

2026-01-09

Hi everyone,

EUROPEAN ROBIN
Rougegorge Familier

Jan. 09, 2026
Erithacus rubecula

2:10 PM

Avenue Rougemont, Montreal

Happy New Year greetings from Minda and Harle who are reporting in today to say that 2026 has begun with an auspicious avian omen when we had a precious but brief and somewhat sporadic viewing experience with a European Robin (*Erithacus rubecula*) that for the past two days has graced Avenue Rougemont in the Viauville neighborhood in Montreal (Northeast of the Botanical Gardens). The weather was miserable - cold, windy and constantly raining; even in our rain gear we felt soaked and shivering. But having several good glimpses of such an extremely rare visitor to Quebec (first e-bird listing in Canada ever!) put a bit of sunshine back in our hearts. The weather conditions that day made it impossible for us to get any decent photos of the robin and so we have relied on the kindness of our birding friends who generously allowed us to add their photos to chronicle the event.



European Robin - photo by Aaron Hywarren: Montreal 2026-01-09

Here are some notes on our trip and on the bird:

Finding the bird: Avenue Rougemont is about ten minutes drive from the Montreal Botanical Gardens; the trip from Outrement took us 35 minutes. It has been sighted in various spots along the wild grapevine covered fence and wall of the South side of this 250-metre street. It had first been seen on the fence opposite 2007 Avenue Rougemont, then at 2061, but today, and probably because the weather was so inclement, it was seen moving about in the cedar hedge at the opposite end of the street next to 2227 Avenue Rougemont.

About the bird: According to e-bird, "The European Robin has a distinctly orange face and breast and is olive-brown above, with a pale bluish-gray neck band and clean white belly. The sexes are similar in appearance. Juveniles, however, differ markedly; they lack the orange breast, and have heavily mottled brown-and-buff plumage." The European Robin is a resident of greater Europe

with 9 subspecies that span the area from the Azores and Canary Islands to the Western region of Siberia and from Scandinavia to the North Shore of Africa and the Middle East. But it very seldom arrives in North America. There are only three prior listings on the e-bird Species Map for the robin's presence in Eastern North America - one on 2023-10-13 in Newark, New Jersey, one on 2018-10-18 in Ft. Lauderdale, Florida and one on 2015-02-22 in Bucks County, Pennsylvania. So, just imagine how rare a gift it is for us to find one here in Quebec, practically in our own backyard!



European Robin - photo by Francis Stöckel: Montreal 2026-01-09

About the bird's taxonomy: The original taxonomical name for the European Robin was given by Linnaeus in 1758 as *Motacilla rubecula*, or “little red tail wagger.” The French naturalist Georges Cuvier changed the genus name to *Erithacus* in 1800 to separate the European Robin from the family of true wagtails (*Motacillidae*). *Erithacus* as a genus name has caromed about in a curious manner throughout its ornithological history. It began in ancient Greek as *Erithakos*, meaning an unspecified small bird that mimics human sounds - which could have been anything from the Gray Parrot to the Black Redstart. The name then transformed to Latin as *Erithacus*, again meaning an unspecified small bird but this time related to either the robin or to a redstart. By 1800 the genus name had moved from *Motacilla* to *Erithacus*, and as of 2006 with the separation of the Japanese and Ryuku Robins into a different genus (*Larvivora*) the European Robin has remained the sole species of the stand-alone *Erithacus* genus.

The family name, *Turdidae*, (Latin: *Turdus*=thrush) was coined by the French ornithologist, C. S. Rafinesque in 1815 to include all the known thrushes, and the European Robin was initially thought of as a member of this family. It wasn't until 1951 that it was determined that this red-breasted bird was more closely related to the family of flycatchers than the family of thrushes; the European Robin then moved from the *Turdidae* family into the family of Old-World Flycatchers or, *Muscicapidae* (Latin: *Musca*=fly, *capere*=to catch or capture). BTW: the American Robin (*Turdus migratorius*) was so named because its red breast reminded the early European settlers of the Robin Redbreast they knew so well back in the old country.

The European Robin's species name, *rubecula*, is derived from the Latin word, *ruber*, meaning red. *Rubecula* is the diminutive form of the adjective *ruber*, thus, "little red."

About the bird's common name: The singular commonality in the name of the European Robin centres on its most distinguishing field mark - the red breast or throat. In the UK the bird is traditionally known as Robin Redbreast, in French the common name is "Rougegorge" or red-throat, in German it's "Rotkehlchen" or red-throat, in Dutch it's "Roodborstje" meaning redbreast, in Spanish it's "Petirrojo" or redbreast, in Portuguese it's similar with "Peito-ruivo," as well as in Italian, "Pettiroso." So, one might ask, "Why is the current English common name 'Robin' and not 'Redbreast?'" Good question.

In the 1400's CE, it was a fancy of the English to give diminutive human first names to familiar animals, and birds in particular: there were, among many others, Jack Daw, Jack Sparrow, Jack Hern (heron), Tom Tit, Jenny Wren, Martin (swallow) and even Mag-Pie - which is derived from Mag=Margaret and Pie=piebald or black/white patched coloration. So, Robin Redbreast was no exception; Robin is a diminutive form of the name Robert. Most likely because of its abundant population in the UK and its close affiliation with farmers and gardeners the slightly more formal name, "Redbreast," was dropped in favor of people calling the bird by its more familiar first name, "Robin."

