

# FLY-CATCHING BY MALE RED-WINGED BLACKBIRDS

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About 1815 on 2 July 1981, I was driving east on Alberta Highway 567 towards Irricana, when I saw a male Red-winged Blackbird leave its perch, fly up about 2 m at a steep angle and grab a medium-sized brown-coloured moth in its bill. A few minutes later I saw another male essentially duplicate the behaviour of the first. Both birds were singing as if on territory prior to their insect hawking, and both returned immediately to their perches, ate the prey and sang again. Both were in upland fields well away from water.

These observations were of particular interest to me for three reasons. First, although this species has long been known to use non-marsh habitat to breed, this behaviour seems to be increasing in recent years.<sup>8 10</sup> In both 1980 and 1981 I observed territorial males in many places in both Saskatchewan and Alberta in wooded ditches with no evident water or marsh vegetation in the immediate vicinity. Secondly, although I have often watched Redwings in all three prairie provinces for many years, I have not seen any catch insects on the wing previously. Finally, I became interested in insect-hawking by birds that normally procure food by other means several years ago, and have been particularly watchful for examples of this behaviour.<sup>6 7</sup>

Birds which normally or frequently catch food on the wing characteristically have short bills with wide gapes.<sup>4</sup> Red-winged Blackbirds, with long, pointed bills would thus not be expected to catch most food by aerial pursuit. In fact, this species is well adapted to gleaning food by methodically searching vegetation and by turning over small objects, such as stones.<sup>9</sup>

That fly-catching behaviour is unusual in this species is suggested by the fact that I was unable to find it mentioned in several major publications on this blackbird, including Bent's account of the various races and a detailed comparison of foraging behaviour of various blackbirds by Orians.<sup>2 10</sup> In an earlier paper, Orians did mention that Redwings successfully catch insects, primarily emerging dragonflies, on the wing, but commented that they were not very adept at this method of procuring food.<sup>9</sup>

Fly-catching, especially of the short sally type usually practiced by flycatchers (Tyrannids) and some warblers (Parulids) is occasionally practiced by several species which usually obtain food by other means, including some other blackbirds and orioles (Icterids).<sup>1 5 6 7 13</sup> This is undoubtedly a response to readily available food, and probably takes place only when such food is obtained



*Red-winged Blackbird.*

*Kathy Morck*

with little energy cost. Orians mentioned that dragonflies were obtained by this method in calm weather, and the fact that the dragonflies were emerging suggests that they were easier to catch than when in regular flight.<sup>9</sup> Similarly, my observations took place in calm weather, and the moths caught were slow-moving targets. The Red-winged Blackbird is known to be a "generalist," and has exhibited this in its opportunistic feeding on such foods as horseshoe crab eggs and gull eggs when these are readily available.<sup>3 8 11 12</sup> Thus, it would be expected to catch insects on the wing when these are available and easily caught. Observers should be alert to this and other possible behavioural responses by Red-winged Blackbirds as they invade new habitats.

<sup>1</sup>BARTLETT, L. M. 1956. Observations on birds "hawking" insects. *Auk* 73:127-128.

<sup>2</sup>BENT, A. C. 1958. Life histories of North American blackbirds, orioles, tanagers and allies. U.S. Natl. Mus. Bull. 211 (Dover reprint, 1965).

<sup>3</sup>COOPER, D. M., H. HAYS, and C. PESSINO. 1970. Breeding of the Common and Roseate terns on Great Gull Island. *Proc. Linn. Soc. New York* 71:83-104.

<sup>4</sup>DORST, J. 1971. *The life of birds*. Vol. 1. Columbia Univ. Press, New York.

<sup>5</sup>MAILLIARD, J. 1919. Fly-catching birds. *Condor* 21: 212.

<sup>6</sup>McNICHOLL, M. K. 1967. Red-breasted Nuthatch "hawking" insects. *Blue Jay* 25:186.

<sup>7</sup>McNICHOLL, M. K. 1977. Observations of House Sparrows "hawking" insects. *Calgary Field Nat.* 8:170&188.

<sup>8</sup>MILLER, R. S. 1968. Conditions of competition between Redwings and Yellow-headed Blackbird. *J. Anim. Ecol.* 37:43-61.

<sup>9</sup>ORIAN, G. H. 1961. The ecology of blackbird (*Agelaius*) social systems. *Ecol. Monog.* 31:285-312.

<sup>10</sup>ORIAN, G. H. 1980. Some adaptations of marsh-nesting blackbirds. *Monog. in Population Biol.* 14.

<sup>11</sup>PESSINO, C. M. 1968. Red-winged Blackbird destroys eggs of Common and Roseate terns. *Auk* 85:513.

<sup>12</sup>REESE, J. G. 1973. Red-winged Blackbird feeding on horseshoe crab eggs. *Wilson Bull.* 85:483.

<sup>13</sup>STORER, T. I. 1919. The fly-catching habit among birds. *Condor* 21:125.

## WOOD THRUSH NEAR CADILLAC, SASKATCHEWAN

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An individual Wood Thrush was observed at Driscoll Lake, south of Cadillac, NE7-7-13-W3 20 May 1981 at 1420 hours. The bird was seen foraging with an American Robin on the lawn north of a farm house amongst rather dense shrubbery. The immediate impression was of a short tailed Brown Thrasher, but smaller than a Robin. The white breast with round black spots, a chestnut coloured back, nape and crown, with a slightly paler tail were noted. The bird had a dark eye, with a fairly distinct ring around it.

Silent, the bird gave a strong impression of a European Song Thrush (*Turdus philomelos*). Unlike this species however, the bird observed appeared more "chestnut", "cleaner" and generally more sharply coloured. No wing bars were noted and the birds legs were fleshy coloured.

I observed this thrush with Bushnell 10x50 binoculars for approximately 2-3 minutes at ranges from between 5 and 10 m. The bird appeared to be rather tame and eventually flew off into the nearby shelter belt, there remaining on the ground, or in the low strata of the undergrowth.

NOTE: There are eight other records for the province but this is the most southwesterly (Houston *et al*, 1981, *Blue Jay*, this issue).