



A Capay Valley Late-Winter and Spring is Filled with the Familiar Squeaky-Wheel Sounds of Black Birds! Millions of Them!!



In addition to all that squawking in the trees this time of year, you will notice swarming clouds of starlings in synchronized spectacles out over the farm fields. According to Professor Yossi Leshem, director of the International Center for the Study of Bird Migration at Tel Aviv University, "The natural phenomenon, called 'murmuration', has become rare as starling populations have declined...the birds' synchronized movements are a way to communicate the location of food sources to other starlings, as well as create a defense mechanism against birds of prey." Watch the interesting videos showing this spectacle at:

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/earth/earthvideo/9833647/Synchronised-starlings-create-impressive-spectacle-over-Israel.html>

and

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/earth/earthvideo/8113908/RSPB-guide-to-murmuring-starlings.html>

Our own local Birder, Jim Hiatt tells us about...two of our most common feathery fellows, the Brewer's Blackbird (*Euphagus cyanocephalus*) and the Bi-Colored Blackbird, or better known to us as the Red-Winged Blackbird (*Agelaius phoeniceus*) per The Birds of North America.

Of these two, the Brewer's is equally at home in the country or the city, particularly towns/cities like Woodland or Davis which have lots of trees and lawns. These are something we'll never run short of, like buzzards. These occur in all but the eastern states, and are entirely people- and civilization-friendly. These are a "walker", like Magpies, Crows, and Ravens, not "hoppers" like Mockingbirds, Scrub Jays, or English Sparrows. Males and females intermingle with Starlings in "working" the freshly-mown ground. Water the mown area brings up more bugs out of the cracks and

Blackbirds, cowbirds, and the starlings are found mostly in fields, like the Red-winged Black Bird sitting on the sunflowers at left in Hungry Hollow, taken by Betsy Monroe. While larger "black birds" like ravens and crows are scavengers, who will feed on carrion and farm crops, the smaller blackbirds, cowbirds and starlings prefer insects and farm crops such as wheat and other cereal types--including, apparently, sunflower seeds!



Above photos and information from:

<http://www.birds-of-north-america.net/black-birds.html>

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Continued from Jim Hiatt, Page 22: *'if you mow-n-water it, they will come'. These are also found in freshly mown and newly irrigated alfalfa amongst Crows, Ravens, and Starlings. The males have iridescent plumage which may look black, but a close examination shows very shiny dark purple, green, and bluish coloring that, all taken together, give a black appearance, but is very pretty up close. How would I know that???* Same way John James Audubon found out for his illustrations, but I didn't do that for this article. A "big game hunter" 7 year-old with a BB gun learns a great deal... Females are a dullish gray brown.

Their call is mainly a sharp "Chit!" or "Tap!" uttered more rapidly if the nest or fledglings are threatened; an occasional treble-edged wheeze, which is almost liquid in tone; and also an occasionally-uttered very musical double note, which as a youngster I used to think it sounded like, "King Yeeee!" Just how it did(and does) sound to me.

Red-Wings have a wider environment capability yet, and are found in tule ditches, rice fields and riparian areas in general. They are generally not found in towns. In flight, in large groups, these are much like Starlings. Hundreds, sometimes thousands, will fly as a group, all seem to turn on cue at the same time and in the same direction, as though they're all thinking the same thought at the same moment, and tend to bunch tighter with every turn.[This behavior is called murmuring--no one is entirely sure why they do it, but some scientists are working on it. See page 22]

As seen here, their nest is usually done in either a small branch crotch, not terribly high off the ground, which means that things like Lilac bushes can be used, hedges, Elderberry trees. Light sticks in a circle, and lined with softer stuffs, usually grasses are the home and usually 4-6 turquoise-with-buff-brown-blotches are the usual.



The Life Cycle of Black Birds

Jim writes of these photos he shot over time on his Hungry Hollow Farm: "One nest is taken in a small uuuupper crotch of our one lemon tree, and the other in the bottom-most crotch of the "volunteer" Eucalyptus tree by the fig tree. These are easiest nests to find and observe. The others you have to work at a little more. Some of those newborn shots I love, as they got the "living color" just right. In photos: Here he has eggs, to newly hatched, to just feathering out, to fully fledged and ready to take to the air!

These have very high metabolic rates and have heartbeats at 150-200 beats/minute. These are ready to leave the nest in weeks; I'm glad we get to enjoy OUR young longer than that. They are particularly vulnerable right at the point of being almost-but-not-quite-ready-to-FULLY-fly. When their first solo efforts are embarked upon, the typical first run is 10-20 yards, if that far. VERY easy target for kittycats, and you find lots of failed first attempts here and there. During the hatchling-to-nearly-ready-to-leave phase, the "TAP!" that you hear as the single note chirp of the adults that we're all familiar with become rapid-fire and very frantic---the adults are VERY protective, if not able to DO much about it.

We used to take a "toddler" or two home as kids and try to raise them, and usually to no avail. Have since learned that what we were feeding them, bits of bread soaked in milk, were kind of a near-minimum, but way short of the fat and protein requirements needed; hence the parents constantly bringing them insects ALL day. Note, The little ones [as seen fully fledged and ready for flight at bottom left] with first plumage are all gray—they haven't differentiated into male/female coloration early on.