

# RUSTY BLACKBIRDS IN CALIFORNIA AND WESTERN NORTH AMERICA

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## INTRODUCTION

The Rusty Blackbird *Euphagus carolinus* is normally found east of the Rocky Mountains, breeding north of the Canadian border and wintering in the eastern United States. There are, however, enough records in the West, particularly California, to justify an attempt at interpreting them.

## GENERAL RANGE

The Rusty Blackbird breeds in the wet areas of the northern woodlands from western Alaska (Gabrielson and Lincoln, 1959) across Canada to Newfoundland (Godfrey, 1966). Its range extends south to the vicinity of Cook Inlet in Alaska and Likely in south-central British Columbia, the northern edge of the Great Lakes and central Maine, and north to the Tundra Zone. In winter the species moves southward to southeastern Texas, the Gulf Coast, and northern Florida, with an occasional individual remaining as far north as southern Canada. Along the western edge of its winter range, which coincides with the eastern slope of the Rocky Mountains, it is somewhat scarce, being recorded only occasionally in Montana (e.g., Audubon Field Notes 11:45, 1957; 12:296, 1958; 18:374, 1964; 19:62, 1965 and 24:73, 1970), Wyoming and eastern Colorado (Bailey and Niedrach, 1965), but becomes more numerous in Kansas and Oklahoma (Sutton, 1967).

Birds nesting in the western portion of the breeding range presumably move southeastward in the fall towards the Gulf Coast, for the species is only casual west of the Rocky Mountains (A.O.U., 1957). It is slow to leave its breeding grounds, remaining in Alaska until October, and even November (Gabrielson and Lincoln, 1959). In the New York area it is considered rare before October, but most have passed through that area before December (Bull, 1964). Most of the occurrences in Colorado are for November (Bailey and Niedrach,

## RUSTY BLACKBIRDS

1965). The earliest record for Louisiana is 25 October, and the species does not become common there until the latter part of November (Lowery, 1960).

In the spring it is quick to return to the northern woods, arriving before the snow has gone from the ground. It is rarely reported in Louisiana after the first week of April (Lowery, 1960), and even as close to the breeding range as the New York area it is rarely found after early May, being most numerous in late March (Bull, 1964).

### OCCURRENCE IN THE WEST

Records of Rusty Blackbirds in the West are few. It has occurred in southwestern British Columbia, in all the western states except Oregon, and in northern Baja California. I have traced a total of 50 records involving 61 individuals in this area. The number of records is small, but probably sufficient to discern trends in occurrences if any exist.

Figure 1 shows that all occurrences fall in the six month period between early October (2 October) and early March (7 March). The majority (82%) are in late fall (October-December), with most (54%) in November. This peak coincides with the normal peak fall migration period in Colorado or New York. This suggests that the Rusty Blackbird is a normal migrant in the West, for vagrant land-birds in the West have a strong tendency to appear on dates noticeably later than would be expected at similar latitudes along their normal migration routes in eastern North America.

Of the nine records (11 individuals) after December only one is from the north (Pitt Meadows, British Columbia), the rest being from southern California (2), Arizona (5) and New Mexico (1) at latitudes of normal winter occurrence east of the Rocky Mountains. I do not know where the migrant Rusty Blackbirds found in the fall are wintering. They may move south into northern Mexico (Sonora and Chihuahua) but the record from Baja California is the only one from that country (Miller et al., 1957). Birds could be overlooked as the winter progresses since they look more similar to other blackbirds; however this does not appear to be the case in Arizona, and does not appear likely in California because of the intensive coverage there. Migrants may simply be more conspicuous than birds settled down on winter quarters because of the localities chosen. The records for late February (Draper Rock, California) and March (Phoenix and Benson, Arizona) may represent northbound migrants.

