

communally, males grouped separately from females. Most redwings winter in the southeastern United States, with huge concentrations in the lower Mississippi Valley. In times past, redwings were more limited to wetland areas; the population increased after the species began branching out and nesting in agricultural areas. The average life span is two to four years although the oldest red-winged black bird on record was 15 years and 9 months. Although still a common bird, this is one of the several birds of farmland and wetlands that have declined in the last few decades.

Eastern Meadowlark (*Sturnella magna*)

The eastern meadowlark is, perhaps, the most characteristic bird of larger grassland habitats in Pennsylvania. Both males and females have a brown streaked back and a bright yellow breast with a prominent black V; the outer tail feathers are white. As their name suggests, meadowlarks live in pastures, hayfields, fallow fields, and strip mines that have been replanted to grass. In summer they eat grasshoppers, crickets, beetles, ants, caterpillars, and many other insects; they also eat seeds, waste grains, and wild fruits. Males arrive in the spring two to four weeks before the females and stake out territories, which average seven acres. The males perch on phone poles, trees, and fenceposts, singing their sweet, slurred, whistling song. Sixty to 80 percent of males typically have two mates, rarely three. The female builds a ground nest in grass or weeds 10 to 20 inches high; the nest, usually in a slight depression, is made of dry grasses with a woven dome-shaped roof and a side entry.

Females lay eggs from late May through June. Early mowing of hayfields destroys many nests. The three to five eggs are white, heavily blotched with brown. The female incubates her clutch for about two weeks. After the young hatch, both parents feed them insects. Fledglings leave the nest after 10 to 12 days and are fed by their parents for another two to four weeks. Some females raise two broods over the summer. In August, meadowlarks abandon their breeding territories and forage in small flocks. In September and October most shift southward, migrating at night and feeding during the day. Some meadowlarks winter in eastern and western Pennsylvania, although most go farther south. The population has declined in the northeastern United States during the past 40 years as development has drastically reduced open grassland habitat and agricultural land and formerly farmed areas have grown up into brush and woods. A change in farming practices, namely a more frequent mowing of hayfields and more intensely grazed pastures, increased pesticide use, and possibly the density of planted grasses, may be contributing to their decline. Pennsylvania's Wildlife Action Plan lists the eastern meadowlark as a Species of Conservation Concern. According to Breeding Bird Survey data, the number of Atlas blocks with confirmed breeding has declined by 29 percent between the first (1983-89) and second (2004-09) Breeding Bird Atlas periods. Surveys have also indicated a shrinking breeding range, with an estimated range contraction of 15 percent between Atlas periods.

eastern meadowlark



Rusty Blackbird (*Euphagus carolinus*)

Probably the least known of the state's blackbirds, the rusty blackbird is a regular passage migrant and uncommon winter visitor in Pennsylvania. The males are black with a greenish gloss while females are buffy colored with a gray rump. Both sexes have thin, slightly decurved bills and a pale eye, compared to the dark eye of a red-winged blackbird. They are smaller and have shorter tails than common grackles. The rusty blackbird nests in the vast northern forests of New England, Canada, and Alaska and winters in southeastern United States, primarily in the swampy forests of the Atlantic Coast and Mississippi Valley. In between, they migrate through the Great Lakes region and Mid-Atlantic states including Pennsylvania. This species forages in wet fields, swamp edges, wet woods, and riverine habitats but will roost in different locations, mostly in wooded areas but sometimes open fields. They feed primarily in very shallow water where they pick up various invertebrates, berries, and mast including broken or soaked acorns. They wade in water, regularly turning over leaves with their beak under the water surface. Pennsylvania is at the northern extreme of the rusty blackbird's winter range, mostly in the southern counties. A bird of the difficult to access boreal forests and southern swamps, the rusty blackbird is tough to study and remains one of the most poorly understood birds of the continent. This swamp songbird may have the greatest decline of any North American bird of the last century. For that reason, the scientific