Evidence for Double-brooding by Rusty Blackbirds

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Abstract
The ability of Rusty Blackbird pairs to re-nest after several successive failures has been known since the early 1900s, but double-brooding has not been reported for this species. Observations of telemetered and color-banded individuals in northern New Hampshire have provided strong evidence of pairs successfully fledging two broods in 2010 and 2012.

Background
Rusty Blackbirds have long been known to renest following the loss of eggs. On 24 May, 5 June, and 16 June 1918, Kennard (1920) collected sets of 5, 5, and 4 eggs, respectively, from successive nests of a pair in Piscataquis County, Maine. The pair constructed a fourth nest and fledged four young on 14 July.

However, the species has not been known to fledge more than one family in a given year (Avery 1995).

The Initial Discovery
On 24 May 2010, PIN color-banded an adult male and attached a radio transmitter to one of three young at a nest in Coos County, New Hampshire. RJR documented successful fledging on 25 May and monitored the movements of the transmitted hatch year through 30 June.

On 23 June, RJR, HJB, and CRF observed the color-banded male giving display vocalizations from a prominent perch in a wetland near the nest. Shortly thereafter, the male accompanied a female on two foraging trips. The female delivered the food to a consistent location, and emerged with a fecal sac following one of the food deliveries. RJR had observed that the adults were seldom with the transmitted fledgling, but since they had no transmitters, their whereabouts were unknown.

Further Evidence
On 25 May 2012, CRR observed an adult female and two adult males in a previously occupied territory (2009-2011) in Coos County, New Hampshire. The female gathered nesting material, attended by a banded male. The second male was attending a recent fledging.

On a 2 June visit to the territory, CRR observed the banded male, a female on a nest, presumably incubating, and a fledgling that was flying well.

On 14 June, CRR used a mirror pole to confirm the presence of at least one feathered nestling and observed the banded male deliver food to the female near the nest.

On 27 June, CRR determined that the nest was empty. The female and the older hatch year approached and were agitated during the nest inspection. The banded male delivered food to the ground in an area of dense vegetation near the nest.

Conclusion
While we have yet to document the complete phenology of successive clutches, we believe our observations demonstrate that Rusty Blackbird pairs sometimes raise two broods in a single season; at least near the southeastern edge of their breeding range. We encourage other researchers to check successful territories for evidence of further breeding activity after nests have fledged. The frequency and geographic extent of this phenomenon will affect the species reproductive capacity in a changing climate.

Literature Cited


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