

# ORCHARD ORIOLES INCREASE WITHIN TYVAN AREA, SASKATCHEWAN

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Orchard Orioles are a relatively recent addition to the Saskatchewan bird list. The first sighting was at Regina by Al and Betty Binnie, July 19-25, 1972, and the first breeding record was by Manley Callin at Fort Qu'Appelle, July 19-22, 1974.<sup>1</sup> The next two nests were found in 1980 at Buffalo Pound Lake by Nigel Caulkett and Dale Hjertaas, and at Vic Harper's farm northwest of Saskatoon.<sup>5</sup> By 1985, there were breeding records from Tribune and Bromhead, and singing males at Oxbow, Lampman, Midale, Avonlea and Weyburn.<sup>4</sup>

Orchard Orioles have been regular breeders in flat, open crop and pasture lands at Tyvan since my observations here began in 1986. That year they were only found at several scattered sites including the well-treed village, a few select farmyards, and shelterbelts.

Each year I have observed more Orchard Orioles until now they are more common than Baltimore Orioles. One large L-shaped grove 3 km south of Tyvan, the Fischer Trees, measuring .8 km along the shaft of the 'L' and .3 km along the base, regularly has three to six nesting pairs of Orchard Orioles. In Tyvan this summer (1999), there were the customary three pairs of Baltimores, yet the number of Orchard Oriole pairs in the village decreased from five to two. Possible explanations for the latter decrease include the arrival of a nesting pair of Merlins in 1999 (though merlins nested in the nearby cemetery in 1997 and 1998), nesting American Kestrels, Fox Squirrels, and more domestic cats.

The increase of Orchard Orioles in the surrounding countryside was apparent on July 4, 1999, as I assisted Stuart, Mary and John Houston with banding of nestling Ferruginous Hawks near Tyvan. Orchard Orioles sang at three of the four hawk nest sites, all located within aspen bluffs in cultivated fields or pastures. Two of these groves were very small; the only grove



*Orchard Oriole*

*Photo by Wayne C. Harris*

without a pair of orioles was the smallest, with fewer than ten mature trees, much too small for orioles to be expected.

At all three sites, Orchard Orioles were found in association with kingbirds, either Western or Eastern. This association has been constant here. This oriole occurs with Western Kingbirds because both species prefer large, mature trees. Although Eastern Kingbirds also occur in low shrubby areas which are unsuitable for orioles, in aspen bluffs they form the third species of association. In 1999, in Tyvan, an Orchard Oriole nest was within 1 m of an active Eastern Kingbird nest, on the same branch of a Cottonwood. On another branch, less than 2 m above these nests was the nest of a Baltimore Oriole.

This proclivity of Orchard Orioles to build their nest within as little as 1 to 2 m from the nest of an Eastern Kingbird, was first reported in 1887 by H.C. Campbell at Lansingburgh, New York.<sup>2</sup> Might the orioles

utilize the aggressiveness of both kingbird species for protection from predators and possibly even from cowbird parasitism? Even the less aggressive Gray Catbird seems to lower predation rates for Yellow Warblers that nest within the response range (57 m) of the catbird.<sup>3</sup>

I have never witnessed any interspecific conflict between Orchard Orioles and other species. I have seen instances of "chasing" behaviors involving both male and female Orchard Orioles, perhaps part of the mating ritual, with several males chasing one female, but intraspecific conflict otherwise seems minimal.

In this area, Orchard Orioles prefer dense foliage, particularly Manitoba Maple. I have found them nesting in Aspen, American Elm, Green Ash, and Cottonwood, and occasionally foraging and nesting within Blue or White spruce in active or abandoned farmsteads. They forage within Caragana, Lilac and several other ornamental shrubs, and in spring, in flowering crab apple trees. They also forage in both weedy and uncut grassy areas.

Adult Orchard Orioles look solidly dark in low light conditions. In better light they are very attractive, with a black head, back, breast, wings and tail. The remainder of the bird is a chestnut brown, except for a single white wingbar plus white edges on the secondaries. First spring males resemble females with the addition of a small black bib. They breed in this plumage. Previously, many of the Tyvan area breeding males were in this plumage. Now the majority are in adult plumage. Females have olive-green upper-parts with pale-greenish under-parts. They have two whitish wing bars on their greyish wings. Juveniles resemble females.

Orchard Orioles generally arrive at Tyvan during the last half of May. My earliest male arrival date is May 16, but more often they arrive during the interval of May 20-22. Females usually arrive a week later. They begin nesting almost immediately. Their basket-like nest, much shallower than that of the Baltimore Oriole, is made with fine green grasses which turn yellow later. Their nest blends well with terminal bunches of Maple keys.

Often the first indication of their presence is their distinctive, loud, warbling, rollicking song. They also utter two single-syllable "scold" notes – a blackbird-like "chuck," which is also given in a rapid series, and a bobolink-like "chink." They may sing from a prominent perch, either a dead branch or the top of a tree, but often can be difficult to observe as they both forage and sing within the dense canopy. In comparison with Baltimore Orioles, the Orchards tend to be sporadic songsters. They may sing persistently throughout the late morning and afternoon or may be silent during cool or windy weather. I have never heard them sing during the dawn chorus or late in the evening. Typically they abruptly cease singing during the second week in July.

The young fledge as early as July 2. More typical fledging dates are mid to late July. Often the fledglings are divided, with each parent responsible for one or two begging juveniles.

Orioles leave abruptly soon after the begging young are able to fly well enough to travel from one shelterbelt to another. My only records after August 13 include an immature seen on August 29, 1998, and two adult males evidently migrating south over my yard at 8.15 a.m on August 20, 1999. Another individual called briefly near the village's main street later the same day.

1. CALLIN, E.M. 1975. First records of the Orchard Oriole in Saskatchewan. *Blue Jay* 33:176-179.
2. CAMPBELL, H.C. 1891. Orchard Orioles nesting near Kingbirds. *Ornithologist and Oologist* 16:88.
3. CLARK, K.L., and R.J. ROBERTSON. 1979. Spatial and temporal multi-species nesting aggregations of birds as anti-parasite and anti-predator defenses. *Behavioral Ecology and Sociobiology* 5:358-371.
4. HARRIS, W.C. Prairie Provinces region (nesting season). *Am. Birds* 39:927-928.
5. SHADICK, S.J., and B. LUTERBACH. 1980. Saskatchewan breeding records for Red Crossbill, Orchard Oriole, and Red-headed Woodpecker. *Blue Jay* 38:247-249.