

Rusty Blackbird Visual Identification Tips For Spring Migration

Rusty Blackbird Spring Migration Blitz Coordination Committee

January 2014

When we think of Rusty Blackbirds, or “Rusties,” their distinctive rusty-tipped feathers and prominent brown “eyebrows” often come to mind. However, by the time this species migrates northward in the spring, most of the rusty-colored feather edges have worn off the males, leaving them a glossy black. By March, males’ pale brown eye lines have faded as well. The females retain their rusty appearance and eye lines farther into the spring, but by the time females reach the breeding grounds they appear silvery gray or charcoal gray. Both sexes have pale yellow eyes throughout the year, and compared to other blackbirds, the Rusty Blackbird bill is relatively thin.



Male Rusty Blackbird in New York City in April. While the rusty tips of the bird’s feathers are still visible, by migration they are quite worn, leaving the males a glossy black.



In March (left), male Rusty Blackbirds retain some of their rusty-tipped feather edges. By May (right), males appear glossy black.



© Allen T. Chartier

Female Rusty Blackbirds retain vestiges of their rusty-edged feathers into April.



© Lloyd Spitalnik

By May, female Rusty Blackbirds appear silvery-gray or charcoal gray, with only minimal rusty plumage remaining.

Distinguishing Rusty Blackbirds From Look-Alike Species

Especially during the spring, when males are mostly black, Rusty Blackbirds can be difficult to differentiate from other blackbird species. Here are some Rusty Blackbird look-alikes and a list of their key differentiating features.

Common Grackles and Rusty Blackbirds



Male Common Grackles (above left) also have yellow eyes and appear glossy black in low light. However, Grackles' larger size, long wedge-shaped tails and long, thick bills distinguish them from male Rusty Blackbirds (above right). In addition, male Common Grackles sport distinctive shiny purple-blue feathers on their heads. Female Common Grackles (below, left) have pale eyes, too, but their feathers are browner in hue than those of female Rusty Blackbirds (below, right), and they tend to have more iridescent plumage on their heads than female Rusties.



Brewer's Blackbirds and Rusty Blackbirds

Brewer's Blackbird (male)



© K Schneider

Rusty Blackbird (male, May)



© Daniel W. Clark

Discriminating between a male Brewer's Blackbird (above left) and a male Rusty Blackbird (above right) can present a challenge even for experienced birders. Both Rusty Blackbird and Brewer's Blackbird males sport pale yellow eyes, but the plumage of the male Brewer's Blackbird is much more iridescent than that of male Rusty Blackbirds. Male Brewer's Blackbirds have a purplish sheen on their heads and a greenish body sheen, which can look as though the bird were covered in "liquid ink." In addition, the Brewer's Blackbird bill is slightly more conical than the Rusty's narrow bill.

Unlike female Rusties, female Brewer's Blackbirds (below, left) do not have yellow eyes, and their plumage is a drab brown compared to the rust-colored feathers of the female Rusty Blackbird. Brewer's Blackbirds do not have any brown edging on their feathers, even during the non-breeding season. During the breeding season, female Rusty Blackbirds appear silvery gray (below, right), increasing the similarity between female Rusties and female Brewer's. During this time, female Rusty Blackbirds are grayer than female Brewer's Blackbirds, which are more brown.

Brewer's Blackbird (female)



© Paul Sullivan

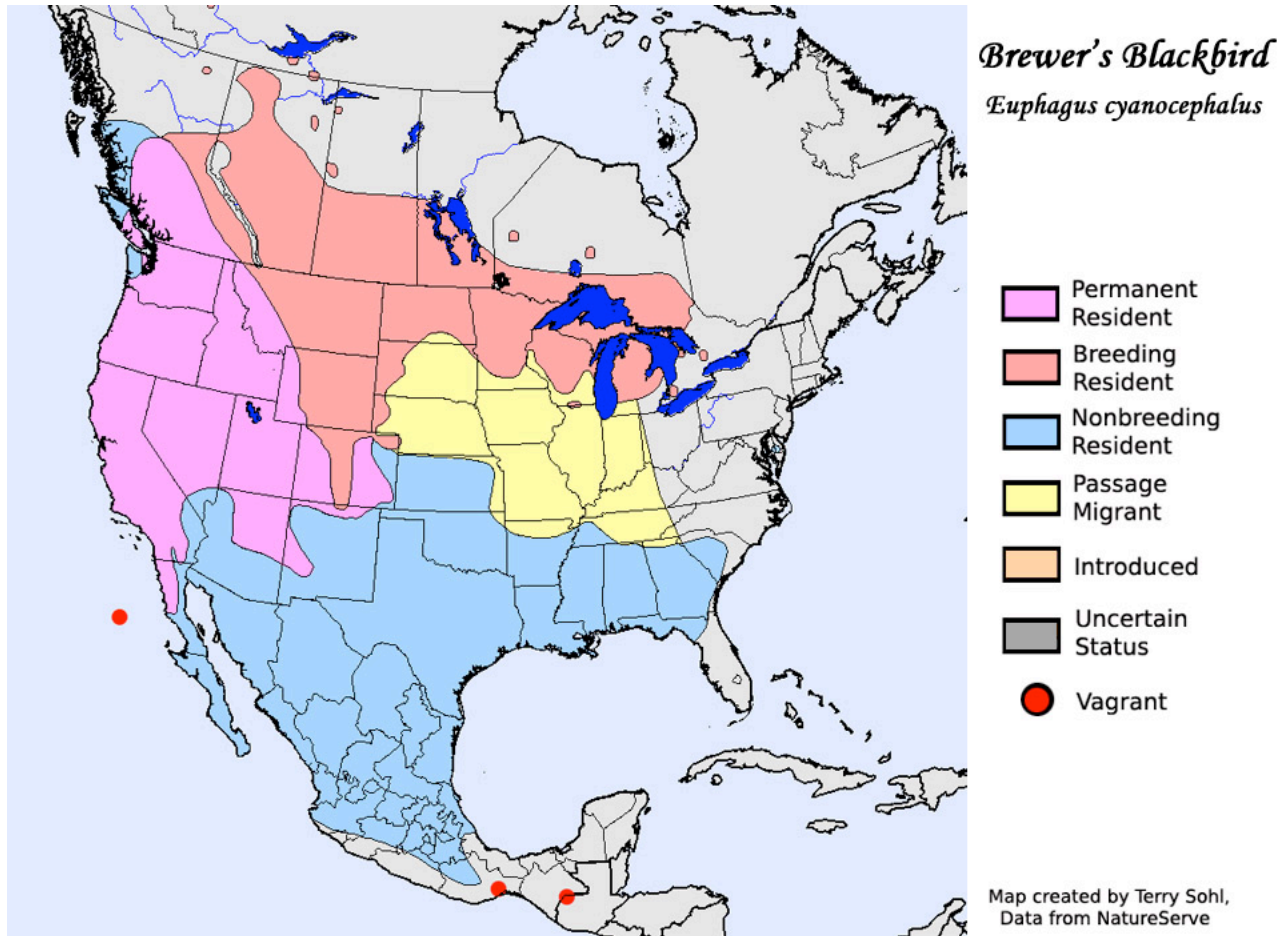
Rusty Blackbird (female, May)



