Local Bird Profiles: Red-wing Blackbirds By Larry Hyslop



A male red-wing displaying its epaulettes. Photo by Annenburg Learner's Journey North

One end of this small pond was covered with lily pads. I watched as two male red-wing blackbirds wandered across the lily pads in their search for food. They even flipped up lily pad edges to snatch delicacies clinging to their bottoms.

Red-wing blackbirds carry red epaulettes on their wings, with yellow lower borders. The red epaulettes of these two males were hidden, showing only the yellow. Although nesting season, these males were too busy in their search for food to display their territory ownership.

As the two birds zigzagged across lily pads, their random routes brought them closer together and as they did, their epaulettes expanded slightly so the red was more conspicuous. At their closest point, their epaulettes were fully exposed, with the red feathers forming a brilliant display. Yet, never once did they stop their search or look at each other. Those epaulettes clearly showed each bird was near the edge of the other's territory. As their wandering separated them, the epaulettes slowly disappeared as the display receded.

These red-wing epaulettes are a strong visual signal. Their favorite territorial display is performed from a cattail reed. The males fan their tails, while holding their wings outward but cupped downward slightly to best showcase the red. They stretch their head outward as they sing their "ok-a-lee" song. Males in flight manage much the same display as they float downward to land. Those blazing red epaulettes shout out "here I am" to both prospective females and intruding males.

Scientists do some horrible things to animals in their search for understanding. In one experiment, researchers caught male red-wings in mist nets and dyed their epaulettes black before releasing them. These red-wings "lacking" epaulettes were soon chased off their territories, although that raised the question of why. Without epaulettes, they looked much like the Brewer's blackbird that shares the same areas. Perhaps other red-wing males did not realize the dyed birds were fellow red-wings and simply ignored their territory claims, until the exhausted, dyed males gave up.

These researchers also placed mounts made of dead birds inside red-wing territories and found the mounts with dyed epaulettes were attacked much more than Brewer's blackbird mounts. The conclusion was resident red-wings could differentiate the two species.

Then the researchers made more mounts with epaulettes dyed half-black. On further mounts, they added red feathers cut from other dead birds so these mounts had even larger epaulettes. When placed in a normal male's territory, they found the degree of attack on these mounts depended on the amount of epaulette showing. Males displaying "half epaulettes" were attacked less than totally-black males. Mounts displaying huge epaulettes were left alone more than those with normal-size epaulettes.

These important visual signals are not only used as species recognition but to signal the male's power. Raised epaulettes show a male's willingness to fight to defend its territory, and their size shows how much they are willing. Lowered epaulettes allow non-territory holding males a chance to depart without a fight.

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