Hands On Learning
with Reading Museum Service

READING MUSEUM SERVICE

GOLDEN ORIOLE Z90

(Oriolus oriolus)

Description



The golden oriole is a rare and exotic bird in the UK. The blackbird-sized male has an unmistakable bright yellow body with black wings. The female is generally a drab greenish colour. Despite brilliant colouring, orioles are often difficult to see slipping through the foliage where sun, shade and trembling leaves create a broken pattern of black and yellow - perfect for hiding from prying eyes. They can be heard, most often at dawn, giving their distinctive fluting whistle. They fly rather like a thrush - slightly undulating.

The golden oriole winters in Africa. In the summer it travels north to southern and central Europe to breed. A few pairs overshoot and arrive in Britain (East Anglia). They arrive in mid May and stay until August. They are dependent on black poplar plantations. In most years, the East Anglia colony provides the only British breeding records.

The golden oriole may have been more widespread in the UK in the early medieval period. In the nineteenth century the few golden orioles that made it here were hunted and had their eggs collected. By the early twentieth century the bird was extinct in Britain. In the 1960s the East Anglian breeding colony at Lakenheath was discovered, although its existence was kept a secret for several years.

Large-scale planting of hybrid black poplars took place in the fens during the 1950s and 1960s. Most of these plantations are now mature and many will be felled or will deteriorate due to old age during the early twenty-first century. The RSPB has launched a campaign to double the area of poplars in agricultural land in the fens to preserve the British population. Each pair of orioles needs between 400 and 1000 poplars at least seven years old within a square kilometre of woodland.



UK Distribution



Reading Borough Council

Heritage Lottery Fund

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Vital Statistics

Eggs: 3-4
Incubation: 16-17 days
Fledging: 16-17 days
Maximum recorded lifespan: 14 years
Length: 24cm
Wingspan: 44-47cm
Weight: 56-79g
UK breeding population: 9-42 pairs
UK passage: 85 birds



What does it eat?
Insects and fruit, found in the tree canopies.

What does it sound like?
A fluty, whistling 'weela-weeoo'. The female makes cat-like squalls.

Breeding
Courtship begins soon after they arrive in Britain and the displays are spectacular. The male pursues the female at high speeds through and above the trees, following so closely that he almost touches her tail. His every movement conforms exactly to hers; there appears to be only one bird with two pairs of wings.

Their nest is a deep closely-woven cup slung like a hammock from the branches of a horizontal fork near the end of a bough. At nesting time the parents become bold and pugnacious attacking crows, magpies, cuckoos and kestrels crossing their territory.

Did you know ...
The medieval name of the golden oriole was the *wodewale* (woodwall), which was derived from the sound the bird makes. The Dutch name for the golden oriole is still *Wielewall*.