

THE BALTIMORE ORIOLE

Maryland's Beloved Songster and State Bird

Sarah M. Andrews, BU1834



State Bird

The Baltimore Oriole (*Icterus galbula*), with its distinctive black and bright orange coloring and melodious voice, is a familiar songbird across much of eastern North America. The species is especially well-known and loved in Maryland, where it has been the official state bird since 1947, and was first adopted as the name of a Baltimore baseball team in the 1880s.

These birds are seen most often among the high branches of deciduous trees in open woodlands and forest edges as well as urban parks and suburban areas. The male is easily identified by its orange under parts and rump, black head and upper back, black and white wings, and black tail tipped with orange.

The female is less brightly colored, with a mottled orange-gray head, orange under parts, and gray wings with white wing bars. Baltimore Orioles eat caterpillars, insects, spiders, and fruits and can be attracted to backyard feeding stations with halved oranges or oriole feeders stocked with sugar water. During breeding season, the female may spend about a week, sometimes two, weaving a pendant nest in which she will lay between three and seven eggs.



Female

The birds are Neotropical migrants, wintering in the West Indies and from southern Mexico through Central America into the northwest portions of South America. The Baltimore Oriole is one of many species that have suffered declines from pesticide use and loss of wintering habitat, particularly as shade trees have been cleared for coffee plantations.

The common name "Baltimore Oriole" can be traced to the colonial era, when Europeans associated the bird's coloring with the colors of the Calvert family (the Lords Baltimore), the 17th-century proprietors of the Maryland colony. The "Baltimore-Bird" was one of many "Birds and beasts of Curiosity" ordered shipped to England in 1698 to grace the royal gardens (Archives of Maryland 23: 455-56). In 1731, naturalist Mark Catesby illustrated the "Baltimore Bird" in *The Natural History of Carolina, Florida and the Bahama Islands*, and in 1758, Linnaeus named the species *Coracias galbula* (the small yellowish jackdaw).



Audubon Illustration

The birds were commonly called orioles because of their resemblance to the Old World Orioles, to which they are not closely related. When John James Audubon depicted the species and its pendant nest in *The Birds of America*, published between 1827 and 1838, he called it the Baltimore Oriole.

Baltimore Orioles are known to hybridize with Bullock's Orioles (*Icterus bullocki*) where their ranges overlap in the Great Plains, and the two species were lumped into one, the Northern Oriole, in 1983. But, happily for Marylanders and Baltimore baseball fans, Northern Oriole was split once again to Baltimore and Bullock's orioles in 1995. Also happily, the bird is seen regularly across Maryland during the spring and summer months.



Bullock's Oriole

Source:

Rising, James D. and Nancy J. Flood. 1998. *Baltimore Oriole (Icterus galbula)*, *The Birds of North America Online* (A. Poole, Ed.). Ithaca: Cornell Lab of Ornithology; Retrieved from the Birds of North America Online: <http://bna.birds.cornell.edu.bnaproxy.birds.cornell.edu/bna/species/384>.

[Ed. note: Ms. Andrews is a relatively recent member of the Biology Unit. She quickly responded to my appeal for an article with the above result. Perhaps I can use this example to convince you longer-term members to provide an article of your own. Get busy.]