So, one might also inquire, "Why was it named 'Redbreast' or 'Red-throat' in the first place when its prominent fieldmark is so evidently orange?" A very good question that deserves a three-part sidebar into the history of the concept of "Orange:" as the name of a place, a fruit and ultimately a color.

Orange: the place. The place name of Orange dates back to 35 BCE and the establishment of the early Roman settlement, Arausio (the name of a Celtic water god), not far inland from the Côte d'Azur in Southern France. The etymology of its name is completely different than that of the fruit. Over the centuries the name of the town transformed from Arausio to Orange as the place itself transformed from a small settlement into a pricey principality. Fast-forward through years of wars, treaties and alliances and in 1544, William the Silent, a Dutch royal and statesman, acquired the Principality of Orange and changed his name to William of Orange. From then on Orange became the eponymous name and symbol of Dutch imperialism around the world. BTW: the town of Orange still exists in Southern France; it is exquisitely picturesque and historical (one of the best-preserved Roman amphitheatres around).



*Ville d'Orange
on map of France*



*Roman Amphitheatre
Orange, France*



*William the Silent aka
William 1st of Orange*



*Imperialist Flag
Dutch East India Company*



1502 Dress with Orange Color
Margaret Tudor, Queen of Scotland

What we learned from all of this history was that the concept of orange as a color entered Europe way later than the naming of birds by their significant fieldmarks. Up until 1150 CE the best that the English language could come up with was “geolurēad” or “yellow-red;” so, apparently, red was the most familiar descriptive word available at the time for identifying fieldmarks. The color orange wasn’t so named until European explorers brought back the fruit in the late 1400s; in effect the color was named after the fruit and not the other way around.

Ein temperamentvoller kleiner Vogel (One feisty little bird)

Since the adult robin's puffed out red breast acts like a red flag provocation; it's no wonder that juvenile robins sport only mottled breasts - it gives them a "fighting chance" to survive into adulthood by avoiding attacks from other adult robins.

“Sing, Sing, Sing!”

According to the website, *Wild Ambience*, “European Robin song phrases are highly variable, but usually include a short melodious warbled passage along with several drawn out, fading notes. Occasionally mimicry is included within the song. Apart from the song, European Robins make a range of other vocalisations including subsong, ‘tic’ calls and high-pitched ‘tsiiip’ sounds in alarm.” And, the European Robin is somewhat unique in the world of avian vocalization. Did you know that **both** the male and female European Robins sing? And did you know that, although they’re quiet during molting, they sing throughout the year - **both** during the Spring and Summer - as well as during the Fall and Winter? And, did you know that they sing **both** day - and night? They sing more than most birds **both** to declare their territory, as well as to attract a mate, with a fluting, warbling sound in breeding season.

Bird of myth and legend

The European Robin has been anthropomorphized over centuries to epitomize the noble human characteristics of bravery, charity, love and self-sacrifice.

In Irish folklore, the story is told of a poor father and son traveling through the woods on a cold winter’s night with only a fire to keep the hungry wolves at bay. The son was instructed to take his turn to stay awake while the father slept, so as to make certain the fire would continue to burn, but the boy eventually fell asleep. Soon the fire had died down and the wolves crept ever closer. The Robin sensing the danger flew down, stood before the smoldering fire and fanned the embers back into flames even as the heat scorched its front - and this is how the Robin acquired its red breast.

In Christian legend, the Robin beheld the suffering of Christ on the cross and flew to Him to offer help. The bird pulled at the crown of thorns and succeeded in dislodging one of the thorns, but in the process the creature smeared his front with the blood of Christ - and this is how the Robin acquired its red breast.

In the UK Robin Redbreast is still a prominent icon of Christmas, featured on many Christmas cards and decorations, especially those whose sales contribute to charitable organizations. The bird has long been fancied as a symbol of the holiday spirit to be loving and giving to others. And, the UK letter carriers of the Victorian Era were also known as “Robins” because of the red overcoats of their uniforms. Many Christmastime themes will feature both the bird and the letter carriers as messengers of love - either in person or in spirit. Thus, the traditional saying, “When Robins appear, loved ones are near.”



UK Victorian Era Letter Carrier - “Robin”



European Robins as UK Letter Carriers



UK Christmas Charity Card

Remerciements - Thanks

We would like to express our appreciation to Sabrina Jacob (member of the Club d'ornithologie d'Ahuntsic) for spotting the European Robin on her street, Avenue Rougement, and recognizing the momentous importance of identifying such an extremely rare visitor to Quebec. She acted as greeter and guide to the many birders who showed up from far and wide. Bravo, Sabrina!

And a special "tip-of-the-Tilley" to Aaron Hywarren from Ottawa and to Francis Stöckel, a member of Montreal's Bird Protection Quebec, for their amazing photos of the robin in the cedar hedge. Aaron and Francis would lament that these pictures were less than the premium quality of their usual photographic efforts, but we celebrate that, given the near biblical proportions of the weather that day, these photos are exceptional souvenirs for us of our encounter with Canada's first recorded sighting of a European Robin. Our sincere thanks go out to you both!

We hope you will have a chance to find the European Robin (in a manner that's respectful to the bird as well as the neighborhood, please) while it continues its visit here in Montreal, and we also hope that it will auger in wonderful experiences and accomplishments for you in the year ahead.

Wishing you all the very best,

Harle and Minda