

OCCASIONAL PAPERS OF THE MUSEUM OF
ZOOLOGY

LOUISIANA STATE UNIVERSITY

BATON ROUGE, LOUISIANA

A NEW SPECIES OF BLACKBIRD (*AGELAIUS*) FROM PERUBy LESTER L. SHORT¹

An apparent conflict between two entirely black, *Agelaius*-like blackbirds perched in a dead stub in a small marsh northeast of Tingo María, Department of Huanuco, central Peru, on 17 August 1968, diverted my attention from the study of a pair of woodpeckers. The blackbirds disappeared into the sedges. Shortly thereafter one of them flew to a sedge, perched, and delivered a rather long whistled song reminiscent of that of the Cardinal (*Cardinalis cardinalis*). Aware that no all-black marsh blackbird was known in the Amazonian drainage of central Peru, I collected the presumed pair. These two birds, the only ones encountered, seem to represent a new species, which I am assigning to the genus *Agelaius*. The problem of determining the affinities of an all-black bird is sometimes difficult; hence, this species may ultimately prove to be more closely allied to some other icterid, but comparison with all known species of Icteridae indicates that it represents a species of *Agelaius*.

AGELAIUS XANTHOPHTHALMUS new species (Figure 1)

PALE-EYED MARSH BLACKBIRD

Holotype.—Adult male; American Museum of Natural History no. 789778; 15 km north-northeast of Tingo María, 4 km north of the Tulu-

¹Department of Ornithology, American Museum of Natural History, New York, New York.

mayo River, and about 2 km northwest of the village of Pumahuasi, elevation approximately 2,150 feet, Depto. Huánuco, Perú; 17 August 1968; collected by L. L. Short; original number 2999.

Allotype.—Adult female; AMNH no. 789779; collected with the holotype by L. L. Short; original number 3002; locality data and date as for holotype; originally preserved in formalin, then alcohol; skin prepared from alcoholic specimen; body retained in alcohol.

Diagnosis.—A moderately small, all-black icterid; sexes essentially alike; color of irides pale orange-yellow; plumage soft in texture, glossy black, but not iridescent; wings short, primary 9 slightly shorter than primary 3; rectrices distinctly pointed, not truncate; feet strong, relatively large; bill long, conical, with the tip sharply pointed and the culmen and gonys straight throughout; bill shallow (Figure 1) and moderately broad across both culmen and gonys, with a distinct tendency toward a spatulate tip.

Description of holotype.—Entire body, head, wings, and tail black and glossy, especially on the breast and back; the gloss is green-blue, barely more pronounced than in males of *Agelaius phoeniceus*; lacking the narrowed or otherwise modified feathers of the head and neck found in icterids like *Gnorimopsar* and *Curaeus*; body feathers unusually soft, but not structurally different macroscopically from those of other species of *Agelaius*; wings short, primary 9 appreciably shorter than primary 3, and primaries 4-8 nearly equal in length; tail moderately long and somewhat graduated, with central rectrices 19 mm longer than the outer rectrices (the type lacks eight rectrices, but the remaining rectrices are like those of the female); rectrices elongated and pointed at their tips, not truncate as in most species of *Agelaius*; bill generally like that of *A. thilius*, but slightly deeper when viewed laterally, and much broader when viewed dorsally; bill tip somewhat flattened, spatulate; bill and legs black; other features as in the diagnosis.

Description of allotype.—Characters like those of the male except as noted; plumage entirely black, slightly less glossy than that of male (one black breast feather has a narrow brown tip); color of irides, bill, and legs noted at the time the bird was collected, and identical to those of the male; bill like that of the male, flattened at the tip, but notably deeper (the bill difference between the male and female suggests variability in bill shape like that found in *A. cyanopus*, which has a similar but narrower bill). A large number of newly emerging feathers are apparent in the dorsal feather tract. These are taken to indicate the accidental loss of the old feathers because not all feathers

