

## ***Rusty blackbird***

*Euphagus carolinus*

### Status

Federal status: G5 N5, Not listed

NH state status: S2, Not listed

ME state status: S3N, S3S4B, Special Concern

Because of remote breeding habitat, inconspicuous behavior, and lack of economic impact, this species has received very little study and its population status and trends remain unknown. Breeding Bird Survey data from across its range indicates that this species may have declined more than 10% in recent decades, but the confidence level for this data is very low.

The expert panel believes that current habitat and population conditions indicate Outcome B-C across the species' range and in the White Mountain National Forest. They are concerned about recent declines in winter habitat. Given expected management on all lands, the panel believes that the outcome in 20 years for the species across its range and on the WMNF would probably remain at B-C, but little is known about the rusty blackbird, so outcomes could change if more is learned.

### Distribution

Breeding range extends from northern Alaska and Canada south to central Saskatchewan, Manitoba, and Alberta, southern Ontario and Quebec, northeastern New York, Vermont, northern New Hampshire, central Maine, and the Maritime Provinces. It is also found at higher elevations in western Massachusetts.

It is uncommon to rare breeder in New Hampshire, restricted to the White Mountains and points north, with most occurrences in northern Coos County. First nests in Maine and northern New Hampshire were noted in early 1900s; first documented nesting in the White Mountains in 1930s. Occurrences are not tracked by either state's Heritage program. It is known to occur on the WMNF in New Hampshire. Where it occurs in Maine is uncertain.

Primary winter grounds range from southern Massachusetts west to extreme southern Michigan, central Iowa and eastern Nebraska, and south through eastern Texas to the Gulf Coast, northern Florida, and the Atlantic Coast.

### Habitat

The rusty blackbird prefers isolated coniferous wetlands and coniferous or mixed forest at the edge of beaver ponds, open wetlands, streams, and lakes for breeding. It seems to prefer edge habitat and habitat created by disturbance in mature forest where there is dense coniferous vegetation. In the White Mountains, this species seems to favor beaver pond habitat. Has been found nesting in smaller clearcuts near water in Vermont. Also uses open areas in mature forest created by fire and wind. What size open patch is suitable and what size opening is too small or too large is unknown.

It usually nests in spruce and fir trees. Nests are almost always near or over water, in living or dead trees and shrubs. Proximity of dense coniferous vegetation to water is the

key habitat criteria. In New Hampshire, this species is typically found between 1000' and 4000' elevation.

During migration and winter, this species uses open woodland, scrub, pastures, and cultivated lands.

#### Limiting Factors

Activities that reduce wet woodland habitat would negatively impact this species. Wetland habitat loss has resulted from development, agriculture, beaver eradication, road building, etc. for decades. Clearcutting larger areas can make habitat unsuitable and result in invasion by species that can out-compete the rusty blackbird, such as common grackles and red-winged blackbirds.

In winter, rusty blackbirds flock with starlings and other species that have been targeted with pesticides and other eradication methods. What effect these lethal controls have had on rusty blackbird populations is unknown.

#### Viability concern

Outcomes given by the panels were uncertain and indicate it may be near viability threshold due to loss of wetland habitat in past and wintering habitat more recently. No surrogate species occurs on the list. Timber harvest in riparian areas is a potential threat and is within WMNF control, so kept on list to be conservative, even though management guidelines already limit riparian harvest.

#### Management activities that might affect viability

Activities that reduce wet woodland habitat would reduce habitat available to this species. On the WMNF, beaver dam removal is the most likely activity of this type. Rusty blackbirds use the forest in or adjacent to beaver-created wetlands for breeding, so loss of these wetlands could remove suitable habitat. Management to encourage beaver activity, if successful, could result in the creation of suitable habitat.

Dam construction or removal could affect habitat suitability for this species. Construction could create new habitat if coniferous forest was flooded or adjacent to the resulting pond. Removal could eliminate suitable habitat.

Road and trail construction and decommissioning could alter habitat suitability if they impacted the hydrology of an area.

Occurrence and habitat use information indicates that rusty blackbirds use small to moderate openings in mature forest, but clearcutting of large areas would be detrimental. The level of regeneration (clearcut and seed tree) harvest on the WMNF has been small (0.5% of the Forest per year) for a couple of decades and is not expected to increase substantially in the foreseeable future. Clearcuts are all less than 30 acres each. It is unlikely that this level of regeneration harvest would eliminate rusty blackbird habitat. Guidelines in the Forest Plan that minimize regeneration harvest in riparian areas, would minimize potential for negative impacts.

#### References

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