# RUSTY BLACKBIRDS

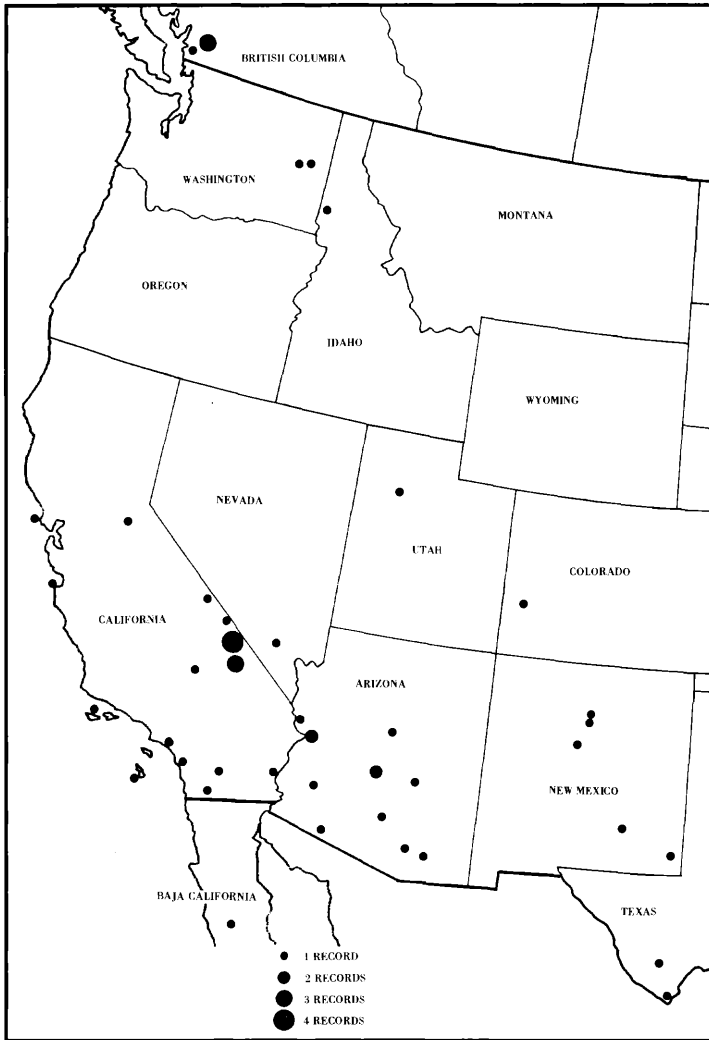


FIGURE 2. The western portion of North America showing records of Rusty Blackbirds to the west of their normal range. Each record, regardless of the number of individuals involved, is indicated by a solid dot. Larger dots are used to indicate multiple records from the same locality.

## RUSTY BLACKBIRDS

Figure 2 shows a concentration of records from the more southern areas, with most (70%) in southern California, extreme southern Nevada, Arizona and New Mexico. Apart from the four sightings from the Vancouver area of British Columbia, the Pacific Northwest is devoid of records. Only five have appeared in the Great Basin areas of Washington, Idaho, Utah and Colorado; however, much of this area is sparsely populated and infrequently if ever visited by ornithologists. New Mexico, also a somewhat sparsely populated area, has produced five records in the past 15 years, which is an indication the species may be somewhat regular there in limited numbers. Increased interest in the ornithology of the Death Valley area of California showed the Rusty Blackbird to be a rare but regular fall visitor in that area. It has been recorded there annually since 1966, and the eight records during that period involve ten individuals. Most of the records are for the weekend of Thanksgiving when the area has received its most intensive coverage. Thorough searching in any area of the Great Basin would probably give similar results.

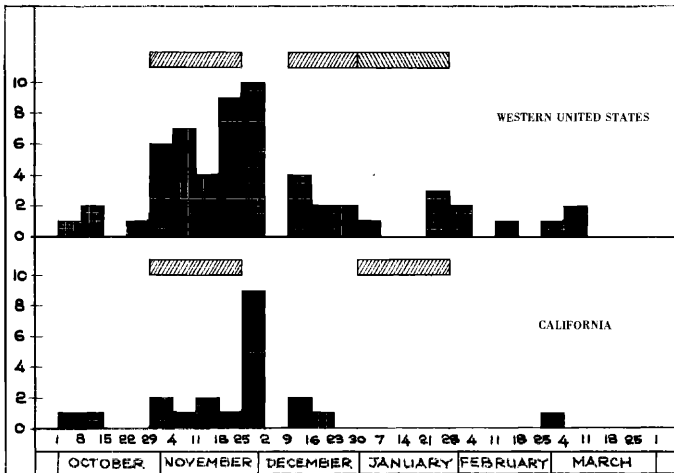


FIGURE 1. The seasonal occurrences of Rusty Blackbirds west of the Rocky Mountains, and in California. The week in which each individual was found is indicated. All the California records are incorporated in the chart for the western United States as well as being indicated by themselves. In the instances when an individual remained for more than one week, the occurrence is removed from the others, and indicated by a line above. These three instances are one near Santa Ana, California, 31 December to 26 January; one in Pacific Grove, California, 3-18 November; and one in Big Bend National Park, Texas, 10-27 December.

