

About the Cover Photo

by Greg Forcey

The Red-winged Blackbird is one of the most abundant bird species in North America, ranging across much of the continent and breeding in a variety of wetland and upland habitats. Adult Red-winged Blackbirds are sexually dimorphic: Males are dark black with a distinct epaulet, whereas females are mottled brown above and streaked below. Red-winged Blackbirds are strongly territorial during the breeding season, with males vigorously defending breeding territories from other males. During the fall and winter, Red-winged Blackbirds form large flocks with other birds, especially Common Grackles, Brown-headed Cowbirds, and European Starlings.

According to plumage expert Jeff Davis, the bird in the cover photograph is displaying partial amelanism, a phenomenon that is more common in social species such as the Red-winged Blackbird than in more-solitary species. Note that the epaulet, which is colored by carotenoids, is unaffected. Note further that the loss of melanin on the underparts has revealed a pink wash, which, while appearing to vary in extent and intensity, may normally underlie the black plumage of male Red-winged Blackbirds. Despite the aberrant plumage, this male was actively singing, and defending a territory. This bird was first observed and photographed in 2005 and the bird returned to the same territory in 2006. It was not observed in 2007.

This individual male was photographed in a small marsh in Otter Tail County, Minnesota. I was alerted to the presence of this male by my doctoral advisor Will Bleier and his friend Lee Soehren. I photographed this bird with a Nikon D2H, a 400mm f2.8 lens, and a 2× teleconverter. The photo was shot at ISO 400, and the exposure was 1/320th of a second at f8 with no exposure compensation. I observed the bird for an extended period to determine his favored singing perches and where best to photograph him. I selected a perch that did not have distracting foreground or background elements, which resulted in a clean shot.



Greg Forcey, Ph.D., is an avian ecologist for Pandion Systems in Gainesville, Florida, and enjoys nature photography as a serious hobby. His photographic subjects range from birds and mammals to landscapes and flora. Greg currently shoots with a Nikon D2x and an assortment of lenses ranging from 10.5mm to 600mm. Greg shoots exclusively in RAW mode and processes his images with Nikon Capture NX. His photography is represented by the Alamy stock agency, and he participates regularly on the naturescapes.net forums. To view more of Greg's photography, visit his website <gregforcey.com>.