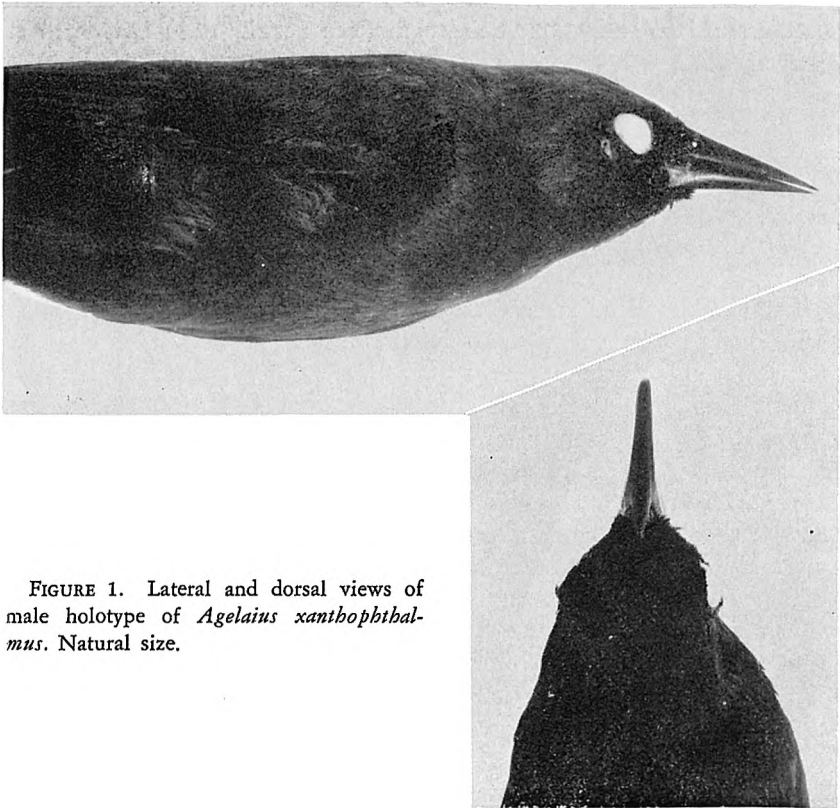


FIGURE 1. Lateral and dorsal views of male holotype of *Agelaius xanthophthalmus*. Natural size.

of the dorsal tract are involved and the bird, with an ovary nearly in breeding condition, shows no other signs of molt.

Range.—Known only from a small marsh surrounded by second growth forest (moist subtropical forest) in the Tingo María region of the Department of Huanuco in central Peru. The basin of the Huallaga River in which Tingo María is situated is bordered on the west by the Andean front range, on the south by the Carpish Mountains, and on the east by the lower (4,500 feet in elevation) Sierra Azul. To the north the basin opens into the Amazon basin.

Specimens examined.—Two, including the holotype and allotype, probably comprising a mated pair; both from the type locality.

Measurements in millimeters.—Holotype male: chord of wing, 96.9; tail, 89.0; exposed culmen, 23.2; bill length from nostril, 17.3; bill depth at center of nostril, 7.9; bill width at center of nostril, 7.0; tarsus, 28.4; middle toe with claw, 28.5; weight, 50.8 gm. Allotype female: chord of wing, 83.3; tail, 79.9; exposed culmen, 22.7; bill length from nostril, 17.1; bill depth at center of nostril, 8.4; bill width at center of nostril, 7.1; tarsus, 28.2; middle toe with claw, 27.6; weight, 44.9 gm.

REMARKS

This blackbird seems allied to the marsh blackbirds of the genus *Agelaius* because of body shape, proportions, color, bill shape, and what little is known of its habits. It is unique in that genus in having pale irides (the fact that no other *Agelaius* has pale eye color was made known to me by K. C. Parkes) and in its monomorphic, all-black coloration. Also, its tail:wing ratio (0.92 in the type, 0.96 in the female) exceeds that found in *Agelaius*, except for a few individuals of *A. cyanopus* that exceed the ratio of the male type of *xanthophthalmus*. "*Agelaius*" *forbesi*, which Blake (1968) transferred to the genus *Curaeus*, has about the same tail:wing ratio as *A. xanthophthalmus*, but there is no other resemblance between these species. Except for the unique features mentioned above, the characteristics of *A. xanthophthalmus* agree well with features of *Agelaius* cited by Ridgway (1902: 319-320). In three other of its attributes it represents an extreme condition among species of this genus, but it is closely approached by *A. cyanopus* and to a lesser extent by *A. thilius*. The 9th primary is very short, shorter than P 3, but this condition is matched in many individuals of *A. cyanopus*. Because of the long tail and short wings of *xanthophthalmus*, its culmen length is greater than the difference between its wing length and its tail length; this is true of *cyanopus* as well. Finally, the rectrices of *xanthophthalmus* are more pointed than those of other species of *Agelaius*, but both *A. cyanopus* and *A. thilius* have somewhat pointed rectrices. None of these three species have their rectrices broadest near their tips, as do other species of *Agelaius* (Ridgway, *loc. cit.*).

