

# OBSERVATIONS OF RUSTY BLACKBIRDS CAPTURING AND CONSUMING FISH

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On 23 November 2020, Dale Hjertaas and I located two Rusty Blackbirds (*Euphagus carolinus*) where flow from two storm sewers created small areas of open water in Regina's Wascana Marsh. I spent about 17 minutes observing and photographing them and observed one capture a fish. When I returned two days later for a second observation period of about 90 minutes, I observed one bird capture at least two fish. Both observation periods ended when the birds flew away.

Rusty Blackbirds' food is described as crustaceans, aquatic insect larvae and seeds and they are often observed foraging in overgrown, swampy habitat.<sup>1</sup> A quantitative food analysis (stomach contents mostly from March, April, October and November) illustrates that the types of invertebrates eaten vary by month (more scarab beetles in April, more caterpillars in May, more grasshoppers in August and October, more spiders and myriapods in August), likely depending on availability.<sup>2</sup> Invertebrates, including crawfish, are eaten throughout the year.<sup>3</sup> "Other small animals, such as crustaceans, snails, salamanders, and small fish, were found in the stomachs for nearly every month, and amount to 7% of the food of the year", with 30% in December."<sup>2</sup> Rusty Blackbirds are also known to attack, kill, and sometimes eat other birds.<sup>3</sup> Invertebrates, especially dragonfly nymphs (97%) are the primary food during the breeding

season, though salamanders, water beetles, spiders, small fish, crustaceans, snails, and mosquitoes are also consumed.<sup>4</sup>

On 11 December 2012, Kim Mann photographed a Rusty Blackbird holding a fish at A.E. Wilson Park in Regina.<sup>1</sup> She stated: "Laurie had seen the bird around the Christmas Bird Count time I think. I felt so sorry for the bird. I think it was found dead a few days later. It was wicked cold that time." My internet search managed to locate only two other photos of a Rusty Blackbird holding or eating a fish<sup>5,6,12</sup> and I found no records in past issues of *Blue Jay*.

On 25 November, only one bird was present, alternating between the two open water areas. This is the last day this or another bird was seen in this area. A third Rusty Blackbird was observed below the Broad Street bridge at the same time I was photographing by the storm sewer. This third bird was last seen on the afternoon of the 30 November (ebird S76917471). The three birds mentioned here are late migrants, as Saskatchewan's average fall departure for Rusty Blackbirds is 25 to 27 October.<sup>1</sup> Rusty Blackbirds have occasionally overwintered in Saskatchewan.<sup>1</sup>

The Rusty Blackbirds spent most of their time foraging along the ice, rocks and shoreline, generally within 17 m of the storm sewer outlets (Figure 1). When a bird got that far out it returned, hopped or flew across, then foraged on the other shore. On 25 November, I observed the bird fly four times from the open water by one storm sewer to the other. I photographed it holding and eating two different fish. It may have caught a third fish as it went to

shore — for about seven seconds, I could see its head moving in a behaviour similar to handling a larger prey item. However, it was behind a rock so I cannot be sure what the prey item was. I also watched the bird apparently capture a few small unidentified objects, probably aquatic invertebrates, and eat Russian Olive (*Eleagnus angustifolia*) berries that had fallen on the ground. Twice I observed the bird preen.

Figures 2 and 3, taken on 23 November 2020, show a Rusty Blackbird holding, then preparing to fly away with a fish as the other blackbird flew toward it. On 25 November, the blackbird quickly carried one small fish up to the snowy bank before dropping it in the snow (Figure 4). Although



FIGURE 1. Rusty Blackbird foraging along the ice. Regina, Saskatchewan, 25 November 2020.



FIGURE 2. When this one caught the fish, the other came in fast in what seemed like an attempt at stealing it. 23 November 2020.

dropped a few more times, the fish was swallowed whole, headfirst, a minimum of seven seconds later.