## RUSTY BLACKBIRDS

Most interesting is the paucity of records from the immediate vicinity of the coast compared to the interior. There are only four records from the coast of California (Point Reyes, Pacific Grove, near Santa Ana and Doheney Beach), and two records from the Channel Islands off southern California (Santa Rosa Island and San Clemente Island). The coast is intensively worked by birdwatchers, particularly during the fall, and an impressive number and variety of vagrant species is recorded each year. Records of Blackpoll Warblers *Dendroica striata* for instance are clearly concentrated along the coast (McCaskie, 1970), and a detailed analysis of the appearances of most other vagrant land-birds from eastern North America would show a similar pattern of occurrence. I think that these fall vagrants are moving in a westerly direction, and are temporarily detained and concentrated by the ocean barrier. Keeping in mind the relative numbers of observers in each area, it is clear that the Rusty Blackbird is one of the rarest stragglers to the coast, while it is probably regular in small numbers in the interior, particularly to the east of the Cascades and Sierras. This is another indication the birds are not disoriented individuals heading westward, but migrants moving southward in the fall to winter in the Southwest or thereabouts.

### OCCURRENCE IN CALIFORNIA

In California there are 20 records of the Rusty Blackbird involving 23 individuals, and this represents nearly 40% of all the records from west of the Rocky Mountains. Most (65%) of the records are for November, but it has occurred as early as 2 October (Doheney Beach), and has been found as late as 26 February (Draper Rock along the Colorado River). A large number of the records are from the eastern boundary of the state at the southern end of the Great Basin, with the rest scattered in the southern two-thirds of the state.

Rusty Blackbirds found in California are usually alone. There are three records involving two individuals together, and all three are from Death Valley National Monument. The two seen there on 1 November 1961 were with a small flock of Brewer's Blackbirds *Euphagus cyanocephalus* and Red-winged Blackbirds *Agelaius phoeniceus* feeding on an irrigated lawn (Wauer, MS), and is one of two instances where the species has been reported associating with other blackbirds. The other instance involved a bird remaining in Pacific Grove between 3 and 18 November 1969, which was associating with Brewer's Blackbirds feeding around kelp along the shore. On the

## RUSTY BLACKBIRDS

other hand other Rusty Blackbirds did not associate with other blackbirds, even when they were in the same vicinity (eg., one at Saratoga Springs on 26 November 1966 did not join three Red-winged Blackbirds also present).

The Rusty Blackbird has a strong attraction to water. Most of the birds recorded in California have been observed in or around water (there are no details for the Amador County bird, the individual from Santa Rosa Island was found dead, and the one from the South Fork Valley of the Kern River was recovered from a cat). All the birds found in and around Death Valley National Monument (Deep Springs, Scotty's Castle, Furnace Creek Ranch and Saratoga Springs) were observed walking around in water, and appeared reluctant to leave it; one of the two present at Furnace Creek Ranch on 25 and 26 November 1967 was seen to catch and eat a small fish. The one found at Point Reyes on 11 October 1970 was staying close to a small wet area. The bird that spent part of the winter of 1962-63 near Santa Ana remained close to the shallow fresh-water pools at the mouth of the Santa Ana River, and did not leave them when disturbed; this individual was never seen to join the Red-winged Blackbirds also frequenting the area.

The Amador County and San Clemente Island birds were reported to be males, and the Santa Rosa Island and Jamacha birds were females, the latter being reported as an adult (it is not stated how this was determined). The specimen from Kern County was not sexed. No attempt has been made to age or sex those individuals not collected.

## IDENTIFICATION

I have seen a total of eight Rusty Blackbirds (6 records) in California since 1962. All have been rather obvious birds with much rusty coloring on the top of the head and upper back, pale buffy superciliary lines, varying amounts of buffy barring and mottling on the breast and under-parts, and slate gray rumps contrasting with blackish tails. I have seen descriptions of all but the Draper Rock bird and the two at Furnace Creek Ranch in 1961, and all appeared to be in plumages similar to those birds I have seen.

