

SUBMISSION TO THE NWMB FOR

Information:

Decision: X

Issue: Approval of the proposed Management Plan for the Rusty Blackbird in Canada, pursuant to the *Species at Risk Act* (SARA)

Background:

Rusty Blackbird is a medium-sized song bird that is found only in North America and is found breeding in the boreal forest in every Canadian province and territory (Figure 1). Although it is found mainly in forested areas below the treeline some have been seen in Nunavut. They are known to occur in the Arviat area, and there have also been sightings in Cambridge Bay and possibly Kugluktuk. Rusty Blackbird was assessed in 2006 by the Committee on the Status of Endangered Wildlife in Canada (COSEWIC) as a species of special concern and was listed as such in Schedule 1 of the *Species at Risk Act* (SARA) in 2009.

Over 70% of the breeding range of the Rusty Blackbird is in Canada's boreal forest and the population is believed to have declined by 85% between 1966 and 2003. The population is still showing declines but at a slower rate. The decline of Rusty Blackbird is believed to be because of the changing of wetlands in their wintering grounds in the southern United States to other types of habitat. Other reasons for their decline might be habitat loss in their breeding areas, accidental death, pollution, climate change, increased predators and increased competition for food.

Management Plan:

Under SARA, there are no requirements to restrict harvest or regulate habitat for species that are listed as Special Concern, however, there is a requirement to develop a management plan.

The management plan objective is to maintain or increase the current population level and distribution of Rusty Blackbird in Canada. Little is known about the potential threats to Rusty Blackbird survival so maintaining the current population and distribution level is the best solution for the short time. As threats are identified and better understood, the objective to increase the population and distribution will be more possible. General strategies and management activities designed to achieve this goal are set out in the proposed management plan.

There are no activities proposed in the management plan that would occur in Nunavut.

Community Consultation:

In November 2012, the three communities that we consulted during the listing process for Rusty Blackbird were contacted by letter (Arviat, Cambridge Bay and Kugluktuk).

They were provided information about the management plan and were asked to indicate to CWS if they had any concerns or information – or if they would like an in-person presentation to be held in the community. We are asking for their response by November 30th so that we may present the results at the NWMB quarterly meeting in December. We have also sent out a poster about Rusty Blackbird to Whale Cove, Rankin Inlet, Chesterfield Inlet and Baker Lake to ask if they have seen this bird and whether they would like to be consulted.

Recommendations:

The NWMB is asked to consider whether or not they wish to make a formal decision on supporting the national SARA Management Plan for Rusty Blackbird, and if so, whether or not they approve of the Management Plan.

