



WILDLIFE NOTES

Yellow-headed blackbird *Xanthocephalus xanthocephalus*

The yellow-headed blackbird is one of the most fascinating birds to observe in New Mexico. It builds tightly woven nests in marshes, feeds aquatic insects to nestlings, and even keeps the nests clean by removing the droppings of young birds, which are contained in a sac.

In New Mexico, yellow-headed blackbirds breed locally in many locations. These include the north (San Juan Basin, marshes, and lakes on the Jicarilla Reservation, lakes and associated marshes from Maxwell to Las Vegas.) They breed as far south as Zuni (Tekapo Reservoir), San Rafael (Ojo de Gallo), Reserve area (Centerfire Bog), Tucumcari area (Ladd S. Gordon Wildlife Area and Dry Lake), and probably in suitable habitats between these areas.

Yellow-heads winter most commonly in southern New Mexico, with occasional sightings in the San Juan and upper Rio Grande valleys, and the Clayton, Zuni, and Las Vegas areas.

Adult males are unmistakable and have a yellow head and breast. The overall body color is black,

with a contrasting white wing patch. Adult females are dusky brown; the eyebrow, lower cheek, throat, and breast vary from yellow to buffy; their belly is streaked white; and they lack the white wing patch found in adult males.

On average, adult males weigh 2.8 ounces and females weigh 1.7 ounces. They generally run eight to 11 inches in length.

During breeding seasons yellow-heads favor freshwater marshes with bulrush, cattail, willow, and salt cedar. They also occupy wet meadows, agricultural fields, and even livestock feed lots. Their nests, which are built by the females, are most frequently placed over water, and woven onto bullrush or cattail stalks.

Females lay three to five eggs, with clutches of five most common. They are oval, smooth, and glossy, greenish white to grayish, speckled and mottled with profuse brown and red-brown markings. Eggs measure 7/10 of an inch by one inch.

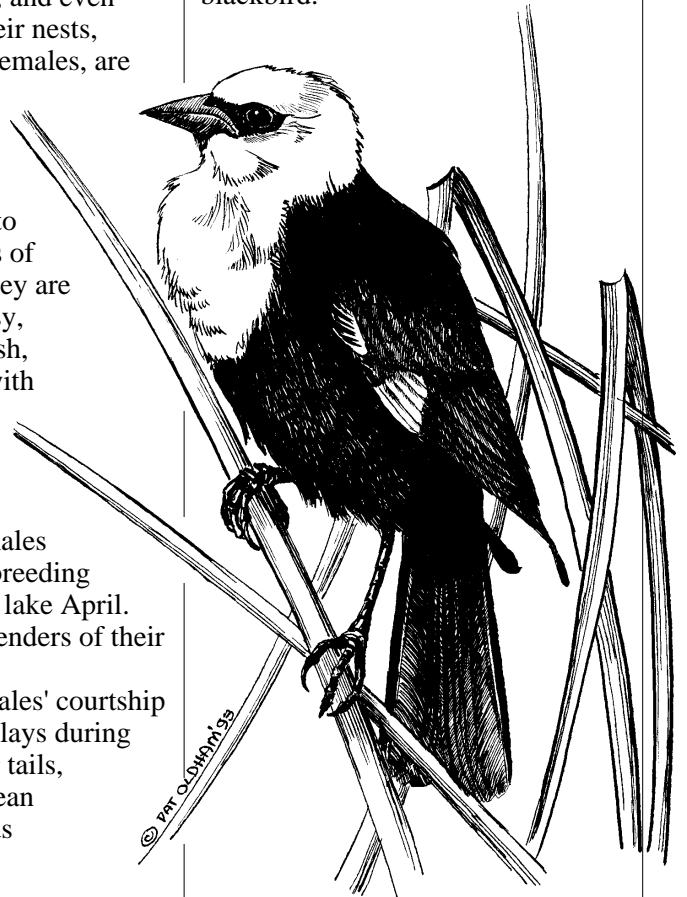
In New Mexico, males begin arriving at their breeding grounds during mid- to late April. Males are vigorous defenders of their territories.

A portion of the males' courtship consists of singing displays during which they spread their tails, open their wings, and lean forward with their heads pointing downward or upward.

The call of the yellow-headed blackbird is unique, and has been described as "oka wee we, oka wee wee, oka wee wee" and "klee klee klee ko-kow-wow," the last low and much drawn out.

Their diet consists of a variety of insects. When insects are less abundant, they also feed on seeds from a variety of plants.

Marshes in which yellow-headed blackbirds nest are critically important habitats for a significant number of other species, as well as plants. Efforts to protect and preserve marsh ecosystems are important for the conservation and perpetuation of New Mexico's yellow-headed blackbird.



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