The only birds that closely resemble the Rusty Blackbird in fall are female plumaged Red-winged Blackbirds and some Brewer's Blackbirds. Female plumaged Red-winged Blackbirds have a bold superciliary line like that of the Rusty Blackbird, and also have rusty

## RUSTY BLACKBIRDS

and buffy edgings to many of the feathers. However, there is never the conspicuous contrast between the back and rump displayed by the Rusty Blackbird, the breast and under-parts are always conspicuously streaked, and the eye is brown instead of yellow. Many female and immature Brewer's Blackbirds have a brownish cast to their plumage, and some show a superciliary line, but they never have the rich rusty-brown and buff colors of the Rusty Blackbird. Instead, the brown tends toward gray, and the superciliary line is never as bold. The eye color should be diagnostic for most female plumaged Brewer's Blackbirds, but immature males can have a pale eye when still in this plumage. Brewer's Blackbirds do not seem to have brown edgings to the flight feathers (primaries and secondaries); none in the large series of skins at the San Diego Natural History Museum exhibits this character. The six fall-taken Rusty Blackbirds in the same collection show conspicuous rusty and buff edgings on the flight feathers, and this character was noted on the eight birds I have seen in the field. Some adult male Brewer's Blackbirds have pale edgings to the feathers of the head, upper back, throat and breast, and consequently look quite similar in pattern to fall plumaged Rusty Blackbirds (fig. 3), but these feather edgings are grayish in color. The eye of a male Brewer's Blackbird always looks very white, and is easily seen at a great distance; on the other hand, the eye of a Rusty Blackbird is yellow, and not nearly as conspicuous.

The Rusty Blackbird apparently acquires breeding plumage by wear, losing all the rusty and buff colors by early summer, and molting into fresh plumage with feather edgings in the late summer. Individuals seen in the winter would be expected to have less rusty and buff than those seen in the fall, and by March they should have lost most of these feather edgings. The individual near Santa Ana had become noticeably darker on the upper-parts between 31 December and 26 January.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am particularly grateful to Theodore Chandik who inspired me to write this paper, and who also gave much help in gathering documenting photographs of birds in California and checking specimens in the museums of the San Francisco Bay area. I am grateful to Dr. Allan Phillips, Amadeo Rea and Dr. Stephen M. Russell for information on Arizona records, Barbara C. McKnight and John P. Hubbard for information on New Mexico records, Charles S. Lawson

## RUSTY BLACKBIRDS

for the complete details surrounding the Nevada record, John B. Crowell Jr. and Terrence R. Wahl for information on records from Washington and southwestern British Columbia.

### SUMMARY

The Rusty Blackbird has been considered a casual stray west of the Rocky Mountains. However, an analysis of some 50 records indicates it may be a rare fall migrant throughout the Great Basin, with only an occasional bird straying west to the coast of California; a few remain throughout the winter in the Southwest. Fall migrants are found between early October and late December, with most occurring in November. Winter records extend from January to early March; some of the later birds may be spring migrants.

In California there are 20 records, mostly in November. The birds are normally alone when found, and are invariably around water. The appearance of the birds seen in California is outlined, and the ways in which this species differs from similar blackbirds is discussed.

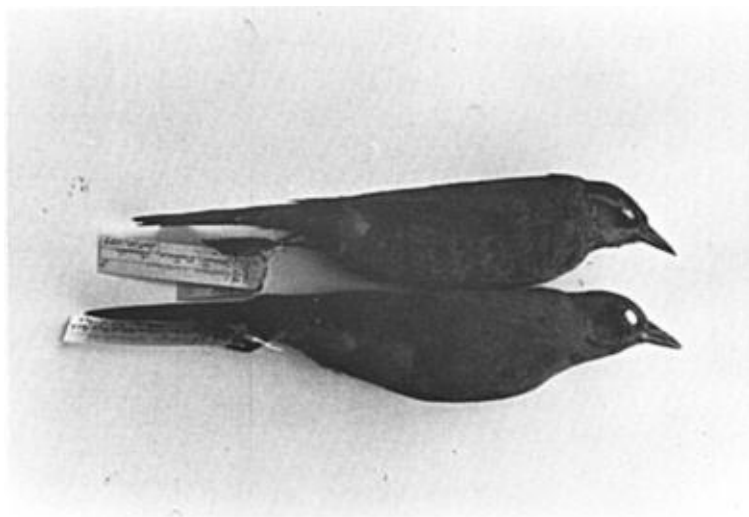


FIGURE 3. A Rusty Blackbird (top) and a Brewer's Blackbird (bottom) illustrating how similar the patterns of these two species can appear; however, the light areas on the Brewer's Blackbird are grayish rather than rusty. The Rusty Blackbird (#2102 San Diego Natural History Museum) was taken at Toronto, Ontario, Canada on 22 September 1889. The Brewer's Blackbird (#35093 S.D.N.H.M.) was taken on South San Lorenzo Island, Baja California, Mexico, on 21 October 1964.

