

Rare bird alert: Yellow-headed blackbird spotted at Migratory Bird Sanctuary across the river

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WEST ALTON – A rare bird (for this area) was sighted at the Audubon Migratory Bird Sanctuary in West Alton.

A yellow-headed blackbird, scientifically known as *Xanthocephalus xanthocephalus* was spotted by several “hardcore birders” at the sanctuary in recent weeks. While not

necessarily a rare bird, the Audubon Field Guide for North American Birds lists the habitat of the blackbird, which sports a very vibrant yellow head – as its name suggests – is as far east as Michigan in rare amounts, but no further south than Rockford, Illinois. They are more common further west in states like Nebraska, Colorado, Montana and Idaho. The field guide does not even denote the Riverbend as any sort of range for the migratory songbird, which should currently be on a route south to Texas and Mexico.

“This may sound like an oxymoron, but rare birds are common here,” Audubon Migratory Bird Sanctuary Director Ken Buchholz said Wednesday afternoon. “This one is not nearly as rare as the snowy owl we had here a few years back, but it's still pretty rare. There are so many birds that come here, though, that it's almost hard not to spot a rare bird or two.”

While the yellow-headed blackbird may be quite the sight for people who have never seen one with its beautiful yellow breast and face, the field guide describes its call as a “hoarse harsh scraping.” Their usual habitat is to nest in “noisy colonies in big cattail marshes of the west and Midwest; when not nesting, they gather in flocks in open fields, often with other blackbirds.”

In spots in the Southwest, this Riverbend rarity can be seen in massive flocks, much like starlings and its cousin the red-wing blackbird do during migratory flocks in the Riverbend. In fact, the area around West Alton does fit the habitat qualifications of the bird, despite not being within its range.