Prepared by:
Lisa Pirie
Canadian Wildlife Service, Iqaluit

2 November 2012

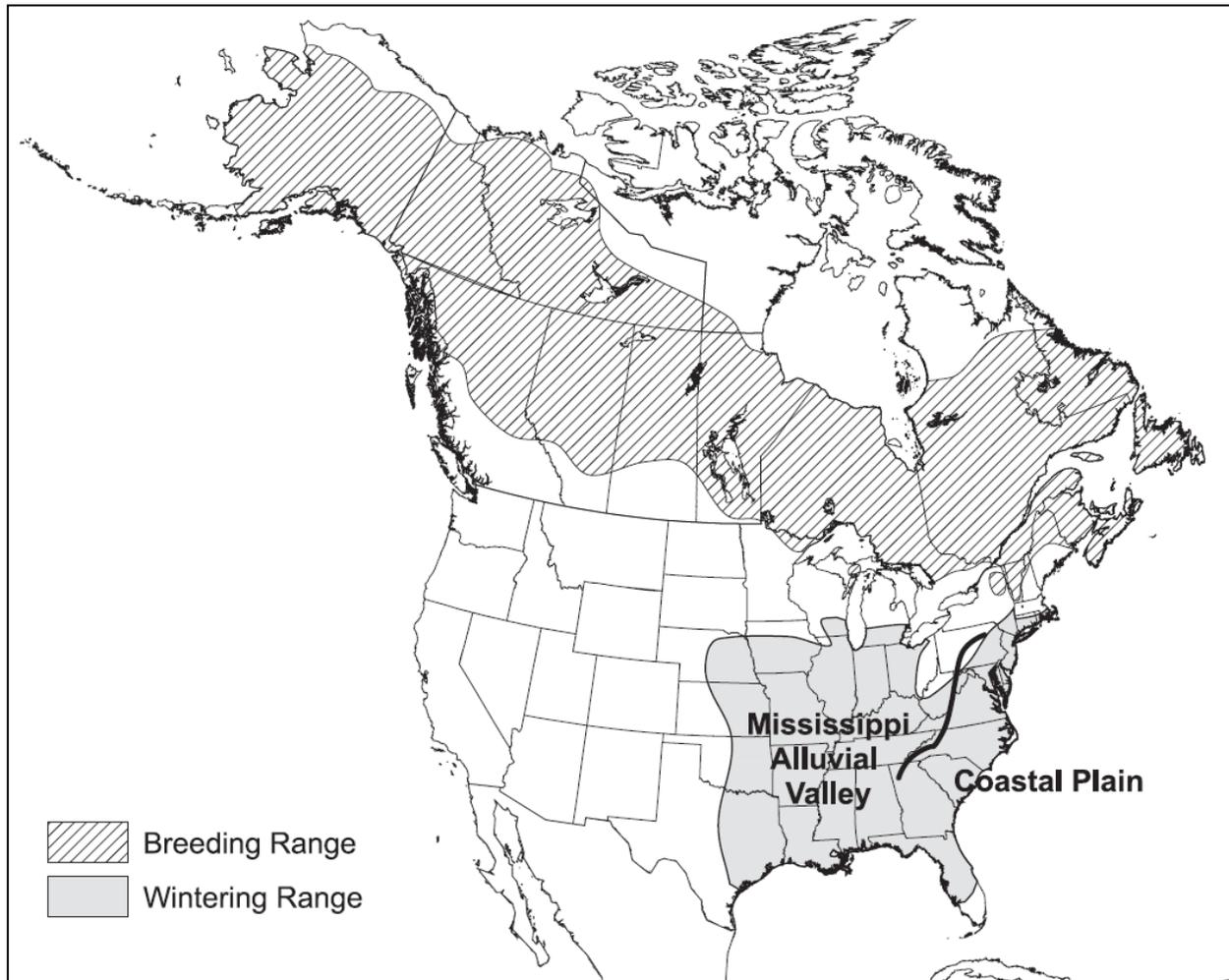


Figure 1. This figure shows where Rusty Blackbirds range during the breeding season and during the winter.

**Proposed Management Plan for the Rusty Blackbird
(*Euphagus carolinus*) in Canada**

SUMMARY

This is a summary of the information provided in the proposed management plan for Rusty Blackbird. Rusty Blackbird was listed as a species of special concern under the *Species at Risk Act* in 2009.



Date of Assessment: April 2006

Common Name (population): Rusty Blackbird

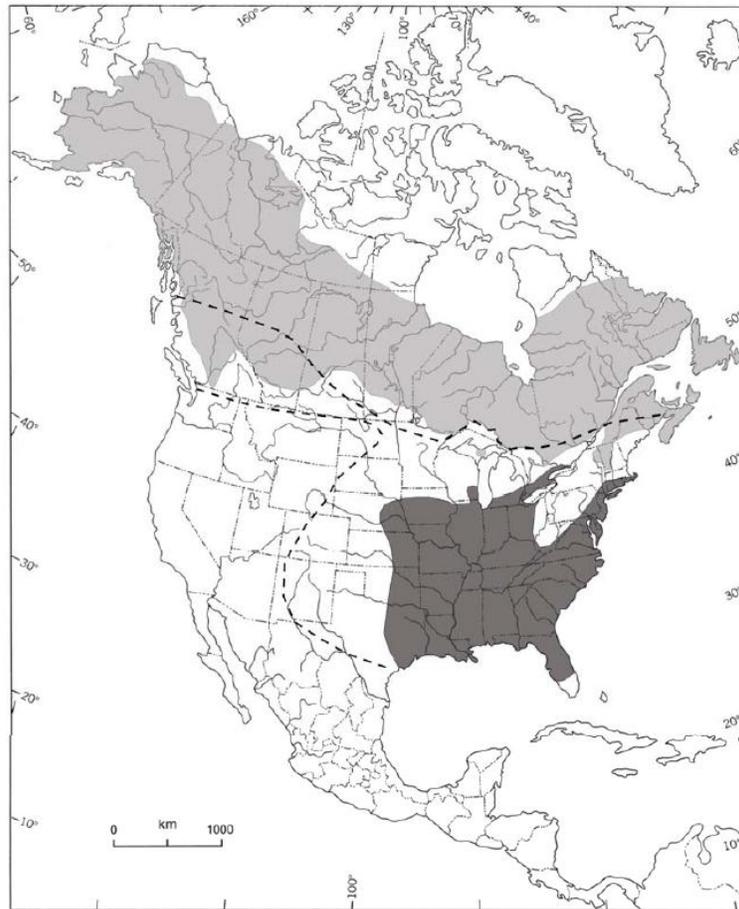
Scientific Name: *Euphagus carolinus*

COSEWIC Status: Special Concern

Reason for Designation: More than 70% of the breeding range of the species is in Canada's boreal forest. The species has experienced a severe decline that appears to be ongoing, albeit at a slower rate. There is no evidence to suggest that this trend will be reversed. Known threats occur primarily on the winter range, and include habitat conversion and blackbird control programs in the United States.

Canadian Occurrence: Prince Edward Island, Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, Newfoundland and Labrador, Québec, Ontario, Manitoba, Saskatchewan, Alberta, British Columbia, Yukon, Northwest Territories and Nunavut.

COSEWIC Status History: Designated Special Concern in April 2006.



