarks and starlings are not really related, the scientific name of the meadowlark (*Sturnella magna*) means “large, little starling.” And they do share similar short-tailed, stocky body shapes and flight silhouettes like flying triangles.

Common grackles are fairly large blackbirds – about the same length as a blue jay. When the sun strikes their black feathers at just the right angle

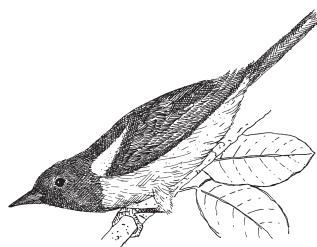
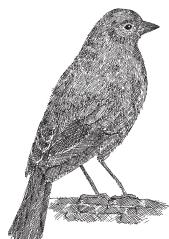
they sparkle with beautiful iridescent purples and greens. Their eyes are bright yellow. Grackles are easy to identify in flight. **They have a long tail that is held out behind them like a ship's rudder.** Their tail probably helps balance them while they in large flocks that swiftly roll and change direction in flight.

Grackles prefer to walk on the ground instead of hopping like most other birds. They also have this **neat habit of allowing ants to crawl over their bodies**. Since ants secrete something called formic acid, some biologists believe this helps to rid the grackles of parasites.

Brown-headed cowbirds also spend a lot of time on the ground, feeding on insects, spiders, fruits and seeds. They really do have brown heads with darker bodies. And can be found on farms, fields and neighborhoods. They call a group of cowbirds a “herd.”

Cowbirds are **called brood parasites**. This means they put their eggs in to the nests of other bird species. So cowbirds never really raise their own young. They let other birds do that for them. Cowbirds got their name from following cattle and bison on the Great Plains. As the large animals grazed their heavy hooves kicked up insects whenever they stamped the ground. The intelligent cowbirds learned this was an easy way to find food.

Red-winged blackbirds prefer to live among the cattails in a marsh or wetlands. The male is one of the first birds to begin singing in late winter. When he sings the bright red feather patches on his wings – called **epaulets** – are displayed. All in an effort to attract a mate.



Both the male **Baltimore and orchard orioles** are black and orange. But the orchard oriole is a bit darker and smaller. The female orioles are yellowish-green. Known for their melodic whistling songs, orioles prefer to live among the mature trees of open woodlands. The Baltimore oriole is the state bird of Maryland and their baseball team of the same name is named after the bird. The **Baltimore oriole builds a free-swinging, gourd-shaped nest that hangs down from a branch.** The orchard oriole's nest is similar but does not hang from the branches or swing free.

Actually, even though **Starlings** are grouped together with other blackbirds - because they so often flock together, Starlings **belong to a different family - Sturnidae.** All other blackbirds belong to the Icteridae family.

Unfortunately, **starlings can cause problems for some of our native birds.** They can be aggressive towards birds like bluebirds and often take over their nesting cavities. But starlings are great mimics and are related to the Myna bird – well-known for its ability to mimic songs and voices. Starlings were brought to our country from Europe over one hundred years ago and introduced into New York's Central Park. Why? Because someone thought it would be a good idea to have all the birds mentioned in the plays of William Shakespeare living in Central Park.