

## Red-winged Blackbirds

Have you seen the red-winged blackbirds (RWBB) at the Tijuana Estuary? Every spring and summer you can find them roosting among the bulrushes in the freshwater marsh along the South McCoy trail.

The males are shiny black and have a red shoulder patch bordered in yellow. The females are brown and heavily streaked with a slight yellow wash around the bill. They are both stocky and broad-shouldered with a slender conical bill. RWBB are a good example of sexual dimorphism, which is when males and females look very different.

The RWBB is one of the most abundant native birds on the continent. It is also the most colonial of songbirds, meaning that they roost together in flocks. During the winter, in the southern states, they sometimes congregate in the millions with other members of the Icteridae family, like cowbirds and grackles to name a few.

Every spring, smaller numbers of RWBB come to roost in the wetlands where they breed. Each morning these birds spread out traveling as far as 50 miles to feed. They like to feed on open ground. They eat mainly seeds but they will also probe the bases of aquatic plants prying them open to get at insects hidden inside and love to hunt dragonflies.

During the breeding season, it is easy to see the displaying males perching high over their territories spreading their wings and puffing up their red shoulder patches while singing their hearts out. The song sounds like “conk-la-le” and is piercingly loud. They continue to incorporate new songs into their repertoires each season. You may also see the males defending their territories, as they can be fierce when chasing other males out of their territory, even attacking larger animals including people if they get too close to their nest.

Ninety percent of birds are monogamous (a pair bonded for one nesting, an entire season, or for life) but RWBB are a highly polygynous species. That means that the males have many female mates. Anywhere from five to fifteen females might crowd their nests onto one male’s territory and each will mate with the territory holder. The male may help feed the young at the nest of his primary mate but the additional mates will not generally get any help. The females make the choice whether to be a second mate in a better territory and get less help or whether to get more help being the first mate but in a lesser territory.

All is not as it seems though because one-quarter to one-half of the nestlings will turn out to have a different dad than the territorial male. It sounds like these birds are very promiscuous but it is really a way to increase the chances of reproductive success. It seems that little to no aid from a male holding a resource rich territory yields a better chance of producing surviving offspring than the full cooperation of a male with an inferior territory. RWBB nest in loose groups because the appropriate marshy habitat is scarce.

The female chooses the nest site and builds the nest low in the dense marsh vegetation. The females make the nests by winding the dead stringy plant material around the living upright stems. They make a platform of leaves and then plaster the inside with mud to make a cup. Then, she lines the cup with fine dry grasses. It takes 3-6 days to build a nest. They are 4-7 inches across and 3-7 inches deep. Inside the nest will be 2-4 pale blue-green eggs with brown markings. RWBB babies are born altricial, which means they are born blind, naked, uncoordinated and entirely dependent on their parents. RWBB become strong agile fliers and live to be around 15 years old.