Within *Agelaius* the new species appears most closely related to *A. cyanopus* and *A. thilius*. The latter is a polytypic species exhibiting strong sexual dimorphism and occurring as far north as Cuzco, Perú. The females of all races of *A. thilius* are brown streaked with black as in most species of *Agelaius*. In its thin bill and a tendency toward pointed rectrices this species approaches *A. xanthophthalmus*, but the dark eyes, shorter tail, strong sexual

dimorphism, less glossy plumage, and weaker legs and feet of all races of *thibilius* preclude the former being a race of the latter. *Agelaius cyanopus* is a sexually dimorphic species with a peculiar distribution (Parkes, 1966). One race (*A. c. cyanopus*) occupies a vast range from eastern Brazil and eastern Bolivia south to east-central Argentina. Three other races are highly disjunct and narrowly distributed in the area around Rio de Janeiro, Brazil (*atroolivaceus*), in western Beni, Bolivia (*beniensis*), and in three localities in northeasternmost Brazil (*xenicus*). Of these races *xenicus* is melanic and hence most closely approaches *A. xanthophthalmus*. The latter species differs from *A. c. xenicus* (and all other races of *A. cyanopus*) in the following characters: irides pale orange-yellow; plumage glossy black in both sexes; bill broader; tail relatively longer; rectrices more pointed; and legs and toes stronger. As far as is known all races of *A. cyanopus* have dark eyes. The females of *A. c. xenicus*, although melanic, nevertheless have the abdomen yellow-olive, the rump with an olive wash, the back feathers edged with brown, and some wing coverts and secondaries also edged with dark brown. The single female of *A. xanthophthalmus* is entirely glossy black with only a trace of brown in its plumage (on only one feather). No race of *A. cyanopus* approaches *A. xanthophthalmus* in bill width or in the massiveness of the legs and feet. *A. cyanopus* does closely approach *A. xanthophthalmus* in bill depth, and it tends toward the latter, although not closely resembling it, in its quite melanic plumage, somewhat pointed rectrices, and relatively long tail. Nevertheless, the differences between *xanthophthalmus* and *cyanopus* far exceed those among the races of the latter and preclude the possibility that *xanthophthalmus* represents another widely disjunct race of *A. cyanopus*.

Although its relatively long tail, relatively short wings, and pale irides suggest icterids such as the caciques (*Cacicus*) and grackles (*Cassidix, Quiscalus*), *A. xanthophthalmus* clearly has an *Agelaius*-like bill, and it lacks the plumage modifications (e.g., iridescence, narrowed neck and crown feathers) typical of those groups. Its habits are little known, but seem typically agelaiine. It perched like those species of *Agelaius* with which I am acquainted. The activity of the two birds observed was confined to sedges well within a marsh, despite the proximity of forest. They were not observed to frequent the occasional tall trees scattered throughout the marsh. Unfortunately, I secured little information regarding the moderately long, whistled, Cardinal-like song of *A. xanthophthalmus*. The songs of other South American species of *Agelaius* are inadequately known, and hence meaningful comparisons would be impossible at this time even if more data were available for *xanthophthalmus*.

