Yellow-headed blackbird
*Xanthocephalus xanthocephalus*

If you’ve seen a blackbird in Illinois, you’ve likely seen the red-winged blackbird, a common inhabitant of our local wetlands. They are easily recognized as a black bird with a splash of red on either wing. Substitute a flash of yellow and you’ve got another local resident, the male yellow-headed blackbird.

They are moderately-sized black birds, brightly colored with white wing-patches and black masks on a golden-yellow head. Females are smaller than males and have brownish-black bodies, no wing-bars, and yellowish-brown heads. Unfortunately, their “song” doesn’t match their pretty feathers. Rather than a lovely trill, this blackbird sounds more like a rusty gate swinging in the wind.

The yellow-headed blackbird is resident of marshy areas throughout western North America, particularly in the central prairie regions. Illinois is well within their summer nesting area. They are particularly fond of cattail marshes, especially in large wetlands with open water. Yellow-headed blackbirds migrate south to Mexico every winter.

Yellow-headed blackbirds breed in colonies. Each male will have 2 to 3 mates. Females do most of the work raising the chicks. The female builds the nest, which is an open cup made of leaves and grass, and lashes it to cattails growing over the water. The female typically lays 3 to 5 eggs which they incubate for about 12 days. The young leave the nest 9 to 12 days after hatching, but stay nearby until they can fly. They rely on their mother to feed them for a few days after they fledge. They like eating insects and seeds, which are abundant in their marshy habitat.

The main enemy of the yellow-headed blackbird is the marsh wren (surprisingly, it’s a much smaller bird). The wren competes for nesting space and will attack the blackbird’s eggs and young. Crows and grackles also raid the nests to feed on the eggs and young. Yellow-headed blackbirds are common throughout their range. Major threats include agricultural pesticides and loss of habitat.

**Blackbird Fun Facts**
- A group of blackbirds can be called a “cloud” or “merl” of blackbirds.
- Large flocks of blackbirds move in a rolling fashion (i.e. birds from the back of the flock fly over the rest to the front, and so on, like leapfrog).
- Yellow-headed blackbirds have one of the most unique bird calls. It has been described as a strange mixture of honking, gurgling, and strangling noises; or the grating of a rusty hinge.
- Blackbirds follow behind farm machinery, taking advantage of food churned up by plows and combines.