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## Red-winged Blackbird *Agelaius phoeniceus*

The Red-winged Blackbird, an abundant permanent resident of Florida, breeds in wetlands throughout most of the continent south of the tundra. Of the 14 recognized subspecies in North America, 4 breed in Florida: *A. p. littoralis* of the Panhandle coast, *A. p. phoeniceus* along the Alabama and Georgia borders, *A. p. mearnsi* inhabiting most of the peninsula, and *A. p. floridanus* in south Florida and the Keys (Howell 1932, AOU 1957, Stevenson 1976). More recent studies question the validity of some of these races (Howe et al. 1977, Stevenson and Anderson 1994).

**Habitat.** Inland, Red-winged Blackbirds occur around freshwater ponds and marshes in natural, agricultural, and suburban settings. Along the coast and in the Keys, they breed in salt marshes, mangroves, and buttonwoods. Their food consists of the seeds of weeds and grasses, various grains, and insects and other invertebrates.

Red-winged Blackbirds usually nest in loose colonies. Generally, more than 1 female nests in a male's territory (Dolbeer 1976). Frequently, a small marsh supports a rather large number of nests. The nests, constructed of stems of cattails or other marsh plants, are usually built in small shrubs growing in or along the edge of a marsh. However, many nests are woven into cattails or sawgrass. In southern coastal areas, nests may be placed in mangroves, usually within 3 m (10 ft) of the ground. In suburban and urban areas, Red-winged Blackbirds nest in hedges and other shrubs. The eggs, usually 3 or 4 in number, are bluish-green and spotted or mottled with purple and black. The eggs hatch within 10 to 12 days, and the young fledge in 9 to 11 days (Bent 1958).

**Seasonal Occurrence.** Many individuals that breed in northern states withdraw to Florida during the winter months, November through February. For Florida breeders, egg dates range from 6 March through 13 July (Stevenson and Anderson 1994).

**Status.** During the breeding season, Red-winged Blackbirds are found throughout the state, although they are less common in parts of the Panhandle and northern peninsula. They breed throughout the Florida Keys, except on the Dry Tortugas. Because of its abundance, the openness of its preferred breeding habitat, and its conspicuous nests, Red-winged Blackbirds were confirmed breeding in a large number of quadrangles, even those that were only briefly surveyed. Recently fledged young perch on wires and fences next to the marshes in which they hatched, making them easy to locate.

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Sponsored by Belinda Perry



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