

For the Birds

Of Kinnickinnic Township

Icterids

By Tom Andersen

This family of birds (Icteridae) contains twenty-two species. Eleven of those species can occur in Kinnickinnic Township. Nine of those eleven birds nest in the Township.

The Red-winged Blackbird is probably the most common Icteridae seen in the Township. Their arrival in March and April each year lets us know that spring is here.



Red-winged Blackbird

Photo TA



Female Red-winged Blackbird

Photo TA

Red-winged Blackbirds are very territorial. Getting near a Red-wing's nest just might earn you a peck on the head. Their beautiful spring song, however, is worth the risk.

There are two species of Meadowlarks. Both can occur in our Township. Incidentally, Meadowlarks are not in the Lark family, they are in the Blackbird family (Icteridae). The Eastern Meadowlark is the one I see most often. Unfortunately, often, is a poor choice of words for this species. Once common, their numbers have declined significantly. The Eastern Meadowlark is thought to have declined over 75% in the last 20 years.



Eastern Meadowlark

Photo TA

The best time to look for Eastern Meadowlarks is in the spring. They can be observed singing from lines between telephone poles or atop fenceposts. They are ground nesters often in wetter grassy areas. Be advised, they are quick to abandon their nest if disturbed.



Eastern Meadowlark (near nest)

Photo TA

Not long after the above nesting bird was photographed, the grassy area in which it was nesting in was mowed. The result, scrambled eggs.

It's been a while since I've seen a Western Meadowlark in this area. Take a trip west, especially the Dakotas and Montana, and you might see them by the hundreds. They do occur here. It takes more than a casual glance to tell the difference between the Eastern and the Western.



Western Meadowlark

Photo TA

The easiest way to ID these birds is to listen to their song (best done during the breeding season). The Eastern's song is pretty but the Western's is more elaborate.



Western Meadowlark

Photo TA

The Eastern's song is kind of a straightforward whistle or melody. The Western's has a gurgling warble at the end. Fortunately for those of us who are hard of hearing (me), there is a good solution. There are some excellent phone apps that can ID bird sounds accurately!

The Bobolink is not common in our Township but I do see them in limited numbers each spring and summer. They are declining but less so than the Eastern Meadowlark.

They can be most easily spotted singing on a high wire along a Town road in the spring. Look for the otherwise all black bird with white on it's back. I've heard them described as the bird with the backwards tuxedo.

Two years ago I observed 4 male Boblinks doing their display flights in a field in the Township. They would fly up in the air and whirl back down to the ground repeatedly.

The Boblink is another bird with a very pretty song. The song is fairly long and somewhat similar to that of a Meadowlark. Best noted in the mating season, it is a bit like a meadowlark in the beginning meandering into an additional, often lengthy song.



Bobolink

Photo TA

The Brown-headed Cowbird is very common in Kinnickinnic Township in the spring and summer.

For some, this particular bird doesn't have the best reputation. The female Brown-headed Cowbird does not build a nest. They do, however, lay eggs. Lots of them. Rather than build a nest for their eggs, they simply lay them in some other bird's nest. That other bird could be an Eastern Towhee or perhaps a Brown Thrasher.



Male Brown-headed Cowbird Photo TA

It's always interesting in the spring when birds show up in good numbers at my bird feeders. The female cowbird often shows up too and seems to be scouting some new parents to raise her chicks. The Brown-headed Cowbird is a brood parasite. Most birds don't recognize the added addition of Cowbird eggs to their nest. They just raise the birds as their own. On several occasions I've seen Cowbird chicks being fed by a 'parent' bird of a different species.



Female Brown-headed Cowbird Photo TA

In the case of the Kirtland's Warbler, the Brown-headed Cowbird was a threat to the existence of that endangered species. I was fortunate to work with a good friend who was a USFS wildlife biologist that had the job of trapping Cowbirds before they could deposit eggs in that Warbler's nests.

The much less common and not often seen Yellow-headed Blackbird is an occasional visitor to the Township.



Yellow-headed Black Bird Photo TA

Look for Yellow-headed Blackbirds in marshy areas where you would likely see Red-headed Blackbirds. The last one I saw was just "across the border" in neighboring Troy Township. He was headed our way!

The Baltimore Oriole might just be everybody's favorite Icteridae. This brightly colored bird of the Blackbird family is very common in our Township in the spring and summer.



Baltimore Oriole Photo TA

Grape jelly in a feeding station is sure to bring in the Orioles. Some years I've noted grocery stores running out of grape jelly and I'm pretty sure it's not being used on toast. Yes, Orioles really like grape jelly.



Baltimore Oriole Female

Photo TA

Once you have Orioles coming to your feeders, you can easily recognize the ratcheting call from these birds. Look for their nest which looks like an old gray sock hanging in tree.

The Orchard Oriole is fairly common in the Township in the spring and summer. They are not as numerous as the Baltimore version. To me they always seem a bit more skittish and don't tolerate humans as well as Baltimore Orioles.



Orchard Oriole

Photo TA



Orchard Oriole

Photo TA

The three birds of the Icterid family I have not featured are The Brewer's Blackbird, the Rusty Blackbird, and the Common Grackle. There's no particular reason for this other than they can be so numerous at times that I just seem to overlook taking pictures of them. I'm searching for the more elusive species. You see, I have a 'life list' of birds but I never count a bird on that list unless I get a good picture.

I've always kind of considered the Common Grackle a city bird. They are much more likely to be found in the grocery store parking lot than they are out here in Kinnickinnic Township. Conversely, the Brewers Blackbird is much more likely to be found in farm fields and farm yards. The Rusty Blackbird, however, migrates through the Township so I'll have to catch it coming or going. They do sometimes winter in the area.

Kinnickinnic Township has ample opportunity to see many species of songbirds. There is a lot of public land featuring prairie restoration as well as a class one trout stream running right through the Township. These areas are great for birding all year long.

Tom Andersen has been a resident of Kinnickinnic Township for 28 years. Finding Tom in the Township is easy. Look for the car driving slowly down one of our Town roads stopping often and poking a camera out the window.