

Nova Scotia Species At Risk Beneficial Management Practice Series

Version 1, March 2022

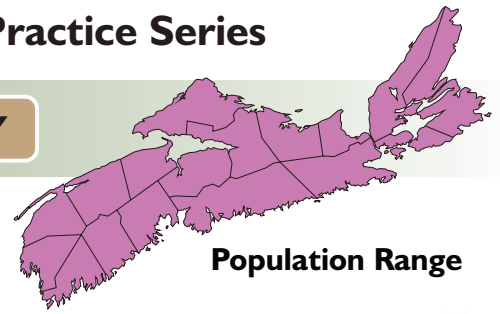
Rusty Blackbird

Euphagus carolinus

STATUS

Special Concern 
Endangered 

FORESTRY



Population Range



Rusty Blackbird in non-breeding plumage

Occurs infrequently throughout the province. Winters in the east-central United States and sometimes in Nova Scotia.

THREATS

- Loss of forested wetland breeding habitat as a result of activities such as residential and commercial development, agricultural expansion, mining, and forest harvesting.
- Removal of beaver, which create suitable breeding habitat.
- Mercury contamination, which can reduce reproductive success and cause behavioural or physiological impairments. Levels of mercury in the environment may be high as a result of human activities such as automobile use and industrial activity, which increase atmospheric mercury. Tailing from gold mines are also a source of environmental mercury.
- Wetland acidification as a result of acid rain, which may impact the availability of some prey (e.g. snails), changes wetland ecology, and contributes to elevated levels of metals in the environment.
- Loss of wetlands due to climate change.
- Blackbird control programs in the United States.
- Loss of wintering habitat in the southern United States.

SPECIES DESCRIPTION

- The Rusty Blackbird is a medium sized songbird, 21-25 cm in length, with yellow eyes and a narrow pointed bill.
- Breeding males are glossy black and females are charcoal-grey.
- They have black legs and feet and a rounded tail.
- They can be confused with Common Grackles, which are larger, more elongate, and have a longer tail and larger bill.
- During non-breeding periods, they are tan or rusty-colored.
- During migration, they often form mixed flocks with Red-winged Blackbirds and Common Grackles.

HABITAT DESCRIPTION

- Rusty Blackbirds arrive in Nova Scotia in April, making them one of the earliest migratory species to arrive.
- They breed from April to July in forested wetlands, including coniferous-dominated wooded streams, swamps, bogs, and beaver ponds.
- They build well-hidden cup-shaped nests within 3 metres of the ground in dense clumps of short coniferous trees near water.
- Rusty Blackbirds have high site fidelity, meaning they return to the same site each year to nest.
- They migrate to the southern United States for the winter, however they will occasionally overwinter in Nova Scotia.

KEY TERMS

Wetland hydrology:

The science of how water moves into and out of a wetland. These processes can take place on the surface or underground. For example, forests help slow-down the movement of surface water from rain or snowmelt, which slows the water to absorb into the soil and prevent erosion.



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Examples of Rusty Blackbird habitat

HOW YOU CAN HELP (BENEFICIAL PRACTICES)

- Learn to identify Rusty Blackbird and report all observations (see “Report Sightings”).
- Avoid harvesting and silvicultural activities during the nesting season (April 15- August 15), if possible. Ideally, harvest on snow packed or frozen ground to minimize risk to nesting birds.
- Avoid harvesting activities within wetlands and wet forest sites.
- Avoid harvesting up to the edge of wet areas and streams. When possible, leave a treed buffer of at least 50 metres wide.
 - If a watercourse is present on your woodlot, ensure that you are familiar with the Wildlife Habitat and Watercourse Protection Regulations that may apply*.
 - Avoid activities that will alter wetland hydrology. For more guidance on this topic, see “Resource Roads and Wetlands: A Guide for Planning, Construction and Maintenance”
<https://boreal.ducks.ca/publications/resource-roads-and-wetlands-a-guide-for-planning-construction-and-maintenance/>
- In mature shade-intolerant softwood stands (white spruce, black spruce or balsam fir) with >60% advanced natural regeneration, remove 50% of the overstory to encourage open canopy conditions with some diversity in vertical structure. Prioritize retention of potential perch trees (mature live or dead trees) throughout harvest block. In stands with <60% advanced natural regeneration, plant native softwood species at a density of 1800-2500 stems per hectare.
- When operating in existing plantations, encourage regeneration and irregularities in harvest layout by cutting large patches (0.5 - 2 ha) according to presence of existing regeneration. In stands with limited natural regeneration, consider planting native softwood species within patches at a density of 1800-2500 stems per hectare. Retain 20-35 potential perch trees and seed trees (desirable species) per patch.
- Retain mature dead and live trees, dispersed individually and in clumps, to provide overstory perch sites above the regenerating coniferous layer.
- Where possible, delineate harvest blocks based on natural stand conditions, encouraging irregularities in boundary layout. Avoid the creation of abrupt edges on linear lines such as property boundaries. Reduce the amount of edge created when planning your harvest. If possible, avoid creating narrow, linear blocks, especially adjacent to roads or mature softwood stands. This is not applicable in the case of riparian buffers, which are typically linear areas.
- Rusty Blackbird will return to the same nesting site year after year; if nesting is observed or suspected, avoid scheduling harvesting activities in these areas. Maintaining these breeding sites is important to conserving this rare species.

Project Partners:



- Limit beaver trapping where they are not damaging roads or high-value timber, as they create irregular wet habitats used by Rusty Blackbird. There is evidence that suggests beaver ponds are some of the best habitat for this species.

*Wildlife Habitat and Watercourses Protection Regulations: If you have forestry operations on your property, specific regulations under the Wildlife Habitat and Watercourse Protection Regulations may apply. This includes the establishment of Special Management Zones adjacent to watercourses. You should review the full regulations prior to commencing any work. More information can be found on the Government of Nova Scotia website: <https://novascotia.ca/natr/wildlife/habitats/terrestrial/>



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Rusty Blackbird female (left) and male (right)

REPORT SIGHTINGS

When possible, report any of your observations of species at risk. Details such as time, date, location (Geographic or UTM coordinates) as well as photos are valuable additions to all reports. **Contact:** 1-866-727-3447, sightings@speciesatrisk.ca AND the Nova Scotia Department of Natural Resources and Renewables, biodiversity@novascotia.ca.

TO LEARN MORE

To learn more about the Rusty Blackbird or other species at risk view the **Species at Risk in Nova Scotia, Identification & Information Guide**, available online at <http://www.sarguide.speciesatrisk.ca/>

Landbird species at risk in forested wetlands website: <http://landbirdsar.merseytobeatic.ca/>

Additional Resources:

[Foss, C. R. and J. D. Lambert. 2017. Guidelines for managing rusty blackbird habitat in New York and northern New England. High Branch Conservation Services, Hartland, VT.](#)

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