

Bobolink

Dolichonyx oryzivorus

Perched on a grass stem or displaying in flight over a field, breeding male Bobolinks are striking. No other North American bird has a white back and black underparts (some have described this look as wearing a tuxedo backwards). Added to this are the male's rich, straw-colored patch on the head and his bubbling, virtuosic song. As summer ends he molts into a buff and brown female-like plumage. Though they're still fairly common in grasslands, Bobolink numbers are declining.

Keys to Identification

Size and Shape

Bobolinks are small songbirds with large, somewhat flat heads, short necks, and short tails. They are related to blackbirds and orioles, and they have a similar shaped, sharply pointed bill.

Color Pattern

Breeding male Bobolinks are mostly black with a white back and rump, and a rich buffy nape. Females and nonbreeding males are warm buffy brown, streaked with dark brown on the back and flanks. They have bold brown stripes on the crown but are unstreaked on the nape of the neck. The bill is pinkish.

Behavior

In spring, male Bobolinks give conspicuous display flights low over grasslands, fluttering their wings while singing. At other times, Bobolinks stay hidden in tall grasses or brush, clinging to seed heads or foraging on the ground amid the stems. They often migrate in large flocks.

Habitat

Bobolinks are birds of tall grasslands, uncut pastures, overgrown fields and meadows, and the continent's remaining prairies. While molting and on migration, look for them in marshes and in agricultural fields, particularly rice fields.

Cool Facts

- The Bobolink is one of the world's most impressive songbird migrants, traveling some 12,500 miles (20,000 kilometers) to and from southern South America every year. Throughout its lifetime, it may travel the equivalent of 4 or 5 times around the circumference of the earth.
- A migrating Bobolink can orient itself with the earth's magnetic field, thanks to iron oxide in bristles of its nasal cavity and in tissues around the olfactory bulb and nerve. Bobolinks also use the starry night sky to guide their travels.

Measurements

Both Sexes

- Length - 5.9 - 8.3 inches
- Wingspan - 10.6 inches
- Weight - 1 - 2 ounces

