

Fact sheet for Teachers: All About Orioles

Why do orioles matter?

The **Baltimore oriole** is one of North America's most spectacular songbirds. Though not endangered or especially rare at present, the national bird conservation project Partners-in-Flight has listed the Baltimore oriole as a species whose population may be declining and that should be monitored. The species nests in parks, orchards, and along tree-lined urban and suburban streets throughout Massachusetts and can therefore be located by anyone willing to learn how to recognize its distinctive plumage and song.

Here are some ideas on how you can involve your students:

To see how this project ties into the Massachusetts Learning Standards, please see our website:

www.massaudubon.org/oriole/index.php?type=teachers

Talk about the type of habitat orioles like (see below). Then take a walk around your schoolyard listening for any birds and looking for nests and Baltimore orioles! When you are finished, fill out the data cards online

www.massaudubon.org/orioledata, or send them in to the Oriole Project, Mass Audubon, 208 South Great Road, Lincoln, MA 01773.

Have you talked about the biology of animals or humans? Have students draw copies of the oriole pictures on Mass Audubon's website and have them identify the different parts of the oriole and what makes it unique. How is an oriole different from a cardinal? A robin? A blue jay?

Use maps to track the lifecycle of the oriole, from wintering grounds to nesting areas (www.massaudubon.org/oriole/index.php?type=where). Discuss the stages of life that make up a lifecycle, and the various habitat needs of birds at different stages.

Look up pictures of various nests of different birds in field guides. Using materials either in the classroom, or outside, or both, have students build these different nests. Then take a walk around your school listening for any birds and looking in trees for nests. Look and listen for Baltimore orioles. When you are finished, fill out the data cards online or send them in to Mass Audubon.

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What birds are orioles related to?

New England orioles belong to the blackbird family, and are related to grackles and cowbirds.

How did the oriole get its name?

“Oriole” either comes from “oriolus” which imitates the liquid song of the Golden Oriole from Eurasia or from the Latin *aureolus* meaning golden.

How big is an oriole?

Adults are 7-8 inches (17.5-20 cm) long and weigh 1.25 ounces (35g) or approximately the weight of 6 quarters.

What does an oriole look like?

Males and females have different color patterns. Adult males are flame orange on the body with black head and wings. Adult females are a dull brown where the males are black and dull yellow where the males are orange. First year birds of both sexes are pale grayish brown with tinges of olive and yellow-orange breasts and tails.

What does an oriole sound like?

A male oriole’s song is a rich, clear, loud whistle, which typically includes short, two-note phrases. Females sing, but less frequently and with shorter songs than males. Both sexes give a chatter call in competitive interactions and in response to potential predators.

What does an oriole eat?

Orioles usually feed on insects, spiders, caterpillars, fruits and nectar found in high or midlevel trees.

Do orioles migrate?

Orioles do migrate. They spend winters in places that include southern Mexico and Florida, Cuba, Jamaica, and northern Ecuador. Around the beginning of February, they leave these wintering grounds and arrive in Massachusetts the first week in May. By August, they head back down south to winter in warmer climates.

What kind of habitat do orioles like?

Orioles like open deciduous forests, with a preference for edges, such as woodlands along streams and park-like landscapes with scattered trees. Orioles thrive in suburban and urban areas with mature trees and in orchards. In particular, orioles like tall American elms, American sycamores, cottonwood and

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maples. For wintering grounds, orioles prefer open habitats such as plantations with shade trees and both wet and dry open forest.

What kind of nests do they have?

Orioles live in nests in trees. A teardrop shaped nest is attached near the tips of a tree's outer branches. In winter, these nests can be easy to spot, but in spring and summer they are well concealed by leaves. Nests are usually 15-30 feet from the ground.

What is the nest made of?

Typical nest materials are plant fibers, hair, wool, and synthetics (e.g. plastic fibers, cellophane); lining is formed with plant down and feathers. Baltimore Orioles often steal materials from other nests in the area.

What do the eggs look like?

The eggs are oval and very small – about an inch long and a ½ inch wide. They are pale grayish to bluish white, irregularly streaked and blotched with lavender, brown and/or black lines. They are smooth and slightly glossy. Orioles typically lay 4-5 eggs in a nest, and the peak of egg laying is late May to early June.

How long do orioles live?

The maximum recorded lifespan is 11 years, 7 months in the wild, and 14 years in captivity.

What are orioles like when they hatch?

Baby orioles weigh 2 grams when they hatch, or about “the weight of a dime.” They grow to adult size in 11-14 days. They stay in the nest for 12-13 days after hatching. The oriole parents continue to feed the young for up to 2 weeks after young leave the nest.

Much of the information in this summary comes from: Rising, J.D. and N.J. Flood 1998. Baltimore Oriole (Icterus galbula). In The Birds of North America, No.384 (A. Poole and F. Gill, eds.). The Birds of North America, Inc., Philadelphia, PA. The BNA should be cited if longer passages are used, e.g. in interpretive materials.