

ABOUT THE COVER

American Redstart

The American Redstart (*Setophaga ruticilla*) is one of our most colorful and active wood warblers, flashing bright orange or yellow in its wings and tail as it pirouettes or sallies forth to catch insects on the wing. Redstarts are unmistakable, with the male's black head, breast, wings, back, and tail contrasting sharply with orange and white below and wing and basal tail patches of vivid orange. In females the black is replaced by gray and the orange by yellow. Immature males resemble females, probably an adaptation for avoiding confrontations with aggressive adult males. American Redstarts are a monotypic genus, more closely related to *Dendroica* warblers than to the Painted Redstarts of the southwest. No subspecies are currently recognized.

American Redstarts are widely distributed across North America, breeding from coastal southern Alaska across southern Canada to Newfoundland, and south on the East Coast to Virginia, and inland to near the Gulf Coast. They are patchily distributed across the northern United States to Washington. They winter from southern California south through Baja California, along both coasts of Mexico, and throughout Central America and the Caribbean to northern South America. On their wintering grounds the sexes often segregate, with males inhabiting the moist forest and females more open woodlands and thickets. They tend to be site-faithful on both breeding and wintering grounds. Redstarts are nocturnal migrants, making the trans-Gulf migration in March and April, and arriving in Massachusetts in mid-May. They begin their fall migration in July, but peak migration in Massachusetts is not until late August to mid-September.

American Redstarts are considered seasonally monogamous, although in one study up to thirty percent of males were polygynous, establishing up to three territories after the original female began incubation. Females, as well, are often seen in the company of neighboring males. DNA analysis suggests that up to forty percent of nestlings are sired by other than the resident male. Pairs produce a single brood. They prefer large tracts of open, second-growth woodland, often near water. The male's territorial song consists of a series of regularly spaced high-frequency notes or phrases, variously described as combinations of *see*, *tsit*, *tsee*, *tsee-bit*, *wee-see*, *tseet*, *weechy*, and *tzirr* with assorted *chips*, *zeeps* and *tsips*. Courtship displays include a fluffed display and bow displays. The male frequently sings while following or leading the female. Agonistic displays in this highly territorial species include ritualized circle flights on stiff wings at territorial boundaries, or gliding and chasing. Nonaerial displays include the head-forward display with bill open and tail spread or cocked.

The female selects the nest site, usually ten to twenty feet from the ground. The nest is an open cup of woven bark, grass, and other plant fibers, glued together with spiderweb. The nest is lined with fine plant fibers, feathers, or deer hair. Redstarts sometimes refurbish and use old nests of other species. The usual clutch is four creamy eggs variously spotted or blotched reddish brown. Only the female develops a

brood patch and incubates, although the male sometimes brings her food. Both parents perform elaborate distraction displays, with tail spread and wings fluttering, at the approach of a potential predator. Incubation lasts ten or eleven days. The female does the brooding, and after about nine days the young leave the nest. The brood is then divided between the parents, and the young may be accompanied by the adults for weeks. The young are fed a diet of insects.

American Redstarts are very active foragers from ground to canopy, pirouetting and flashing their wing and tail color patterns, presumably to startle prey into movement. They eat a broad spectrum of insect prey, including leafhoppers, flies, wasps, moths, and insect larvae. They also are prone to hawking — flycatcher-like sorties after flying insects. They are morphologically convergent with flycatchers, possessing flattened bills, prominent rictal bristles, and proportionally large tail and wing surface area, and they actively compete with Least Flycatchers on their breeding grounds.

American Redstarts prefer large tracts of open woodland, and hence have suffered from urbanization and forest fragmentation in North America and on their wintering grounds, particularly in the Caribbean. Ironically, their numbers have decreased in New England due to reforestation! As with most nocturnal migrants, many are killed annually in collisions with towers, and the problem has been exacerbated by the proliferation of cellular phones and their associated transmission towers. They are subject to the usual pressures of accipiter predation, cowbird nest parasitism, and loss of eggs and chicks to avian, mammalian, and reptilian nest predators. Yet they remain one of New England's most common and much-appreciated warblers.

William E. Davis, Jr.

About the Cover Artist

Julie Zickefoose is a widely published natural history writer and artist. Educated at Harvard University in biology and art, she worked for six years as a field biologist for The Nature Conservancy before turning to a freelance career. Her observations on the natural history and behavior of birds stem from more than three decades of experience in the field. With her husband Bill Thompson III, Editor of *Bird Watcher's Digest*, and their two children, Phoebe and Liam, Julie lives on an 80-acre nature sanctuary in the Appalachian foothills of southeast Ohio. A 42-foot tall bird-watching tower atop their home helps them enjoy and catalogue the wildlife of the sanctuary, which includes 174 bird species and 73 butterflies to date. Julie's art and writings may be seen at <http://www.juliezickefoose.com>.

