

Yellow-headed Blackbird

Xanthocephalus xanthocephalus

With a golden head, a white patch on black wings, and a call that sounds like a rusty farm gate opening, the Yellow-headed Blackbird demands your attention. Look for them in western and prairie wetlands, where they nest in reeds directly over the water. They're just as impressive in winter, when huge flocks seem to roll across farm fields. Each bird gleans seeds from the ground, then leapfrogs over its flock mates to the front edge of the ever-advancing troupe.

Keys to Identification

Size and Shape

Yellow-headed Blackbirds are fairly large blackbirds, with a stout body, a large head, and a long, conical bill.

Behavior

Yellow-headed Blackbirds breed in loose colonies, and males mate with several females. During the breeding season, they eat insects and aquatic invertebrates. They form huge flocks in winter, often mixing with other species of blackbirds, and feed on seeds and grains in cultivated fields.

Habitat

Yellow-headed Blackbirds breed and roost in freshwater wetlands with dense, emergent vegetation such as cattails. They often forage in fields, typically wintering in large, open agricultural areas.

Cool Facts

- In 1825 Charles Lucien Bonaparte, nephew of Napoleon Bonaparte, gave the first detailed description of the Yellow-headed Blackbird, which was collected in 1820 by Thomas Say and Sir John Richardson.
- Because Yellow-headed Blackbirds always build their nests over the water, nestlings sometimes fall in and have to swim short distances to vegetation.
- Pleistocene fossils of Yellow-headed Blackbirds (from 100,000 years ago) have been dug up in California, New Mexico, and Utah.
- The oldest Yellow-headed Blackbird on record was at least 11 years, 8 months old. It had been banded in Saskatchewan and was found in Nebraska.

Measurements

Both Sexes

- Length - 8.3 - 10.2 inches
- Wingspan - 16.5 - 17.3
- Weight - 1.6 - 3.5 ounces

