

# DEPARTMENT of the INTERIOR

news release

FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE

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## YELLOW-SHOULDERED BLACKBIRD OF PUERTO RICO PROPOSED AS ENDANGERED SPECIES

The yellow-shouldered blackbird, a relative of the U.S. "red-wing" and a resident of Puerto Rico, has been proposed for listing as an endangered species and its critical habitat has been proposed for formal delineation, Interior's U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service announced today.

The proposal was published in the June 9, 1976, Federal Register. Public comments are invited through August 8, 1976. Comments should be addressed to the Director, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Washington, D.C. 20240.

The yellow-shouldered blackbird nests and roosts in the coastal mangroves and small offshore cays of Puerto Rico and Mona Island. The natural lay of the land within the bird's present range is being rapidly altered and lost permanently because of intense development.

Additionally, disease and pillaging of nests by other birds are probably the other most significant factors pulling the rug out from under the yellow-shouldered blackbird. The shiny cowbird is its avian nemesis. This competitor began invading Puerto Rico from Trinidad and the Antilles about 1955. By 1975, it had free-loaded its way into 74 percent of the yellow-shouldered blackbird's nests. This significantly lowered nesting success because the cowbirds shoulder enough of the blackbirds' eggs over the side of the nests they invade to make room for their own. Then they lay their eggs and leave them to be hatched and raised by the blackbirds.

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Cowbird young are bigger than blackbird young so they hog all the food the surrogate parents bring to the nest. In a recent survey, it was found that only 25 percent of nests invaded like this produced any young blackbirds at all. By contrast 50 percent of undisturbed blackbird nests were productive.

As if this wasn't trouble enough, the blackbirds have to contend with three other nest robbers--the black rat, the Norway rat, and the mongoose. All three delight in tearing up yellow-shouldered blackbird nests and eating the eggs. As a result the blackbirds usually seek nest sites on small mangrove islands or in cactus and palm leaves, where those predators are few.

Fowl pox currently infects about 19 percent of the adult population. In southwest Puerto Rico, where the major blackbird population lives, the annual adult death rate to this disease is about 31 percent. The annual production of adults, on the other hand, is only about 10 percent, a figure which indicates that the yellow-shouldered blackbird has about 5 years left before extinction.

There currently exist no regulations pertaining to the protection and conservation of this bird. Moreover, the use of broad spectrum rat poisons such as alpha-chloralose, placed around monkey feeders on two monkey islands in southwest Puerto Rico, has resulted in the death of some yellow-shouldered blackbirds which fed on the poison baits.

The proposed critical habitat for this bird was described in detail in the Federal Register notice. As comments are received, these areas will be more precisely defined. They are proposed to include the entirety of Mona Island plus a sizable portion of coastal Puerto Rico.

All Federal departments and agencies would be required to ensure that actions authorized, funded, or carried out by them do not result in the destruction or modification of the critical habitat of the yellow-shouldered blackbird found within the areas delineated.

Until the issuance of additional guidelines, all Federal departments and agencies should consult with the Secretary of the Interior with respect to any actions which might reasonably be expected to affect critical habitat within the delineated areas.

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