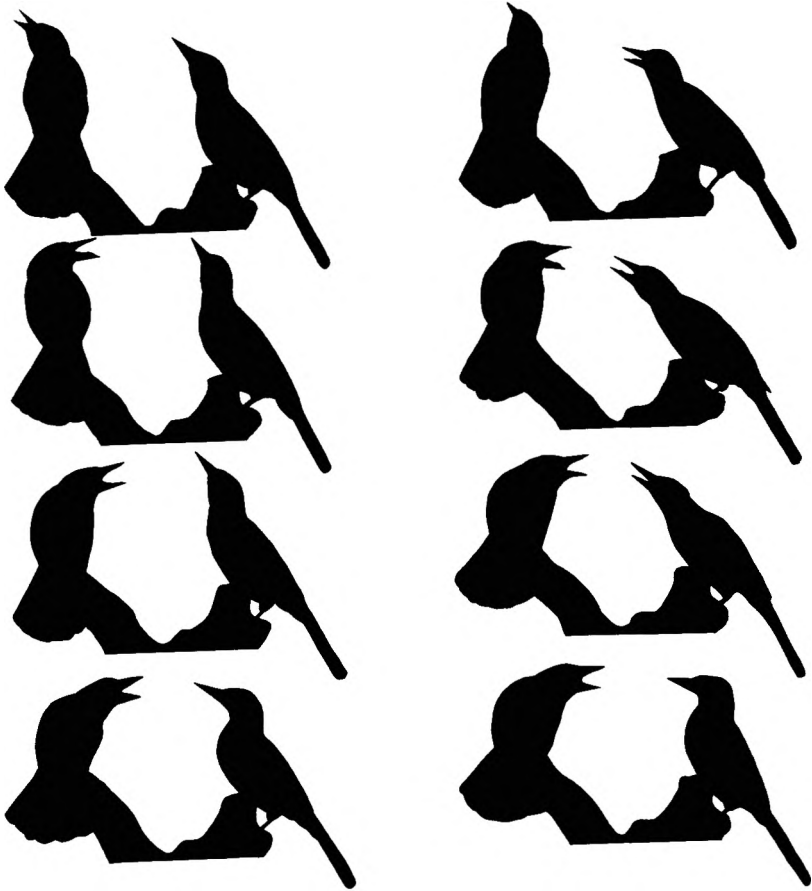


FIGURE 2. Two displaying Pale-eyed Marsh Blackbirds, probably the holotype and allotype, drawn from tracings of 16 mm movie frames. The sequence begins in the upper left and continues down, then up, terminating at the upper right.

A very brief movie was obtained of two Pale-eyed Marsh Blackbirds, probably the same individuals that I collected. The movie frames are not of good quality (the two birds are silhouetted against a gray, late afternoon sky), but they provide some information regarding displays of this species. The birds perched on a dead stub about 10 cm apart. One blackbird, perched slightly above the other, maintained a moderately spread tail, a slightly hunched posture, and fluffed feathers. Its open bill usually was directed

toward the bird below it. My concern with obtaining pictures resulted in my failing to note whether this bird rendered a vocalization during its display. In any event its bill remained open virtually throughout the movie sequence. Its display posture (Figure 2) resembled that of the Red-winged Blackbird (*A. phoeniceus*) during the latter's Song Spread Display and Crouch Display (Figures 6b, 6b' and 8c, 8c' of Orians and Christman, 1968), except that its wings were spread only slightly, if at all. The blackbird perched below it generally maintained a posture like that of the Tricolored Blackbird (*A. tricolor*) depicted in the same authors' Figure 7b (Bill Up Display), except that its wings were not spread. Twice the upper bird extended its head with its open bill toward the lower bird (Figure 2). The latter responded both times by initially withdrawing its head, then advancing its head (once with the bill open) toward the upper bird, which in turn drew its head back. My observations were too brief to permit speculation concerning the function of these displays, or a comparison with other species. However, the similarity of the displays observed to those of other species of *Agelaius* is noteworthy.

The slightly enlarged testes (measuring 3 x 2 mm) of the type male, and its singing, interaction, and association with the female suggest that pair formation had commenced and breeding was imminent. The female has an enlarged ovary (measuring 8 x 6 mm) and a slightly enlarged oviduct, but no large ova are evident. No other individuals were observed in the marsh, which perhaps was sufficiently large (about 7 acres) to harbor more than a single pair. However, no search was undertaken.

Hopefully future field work in the easily accessible Tingo María region will disclose the occurrence of other individuals of this species and provide additional information concerning its habits. Its abundance in the Huallaga basin remains to be determined. Investigators working elsewhere along the eastern base of the Peruvian Andes should be on the lookout for it, as it may not be restricted to the Huallaga basin.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Field studies in Peru were supported by the National Science Foundation (grant GB 5891), to the administrators of which I am grateful. These studies benefited from the assistance of Dr. Maria Koepcke. Mr. John J. Morony, Jr., assisted me in the field and prepared the type specimen. This report has benefited from discussions with Mr. Eugene Eisenmann, Mr. Charles O'Brien, and Dr. Kenneth C. Parkes. I appreciate the helpful suggestions of my colleagues Mr. Eugene Eisenmann and Dr. Dean Amadon, who were kind enough to read the manuscript.

LITERATURE CITED

BLAKE, E. R.

1968. Family Icteridae. In Check-list of birds of the world, pp. 138-202, in Vol. 14, Raymond A. Paynter, Jr., [ed.], Museum of Comparative Zoology, Cambridge, Mass.

ORIANI, G. H., AND G. M. CHRISTMAN

1968. A comparative study of the behavior of Red-winged, Tricolored, and Yellow-headed blackbirds. Univ. Calif. Publ. Zool., 84: 1-81.

PARKES, K. C.

1966. Geographic variation in Azara's Marsh Blackbird, *Agelaius cyanopus*. Proc. Biol. Soc. Washington, 79: 1-12.

RIDGWAY, R.

1902. The birds of North and Middle America. Bull. U. S. Natl. Mus., 50, pt. 2, i-xx, 1-834.