I was able to identify the second fish as a Brook Stickleback (*Culaea inconstans*) by the five spines on the dorsal fin<sup>7</sup> (visible in Figure 5). This fish was either too large, or the dorsal spines prevented the fish from being swallowed whole. The blackbird carried it to shallow water and spent four minutes and 20 seconds tearing it apart and eating it. The blackbird repeatedly picked up the fish, tried to swallow it, dropped it, and held it with one or both feet while using its bill to tear it into smaller pieces (Figures 6, 7 and 8). While the blackbird tore the fish apart, it often did not hold it in place with one foot. This resulted in the fish being picked up before being dropped again, with the bird finally positioning its foot to hold it in place. The blackbird pulled the head off and swallowed it separately, finally swallowing the remainder of the fish "head" first (Figure 9).

The observation of the Rusty Blackbird eating fallen Russian Olive berries apparently adds a species to

the list of seed/fruit known to be eaten by this species. This reflects the species' opportunistic use of available sources of food.

Common (*Quiscalus quiscula*), Great-tailed (*Q. mexicanus*) and Boat-tailed (*Q. major*) grackles have been reported capturing and eating fish<sup>8,9,10</sup> and Red-winged (*Agelaius phoeniceus*) and Brewer's (*E. cyanocephalus*) blackbirds have been reported scavenging dead minnows after a fish kill.<sup>11</sup> There is a recent photo of Brewer's Blackbird feeding a fish to chicks with no



**FIGURE 3.** Rusty Blackbird, carrying freshly captured fish, turning to take off before being pursued by the other Rusty Blackbird. This bird flew away with the fish pursued by the other blackbird.

background information on whether the fish was captured and killed or it was already dead.<sup>12</sup> As Rusty Blackbirds often forage in moist habitats, and with cold November weather eliminating most sources of invertebrate food, the choice of these late migrant Rusty Blackbirds



**FIGURE 5.** Rusty Blackbird with freshly captured Brook Stickleback.



**FIGURE 6.** Rusty Blackbird dropping the stickleback.



**FIGURE 4.** Rusty Blackbird eating small fish.



**FIGURE 7.** Rusty Blackbird tearing up the stickleback.

to forage along small patches of open water where invertebrates and fish could still be obtained is not surprising. A small fish would clearly be a substantial and prized food item.

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FIGURE 8. Rusty Blackbird eating a piece of the stickleback it has torn from the body.

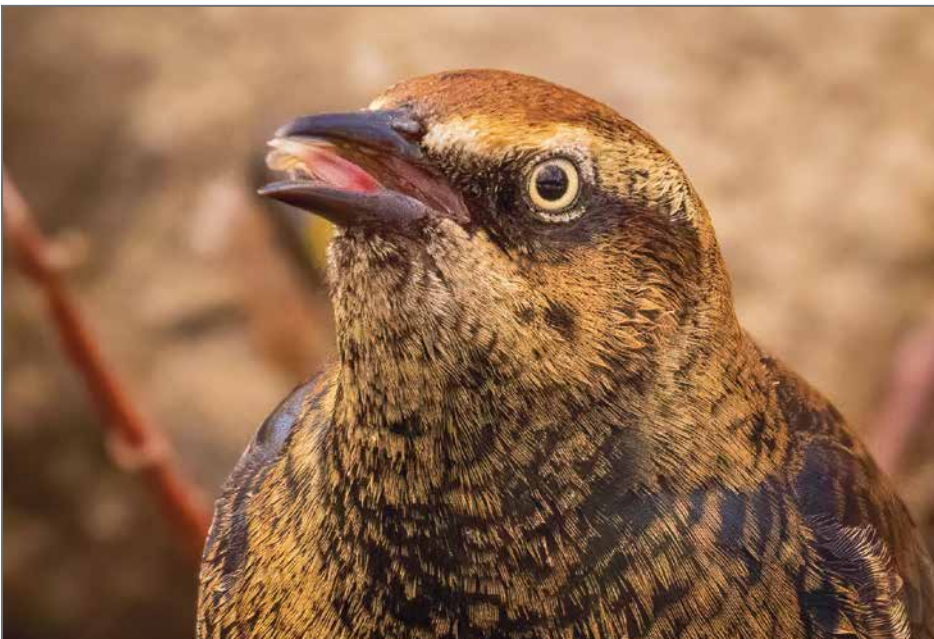


FIGURE 9. Rusty Blackbird swallowing remainder of the stickleback.