

Conservation Corner

By Corinne Peterson
Pocahontas County Naturalist



May 25, 2016

Spring is flying by! High above the nodding and blooming violet wildflowers, another small miracle of spring has arrived to spend the summer on our farm. Think color, nest, song, and baseball.

If you guessed our summer visitors are a pair of Baltimore Orioles, you're right. Or, as Edgar Fawcett described them, "a scrap of sunset with a voice." Baltimore Orioles, *Icterus galbula*, are named for the Old World family Oriolidae, but though similar in looks they are not closely related. Instead, Baltimore Orioles are members of the Icteridae family of blackbirds and meadowlarks, medium-sized songbirds with thick necks, long legs, and the long, thick-based, pointed bills of all blackbirds that correspond to their diet of fruit, nectar, and insects.

Baltimore Orioles are specifically named after the black and orange coat-of-arms of England's Baltimore family. Adult males are the most flamboyant with their flame orange breast, solid black head, and one white wing bar. Females and immature males, meanwhile, have a yellow-orange breast, grayish head, and two white wing bars.

Baltimore Orioles are known for their tightly woven hanging nests anchored high in the tree branches. Females weave the sock-like nest in three layers from materials such as grass, grapevine bark, wool, horsehair, twine, fishing line, or recycled materials from last year's nest. Males don't do any actual weaving but may occasionally help gather materials.

Baltimore Orioles are also known for their song – a rich, whistling melody that may be heard echoing across the tops of leafy deciduous trees. Their song often gives them away before they are seen. In open woodlands, parks, and backyards across Eastern North America, their song is a welcome prelude to summer as the Orioles return from the coffee and cacao plantations of Central America.

Baltimore Orioles also play baseball – at least at Baltimore's Camden Yards. These Orioles are also off to a flying start this year and are currently perched atop the AL East. Perhaps you remember watching Brooks Robinson, a/k/a Mr. Oriole, Cal Ripken, Jr., Frank Robinson, Jim Palmer, or Eddie Murray as they hit, pitched, and flew around the bases in their orange and black feathers. Did you know Maryland is the only state with the Baltimore Oriole as its state bird?

Hanging orange halves from tree branches is a quick and simple way to attract a burst of sunset and song to your backyard or garden. Orioles also enjoy grape jelly, just be sure to offer this treat in small quantities as large amounts may soil their feathers. To keep them returning year after year, plant fruit and nectar sources such as raspberries, crabapples, and trumpet vines.

I'll close with a verse from "Bird Song" by Laura E. Richards.

The robin sings of willow-buds,
of snowflakes on the green;
the bluebird sings of Mayflowers,
the crackling leaves between;
the veery has a thousand tales
to tell to girl and boy;
but the oriole, the oriole,
sings, "Joy! Joy! Joy!"