This is Figure 1 from the proposed management plan. It shows breeding and wintering locations for Rusty Blackbird in North America. The dark grey shading indicates wintering areas and the light gray shading represents breeding areas. Rusty Blackbird also winters irregularly within the dotted line.

The proposed management plan is a plan that sets the goals and objectives for maintaining sustainable population levels for Rusty Blackbird, a species that is sensitive to environmental changes but is not in danger of becoming extinct.

This summary is based on the information in the full English version of the Rusty Blackbird management plan.

The original English copy of the proposed management plan has been provided to the Nunavut Wildlife Management Board for reference.

Information about Rusty Blackbird (pages 4-8)

This section of the proposed management plan for Rusty Blackbird provides some information such as what they look like, their population and distribution in Canada, nesting and wintering biology, and their needs during the breeding and non-breeding seasons.

- Rusty Blackbird is a medium-sized songbird. Both males and females have long, pointed wings, pale yellow eyes, black feet, and slightly curved black bills that are shorter than the head. During the breeding season, adult males are all black with a shiny green colour on the body and a shiny purple colour on the head and neck. In the non-breeding season they are rusty brown coloured. Females are slate grey and have a shiny blue-green colour during the breeding season. In the non-breeding season females have a pale line above the eye and are generally rusty coloured with a grey back, tail and wings.
- Rusty Blackbird is found in every province and territory in Canada.
- They breed throughout the boreal forest region in wetlands.
- They winter throughout most of the eastern United States and sometimes in southern portions of many Canadian provinces.
- Rusty Blackbird wintering populations are believed to have declined by approximately 85% between 1966 and 2003.
- During the winter they occur in forested wetlands.
- Rusty Blackbird eats insects as well as aquatic invertebrates such as snails and insect larvae. In the winter and during migration they also eat nuts, seeds, berries and fruit.

Threats to Rusty Blackbird (pages 8-12)

This section of the proposed management plan describes the things that might cause Rusty Blackbird populations to drop. In order of highest concern, there are nine main threats to Rusty Blackbird:

- **Wetland conversion** – the loss of boreal wooded wetlands due to activities such as agricultural development, peat production, timber harvesting, oil and gas activities and flooding of reservoirs.
- **Logging** – deforestation of boreal forests.
- **Mercury contamination** – exposure to mercury can decrease reproductive success and cause other changes that can lead to death.
- **Wetland acidification** – increase in the acidity of wetlands can cause changes in wetland ecology such as a change in food availability.
- **Climate change and drying wetlands** – the drying of wetland habitat may reduce the availability of nesting habitat and food availability for Rusty Blackbirds.
- **Blackbird control programs** – Rusty Blackbirds are often killed by programs designed to control problematic blackbird species because they tend to roost in mixed flocks with other blackbirds.
- **Changes in surface hydrology** - wetland drainage, water level fluctuations, water diversions and displacement of underground waters could impact Rusty Blackbird due to their requirement for wetland habitat.
- **Altered predator and competitor species competition** - the invasion of more dominant species such as Red-winged Blackbird and Common Grackle may have an impact because these species may act aggressively towards Rusty Blackbird.

- **Disease and parasites** - the high amount of parasites found in Rusty Blackbirds on the wintering grounds suggests that these birds may be stressed and/or have compromised immune systems.

Management Actions (pages 12-16)

The objective of this management plan is to first maintain, and then to increase the current population level of Rusty Blackbird, resulting in a healthy, stable population in Canada.

A number of actions have already been completed or are underway in an effort to meet the management objective, including: monitoring programs, the development of an international working rough to help identify potential threats, a migration banding program, localized monitoring studies, migration studies, localized management plans, contaminant studies and an International Conservation Strategy.

The broad strategies of the management plan are to:

- Identify and better understand threats to Rusty Blackbird everywhere it occurs.
- Mitigate threats to Rusty Blackbird.
- Gain a better understanding of Rusty Blackbird population sizes, trends, distribution and habitat requirements in Canada.
- Encourage and carry out collaborations pertaining to management and conservation-related activities throughout the Rusty Blackbirds' range.

There are a number of conservation measures to be taken identified in the management plan ranging from high to low priority. The high priority conservation measures will include:

- Investigating historical changes in distribution and abundance.

- Assess the role of mercury and other contaminants in population declines.
- Further determine the impact of habitat changes on reproductive success.
- Address Rusty Blackbird requirements in any new or updated management plans for public lands, environmental assessments and forestry planning initiatives.
- Determine the level of protection for Rusty Blackbirds by provincial and territorial laws and encourage additional protection where necessary.
- Identify, encourage and facilitate conservation of key sites that are not currently conserved.
- Determine breeding and post-breeding distribution and habitat use within Canada.
- Assess the quality of available population and abundance data across the breeding grounds and identify knowledge gaps.
- Encourage citizen-based reporting of Rusty Blackbirds.
- Establish population-wide surveys to assess and monitor site occupancy, population trends and distributional patterns.

Success of the management objective will be evaluated every five years to determine if:

- The population of Rusty Blackbird has been maintained or increased in comparison to its current level.