*Photo by Pierre Devillers*



RUSTY BLACKBIRDS



FIGURE 4. A Rusty Blackbird at Saratoga Springs, San Bernardino County, California, on 26 November 1967. Note the bold supercilium, the pale eye, and the fact that the bird is walking in water. *Photo by Douglas Greenberg*

## RUSTY BLACKBIRDS



FIGURE 5. A Rusty Blackbird that remained in Pacific Grove, Monterey County, California, between 3 and 18 November 1969. Note the sharp contrast between the back and rump, and the bold pale edgings to the primaries and secondaries.  
*Photo by Dr. R. L. Branson*



FIGURE 6. One of two Rusty Blackbirds at Saratoga Springs, San Bernardino County, California, on 29 November 1969.  
*Photo by Ron LeValley*

## RUSTY BLACKBIRDS



FIGURE 7. A Rusty Blackbird at Point Reyes, Marin County, California, on 11 October 1970. The bold superciliary, the pale eye, and the pale edgings to the wing feathers are all visible on this individual. *Photo by Theodore Chandik*

## APPENDIX

The specific records used in the analysis of the Rusty Blackbird in the West are listed below in chronological order and according to the state in which they occurred.

### SOUTHWESTERN BRITISH COLUMBIA

1 (University of British Columbia Collection) Pitt Meadows 14 October 1968 (Grass, Murrelet 50:23, 1969); 5 Pitt Meadows 22 November 1970 (Crowell, American Birds 25:99, 1971); 1 Lulu Island 27 December 1970 (Crowell, A. B. in press); 2 Pitt Meadows 23 January 1971 (Crowell, A. B. in press).

## RUSTY BLACKBIRDS

### WASHINGTON

1 Spokane, Spokane County, 26 December 1960 (Rogers, Audubon Field Notes 15:346, 1961); 1 Reardan, Lincoln County, 29 October 1968 (Rogers, A.F.N. 22:72, 1968). One seen in the Mt. Baker National Forest on 25 September 1927 is considered questionable (Jewett et al. Birds of Washington State, 1953). An attempt to check the report of 5 seen near Chattaroy, Spokane County (Rogers, A.F.N. 21:62, 1967) resulted in no response from either the author or the observer.

### CALIFORNIA

1 (#50236 California Academy of Sciences) Drytown, Amador County, 15 December 1895 (Mailliard, Condor 6:16, 1904); 1 (#21271 Museum of Vertebrate Zoology, Berkeley) San Clemente Island 20 November 1908 (Linton, Condor 11:194, 1909); 1 (#10163 San Diego Natural History Museum) Jamacha, San Diego County, 14 November 1925 (Sefton Jr, Condor 28:99, 1926); 1 (Dickey Collection) Santa Rosa Island 6 November 1927 (Dickey, Condor 30:162, 1928); 1 (#1020 Stager Collection) South Fork Valley of the Kern River, Kern County, 16 December 1937 (Stager, Condor 40:127, 1938); 1 Draper Rock on the Imperial National Wildlife Refuge, Imperial County, 26 February 1959 (Monson, A.F.N. 13:315, 1959); 2 Furnace Creek Ranch, Inyo County, 1 November 1961 (Small, A.F.N. 16:76, 1962); 1 near Santa Ana, Orange County, 31 December 1962 to 26 January 1963 (Small, A.F.N. 17:359, 1963); 1 Doheney Beach State Park, Orange County, 2 October 1963 (McCaskie and Pugh, A.F.N. 16:76, 1964); 1 Borrego Springs, San Diego County, 27 November 1964 (McCaskie and Pugh, A.F.N. 19:81, 1965); 1 Saratoga Springs, San Bernardino County, 26 November 1966, and 1 Furnace Creek Ranch, Inyo County, 27 November 1966 (McCaskie, A.F.N. 21:80, 1967); 2 Furnace Creek Ranch, Inyo County, 25-26 November 1967, 1 (fig. 4) Saratoga Springs, San Bernardino County, 26 November 1967 (McCaskie, A.F.N. 22:92, 1968); 1 Furnace Creek Ranch, Inyo County, 29 November 1968 (McCaskie, A.F.N. 23:112, 1969); 1 (fig. 5) Pacific Grove, Monterey County, 3-18 November 1969 (Baldrige, Chandik and DeSante, A.F.N. 24:95, 1970); 1 Deep Springs, Inyo County, 15 November 1969, 1 Saratoga Springs, San Bernardino County, 28 November 1969, and 2 (fig. 6) there on 29 November 1969 (McCaskie, A.F.N. 24:100c, 1970); 1 (fig. 7) Point Reyes, Marin County, 11 October 1970 (Chandik, DeSante and Pugh, A. B. 25:99, 1971); 1 Scotty's Castle, Inyo County, 12 December 1970 (McCaskie, A.B. in press).

