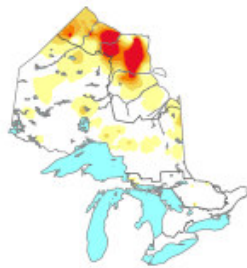


# Rusty Blackbird Factsheet

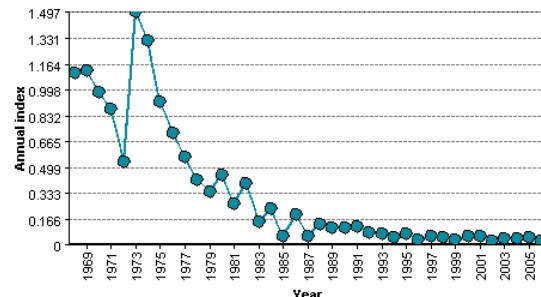
## Boreal Bird Toolkit



Rusty Blackbird



Relative Abundance



Breeding Bird Survey Index Trend 1968-2006 (Canada)

**Description and biology:** The Rusty Blackbird receives its name from the rust-coloured feather edgings it possesses in fall and winter. In contrast, during the summer it is uniformly black with a faint bluish-green gloss. Like the similar Common Grackle, it has yellow eyes, but it is much smaller overall (21-25cm) and not as glossy. The Rusty Blackbird is an opportunistic feeder eating whatever is available, mainly insects during the summer and seeds during the winter.

**Habitat requirements:** The species breeds in wet coniferous and mixed forests, fens, bogs, beaver ponds, and swampy lake and stream edges. It favours small openings in the forest which have a dense understorey that can both support and hide their large bulky nests.

**Natural history:** The Rusty Blackbird often forages in shallow water, sometimes wading up to its belly like sandpipers. During harsh winter conditions, it has been observed killing and eating other birds.

**Conservation status:** Of the North American and world population, an estimated 70% breed in Canada's boreal forest. Breeding Bird Surveys reveal that it declined significantly by 9.9% per year between 1968 and 2006 across Canada. In Ontario, the declines appear greater (19% decrease per year), but the provincial trend is not statistically significant. Declines have also been noted in Christmas Bird Counts. COSEWIC lists this species as "special concern" because it has experienced such a steep decline and because of its restricted breeding range in Canada's boreal forest. Results from the second Ontario Breeding Bird Atlas (2001-2005) show the species declined significantly by 32% over twenty years in the Northern Shield and by 30% in the Southern Shield. Interestingly, the Atlas shows a 37% increase in the Hudson Bay Lowlands. The species is designated of continental concern by Partners in Flight.

**Environmental threats:** On the breeding grounds, forest clear-cutting removes Rusty Blackbird habitat and allows Red-winged Blackbirds and Common Grackles to move in, species that may compete for space or resources. Habitat conversion and blackbird control programs (which kill large flocks of birds) on the wintering grounds in the southern United States are likely a problem also.

**Conservation opportunities:** The *Atlas of the Breeding Birds of Ontario, 2001-2005* identifies the Hudson Bay Lowlands as being of particular importance to the Rusty Blackbird, providing habitat for an estimated 86% of Ontario's breeding population. Loss of wetland, taiga and forest habitat could have a negative impact on potentially one of the most significant population centres in the central boreal region. In light of the long-term and continent-wide population declines, efforts to protect essential breeding habitat and to reduce winter mortality are recommended.

### Boreal Bird Toolkit:

Toolkit and factsheet: © Wildlife Conservation Society Canada and G.G. Beck Ecological Consulting 2008

Breeding Bird Survey: courtesy Canadian Wildlife Service, volunteers & coordinators; [www.cws-scf.ec.gc.ca/mgbc/trends](http://www.cws-scf.ec.gc.ca/mgbc/trends)

Abundance map and point count data: courtesy *Atlas of the Breeding Birds of Ontario, 2001-2005*; [www.birdsontario.org](http://www.birdsontario.org)

Photo: © Jeff Nadler. See toolkit for literature cited.