© U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service

Although Brewer's Blackbird is the most difficult species to distinguish from the Rusty Blackbird, these two species only overlap in the southern and western portions of the Rusty's range. Observers in the Northeast and mid-Atlantic will almost never encounter this particular identification challenge.

Brewer's Blackbird Range Map



Red-winged Blackbirds and Rusty Blackbirds



Even when the telltale red shoulders of male Red-winged Blackbirds (above right) are not visible, several other features distinguish them from Rusty Blackbirds (above left). Red-winged Blackbirds have black eyes instead of yellow eyes, and their bills are much stouter and more conical than Rusty Blackbird bills. Female Red-winged Blackbirds (below, right) look very different from female Rusty Blackbirds (below, left), with dark eyes, brown, streaky plumage, and a stouter, more sharply pointed bill.



Brown-headed Cowbirds and Rusty Blackbirds



Brown-headed Cowbirds and Rusty Blackbirds can be reliably distinguished using eye and bill characteristics. Unlike the bright yellow eye of the Rusty, both male and female Brown-headed Cowbirds have dark eyes. Rusty Blackbird bills are slender, whereas Brown-headed Cowbird bills are thick, stocky, and conical, initially appearing almost finch-like. As their name suggests, male Brown-headed Cowbirds (above, left) sport largely uniform brown heads. In contrast, by early spring, some of the rust-tipped feather edges have worn off male Rusty Blackbirds (above, right), leaving them with a more mottled or speckled appearance. In the spring, female Rusty Blackbirds (below, right) appear grayer than female Brown-headed Cowbirds (below, left).



Rusty Blackbird Vocal Identification Tips

Rusty Blackbirds produce several distinct vocalizations, which can be key for identification when visual characteristics are not easily observed. During migration, Rusty Blackbirds often produce a “squiggle” or “gurgle” call, which consists of a series of rapid, undulating notes with a hoarse tone and can sound like an audio tape on rewind. The Rusty Blackbird song, sung both on the breeding grounds and during migration, is piercing and high-pitched; this song can sound like a “squeaky hinge.” Often referred to as the “kerglee,” the song quickly slides upward in pitch, and is clearer in tone than the squiggle/gurgle. Finally, the call note is a “chuck” or “check,” very similar to the call notes of other blackbirds. Even experts sometimes have trouble distinguishing the subtle differences between call notes, but generally, Common Grackle calls have a lower, huskier sound than Rusty calls, while the call notes of Red-winged Blackbirds are more nasal.

To hear examples of Rusty Blackbird songs and calls, the following resources are available:

All About Birds (Cornell Lab of Ornithology): this site offers examples of Rusty Blackbird songs and calls. Search for “Common Grackle,” “Red-winged Blackbird,” “Brewer’s Blackbird,” or “Brown-headed Cowbird” to hear vocalizations from look-alike species.

http://www.allaboutbirds.org/guide/Rusty_Blackbird/sounds

NatureInstruct- Dendroica: This website is geared towards citizen scientists that conduct bird surveys and offers a number of vocalizations recorded across the Rusty Blackbird range. You can opt to listen only to Rusty Blackbird vocalizations, or select a subset of target birds and test yourself.

<http://www.natureinstruct.org/dendroica/>

Xeno-Canto: This website allows users to submit recordings of vocalizations. There are some great examples of Rusty songs and calls from throughout their range. Search for “rusty blackbird.”

<http://www.xeno-canto.org/>



rustyblackbird.org