



## Natural Heritage & Endangered Species Program

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Massachusetts Division of Fisheries & Wildlife

## Rusty Blackbird *Euphagus carolinus*

State Status: **None**  
Federal Status: **None**

**SPECIES DESCRIPTION:** The Rusty Blackbird is superficially similar to other Massachusetts breeding blackbirds (Red-winged Blackbird and Common Grackle), but its affinity for remote spruce bogs and its solitary nature during the breeding season set it apart from its more gregarious and marsh-loving cousins. In breeding plumage the Rusty Blackbird is bluish-black with no obvious markings, but its post-breeding plumage is distinctive with rusty-brown patches on its back and brown barring on its chest and flanks. The Rusty Blackbird is far more likely to be encountered during migration when it joins mixed flocks and forages along the edges of flooded swamps and agricultural fields.

**DISTRIBUTION AND ABUNDANCE:** Rusty Blackbirds were never common breeders in Massachusetts, relegated to a few sites in northern Berkshire and Franklin counties.

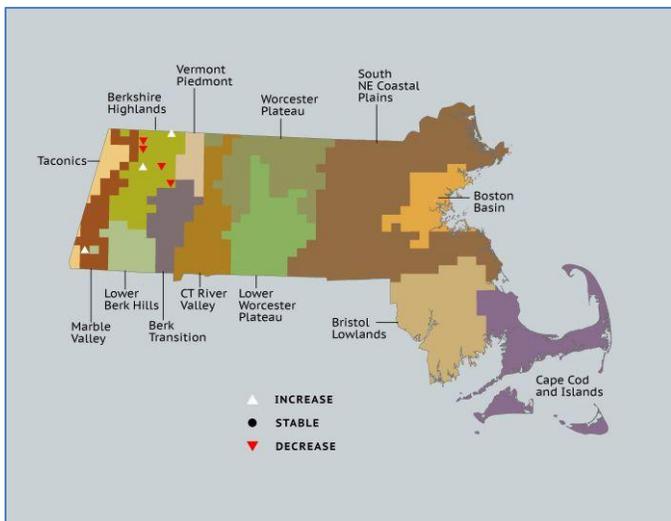


Figure 1: Changes between Breeding Bird Atlas 1 (1974-1979) and Breeding Bird Atlas 2 (2007-2011).

Rusty Blackbirds were present and confirmed at several sites in Atlas 1. In fact, the first nest ever found of this species in Massachusetts was collected from a swamp in Savoy Mountain State Forest in 1977 during an Atlas 1 survey.

Concern for this species has been amplified range-wide during the last 10 years, as wintering and breeding estimates seem to be crashing. While Massachusetts has never supported a robust breeding population of this species, even our existing fringe population seems to have been extirpated during the Atlas interval. There were only a few reports during Atlas 2, and none were confirmed.

Rusty Blackbird Breeding Bird Survey data is not available for Massachusetts, but across North America there was an annual decline of 5.12 percent from 1966-2013. However, much of the population breeds north of Survey routes and the decline is thought to be much more dramatic (up to 95% since 1970)

**HABITAT DESCRIPTION:** Breeding Rusty Blackbirds in Massachusetts are associated with remote spruce bogs in the high elevations of northern Berkshire and Franklin counties. Small openings are favorable for nesting, as well as aggregations of dense spruce and fir saplings at the nest microsite. Fire and beaver activity are thought to provide important disturbance events that shape ideal nesting habitat.

In migration, Rusty Blackbirds are found as solitary birds, in small groups, or in large mixed-species flocks associated with wooded swamps or flooded agricultural fields where they forage on the ground, often at the water's edge.

**A Species of Greatest Conservation Need in the Massachusetts State Wildlife Action Plan**

## Massachusetts Division of Fisheries & Wildlife

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**THREATS:** Potential factors promoting the dramatic, range-wide decline of Rusty Blackbirds include loss of wetlands used by wintering individuals in the Southeast, contaminants on breeding grounds, poisoning of other blackbirds on wintering roosts, and increasing disturbance of boreal wetlands where this species breeds. Alone, none of these factors appears adequate to account for the broad and extraordinary loss in numbers of this species, so it is likely that the decline is a result of synergistic effects.

**MANAGEMENT:** Studies suggest that providing a no-logging buffer of 50-100m around wetlands occupied by breeding Rusty Blackbirds would result in increased reproductive success.

**REFERENCES:**

- Avery, M.L. 2013. Rusty Blackbird (*Euphagus carolinus*), The Birds of North America Online (A. Poole, Ed.). Ithaca: Cornell Lab of Ornithology; Retrieved from the Birds of North America Online: <http://bna.birds.cornell.edu/bna/species/200>
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- Veit, R.R, and W.R. Petersen. 1993. *Birds of Massachusetts*. Massachusetts Audubon Society, Lincoln MA.

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