

## UNIQUE FLIGHT FORMATION OF BLACKBIRDS

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It is common knowledge that the constant decline of the bird population of North America would result in a critical situation. The alarming reports of the Department of Conservation and the publications of the Audubon Societies add an atmosphere of realism that is anything but encouraging. Early American literature abounds in narratives of birds filling the air so as to blot out the sun, of birds crowding so thickly on trees as to break the branches, and of birds covering the sky from one horizon to the other. We generally think of such facts as being true only of the past, not as a feature of our time. It would seem to be a rare

experience to observe any such phenomenon today.

The purpose of this paper is to report and describe such a flight formation of red-wing blackbirds, now almost a feature of the past, as observed a few months ago.

The formations were observed in the vicinity of Reelfoot Lake, situated in the extreme northwestern corner of Tennessee. While driving south on the Jefferson Davis Highway just outside the limits of Union City on December 21, 1940, at 4:25 P. M., I saw a long, black column of flying birds coming from the east. As the column passed overhead it

was possible to see the individual birds. The formation bent and swayed as it passed through the air. The birds were about one hundred feet above the ground and flew so closely together that the column was only about fifteen feet in width. I watched the passing birds for twenty minutes and yet the end of the column was not in sight. Within the next four miles, two more such formations were seen, stretching from horizon to horizon. The flight direction was toward the west.

Near Troy, Tennessee, sixteen miles south, two more of these long, snake-like, swaying columns of birds passed overhead. These birds were also about one hundred feet above the ground and the columns about fifteen feet in width. Flight direction had shifted, as the birds were now coming from the southeast; the columns extended from one horizon to the other.

On December 30, at 4:20 P. M., while driving north on the Jefferson Davis Highway between Troy and Union City, I sighted six columns of these birds, similar in every respect to those reported

on December 21. From the residents of this section I learned that these flights are a common sight each morning after dawn and each evening a short time before sundown. The birds head toward Reelfoot Lake. According to my compass observations, the birds would reach the central portion of the lake. Hunters who know this region verified my observations by stating that the birds settle in the central portion of the lake to feed and rest.

I conclude, therefore, it is still possible to witness one of these rare bird flights which are recorded in the literature of years ago. It is an unusual experience to observe these swaying columns of red-wing blackbirds whose formations stretch from horizon to horizon. A complete record of these flight formations of the Reelfoot Lake region would be extremely valuable. It would be advantageous to know, among many other facts, if such flights encompassed the entire lake, where and how the formation disseminates as well as the methods of growth, the range of the birds, and the daily and seasonal variation of these "regular" blackbird flights.

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