

Lapsus Calami

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First Sign of Spring

As a one-time biologist, I am especially observant of nature. I'm one of the old fashioned evolutionary biologists who is more interested in entire organisms than just the chemicals they contain. Biology today is almost entirely biochemical, dealing with rather vague blurred laboratory images representing the sequences of nitrogenous bases in organisms' DNA, Adenine, Thymine, Cytosine, and Guanine, in esoteric electrophoretic records. And since I live out in the sticks in central Kentucky in a farming community, where it is still quite open, I am attuned to its abundant wildlife. And at this time of the year, I search hopefully for signs of spring. The weather in February can be capricious – sometimes with lots of snow and ice, which may last until the middle of March, I eagerly search for evidence that the sun will return, bringing sunshine and greater day length and warmer temperatures. The first sign of spring for me is the migratory return of the red-winged blackbirds, *Agelaius phoeniceus*, from their customary wintering grounds in the south, along the gulf coast and in Florida.

The male Redwings fly into their Kentucky breeding grounds in mid February. I find that the average date of return is February 17. They got here a day early this year. Most male red-wings fly on through the state to more northern climes, and the females don't arrive until about a month later. The males that breed here immediately set up territories, limited geographic spaces in which they lure females and build nests and mate and raise their young. Without a territory, the males aren't permitted to breed. So males have to be very aggressive and set up the largest territories they can defend against other competing males. They seek conspicuous perches, on fence posts or the tops of trees, where they sing loudly and

display their brilliant wing colors. They sing to other males because the females are not here yet. They are a polygynous species, where one male breeds with a number of females within its territory. They raise two to four broods a year locally, building their nests near lakes and ponds on emergent vegetation. They are especially noisy animals, and have a distinct raucous *Oak-A-Lee* call. The males have magnificent colors, glossy black and red and yellow shoulder feathers. The females are drab, and streaked brown, and don't look at all like the males, except in their beaks.



I hope you will join me in searching for these beautiful birds, the true harbingers of spring here. They are much nicer to look at than the groundhog that gets all of the publicity in February. The Red Wings know where the sun is, and respond to increasing photoperiod in the spring by doing their spring migration. They are around all summer, and depart again for Florida usually in early October, flying in great flocks accompanied by cowbirds, grackles, and other Icterid birds. I am always glad when they return to Kentucky.

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