### BAJA CALIFORNIA

1 (collected) west slope of the Sierra San Pedro Martir at Valladares (lat. 31°) 12 December 1888 (Grinnell, Univ. of Calif. Publ. in Zool. 32:1-100, 1928).

### NEVADA

3 Tule Springs Park, Clark County, 10 November 1969 and 2 there on 11 November 1969 (Snider, A.F.N. 24:78, 1970 - dates of 9-10 November are incorrect according to C. S. Lawson).

### IDAHO

1 (collected) Potlach, Latah County, 2 November 1952 (Burleigh, A.F.N. 7:28, 1953).

### UTAH

1 (collected) near Camel Back Mountain, Tooley County, 24 November 1952 (Porter, Condor 56:363, 1954).

### ARIZONA

1 (collected) Camp Verde, Yavapai County, 24 October 1887, (Phillips, Marshall and Monson, The Birds of Arizona, 1964); 1 (collected) Indian Dam on the Santa Cruz River near Tucson, Pima County, 17 December 1938

## RUSTY BLACKBIRDS

(Phillips, pers. comm.); 1 Bill Williams Delta near Parker Dam, Yuma County, 17 February 1950 (Monson, A.F.N. 4:216, 1950); 1 (collected) Bill Williams Delta near Parker Dam, Yuma County, 21 November 1951 (Monson, A.F.N. 6:33, 1952); 1 near Topock, Mohave County, 6 November 1952 (Monson, A.F.N. 7:30, 1953); 1 (collected) Tule Well, Yuma County, 21 November 1958 (Monson, A.F.N. 13:55, 1959); 2 (1 collected - #JSW643 Prescott College) Picacho Reservoir, Pinal County, 1 February 1959 (Monson, A.F.N. 13:315, 1959); 1 Charco 3 on the Kofa Game Range, Yuma County, 29 October 1960 (Monson, A.F.N. 15:65, 1961); 1 (#H2656 Prescott College) Globe, Gila County, 6 November 1960 (Rea, pers. comm.); 1 (collected) Benson, Cochise County, 7 March 1962 (Zimmerman, A.F.N. 16:355, 1962); 1 (#481990 U.S. Nat. Museum Phoenix, Maricopa County, 22 January 1966 (Russell, pers. comm.); 1 Phoenix, Maricopa County, 4-6 March 1970 (Snider, A.F.N. 24:527, 1970).

### WESTERN COLORADO

1 (collected) Montrose County, 13 November 1915 (Bailey and Niedrach, Birds of Colorado, 1965).

### NEW MEXICO

1 Roswell, Chaves County, 10 November 1956 (Ligon, New Mexico Birds, 1961); 1 (photographed) Los Alamos, Los Alamos County, 29 November 1957 (Monson, A.F.N. 12:50, 1958); 1 Espanola, Arriba County, 2 January 1960 (Monson, A.F.N. 14:332, 1960); 1 near Albuquerque, Bernalillo County, 13 December 1961 (Zimmerman, A.F.N. 16:355, 1962); 1 (collected) 23 miles northwest of Jal, Lea County, 31 October 1962 (Harris, Condor 66:159, 1964).

### WEST TEXAS

1 Alpine, Brewster County (A.O.U. Check-list of North American Birds, 1957); 1 Big Bend National Park, Brewster County, 10-27 December 1967 (Snider, A.F.N. 22:466, 1968).

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