

12. Terres, J.K. 1980. *The Audubon Society Encyclopedia of North American Birds*. Alfred A. Knopf. 1109 pp.
13. Grant, P.J. 1982. *Gulls: A Guide to Identification*. T & AD Poyser. 280 pp.
14. *American Birds*. Journal of the National Audubon Society, New York. Five issues/year.
15. *Ontario Birds*. Journal of the Ontario Field Ornithologists, Burlington. Three issues/year.

The final word on all of this comes from Jim Richards, who wisely cautions that,

“. . . by having the above, you will find that you are so damn busy reading that you won't have time to go birding much anyway, and after paying for the books and your annual magazine subscriptions, you won't be able to afford to go anywhere even if you had the time.”

Happy Reading!

## Notes

### Sexing Blue-gray Gnatcatchers (*Polioptila caerulea*)

I found the note by Ted Cheskey (*Ontario Birds* 3:68-69) on winter records of Blue-gray Gnatcatcher very interesting, but I'm afraid I must question his unqualified sexing of the one he saw as a female.

Spring adult Blue-gray Gnatcatchers are sexually dichromatic, as shown in virtually all bird books, the males having a narrow black line extending from the forehead to the sides of the crown. Only *one* of the current field guides (Terrill, in Farrand 1983) bothers to mention "immatures" at all, and here the wording is ambiguous; the head pattern of the spring adult male is correctly described, and then the text states "Females and immatures are similar but less bluish above"

(Vol. 1, p. 38). It is stated explicitly that females lack the black head marking, although this is probably implicit in the sentence attributing this mark to adult males, and of course the lack of the mark is obvious in the accompanying photograph of a female. What is *not* stated or even necessarily implied in the above-quoted sentence is that "immature" males (i.e., in first basic plumage) *also* lack the black line. This mark is not acquired until about February, in a limited first prealternate molt.

There appears to be some controversy in the literature as to whether fall adult males retain the black head markings after their complete prebasic molt. Dwight

(1900:307) and Oberholser (1974:679), usually the two best references on passerine plumage sequences, both clearly state that the "winter plumage" of adult males is the same as the "nuptial plumage", i.e., with the black face marks. Bent's "Life histories" (1949), oddly enough, is self-contradictory. On p. 352 the editor (i.e., Bent himself) states "young males lack the black frontal band during the first fall and winter, and the females never have it", rather clearly implying that *adult* males *do* have it in fall and winter. On the other hand, on p. 356, discussing the black facial marking of "the male gnatcatcher," the author of the general account for this species, Francis Marion Weston, writes: "It seems to be not generally known that this distinguishing mark is not present in winter specimens."

Wood's "Bird-bander's guide" (1969) is incorrect with respect to fall gnatcatchers, as he made no provision even for first-year males lacking head markings. This was rectified by Sheppard and Klimkiewicz (1976:26), who warned "Do not sex HY [hatching year] or AHY [after hatching year] (except AHY in Mar.-Jun.) by plumage." Inclusion of AHY ("adult") gnatcatchers in this ruling indicates the belief of the authors that all males do, in fact, lack the head markings in fall and winter, as stated by Weston (in Bent 1949). This viewpoint is supported by specimens in the collection of Carnegie Museum of Natural History. Of 19 specimens sexed as male taken between 17 August and 13 February (an 18

February male is in head molt), *none* has black head markings. Although most of these lack label annotations about skull pneumatization, it would appear unlikely that all of these 19 randomly collected fall/winter males were first-year birds.

Specimens in our collection confirm that spring males are bluer, less gray above than spring females, but I doubt that it would be possible to differentiate by color among the age and sex classes in the field in the fall, especially looking at only a single bird without available color comparisons. Because of the lack of black head markings on fall males, relying on field guide information for sexing Blue-gray Gnatcatchers will result in a manifestly impossible 0:1 sex ratio!

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## Partial Albinism and the Determination of Local Movements in an American Crow (*Corvus brachyrhynchos*)

Albinism (the presence of abnormal white coloration in the plumage, cf. Sage 1962) has been recorded quite frequently in corvids (Harrison 1963, a,b; Lee and Keeler 1951; Sage 1962, 1963). The presence of white feathering on a black bird presents a striking pattern which is readily detected in the field. On 18 March 1985, A. Wormington and M. Jennings observed a partially albino American Crow (*Corvus brachyrhynchos*) at the Burlington Landfill Site, on the North Service Road, Halton Regional Municipality (R.M.). It was flying in association with several hundred normally-plumaged crows. Four days later, on 22 March 1985, WJC observed a similar crow over the Queen Elizabeth Way near Cawthra Road in Mississauga, Peel R.M. It was flying in the company of four normally-plumaged crows. A comparison of our notes suggests that the same bird may have been involved in both observations, or perhaps we

had observed related birds from the same brood. We both noted the striking resemblance of the wing tip pattern to that of the Black-billed Magpie (*Pica pica*). The greater part of each primary feather on each wing was white, with the tips of these feathers being black. As far as it was possible to determine, the pattern of albinism was perfectly symmetrical.

Our observations are of interest for several reasons. They document an additional case of albinism in the American Crow (Nero (1968), Sealy (1967), and Short and Laybourne (1967) have reported other cases, which differ in the extent and distribution of albinism in the plumage), they record albinism in a migratory species, in which the incidence of albinism is low (Sage 1963), and they allow the determination of local dispersal, a poorly known aspect of the American Crow's life history (Stokes 1979). The distance between our sightings is approximately 36 kilometres.

Although this distance is not great, these observations provide a clue as to the timing and direction of post-roost dispersal of some crows at the west end of Lake Ontario in the spring. AW's observation was clearly that of a crow associating with roost mates (probably from the Hamilton Mountain roost mentioned by Lamoureux and Lamoureux 1980). The Burlington Landfill Site is a well-known feeding area for crows in winter (see recent Hamilton Christmas Bird Count results, published in *American Birds*). A few days later, the same or a closely related bird was seen in Mississauga. Its direction of flight was toward the southeast at the time of the observation, which was approximately 1700 h (dusk), and it seems unlikely that it would return to a roost over 40 km away after dark.

Albinism is often genetically based, although partial albinism may be induced by poor diet, senility, or shock (Goodwin 1976; Sage 1962). These latter forms of albinism appear to be rare, and may be reversible. Cowin (1933) observed a very similar magpie-like pattern in Jackdaws (*Corvus monedula*) on the Isle of Man, England. Several birds (nine or ten in one field) showed the pattern, and these birds were present for at least eight years, suggesting that the albinism was genetically based and well established in that British population. The symmetrical pattern observed by us is also suggestive of a genetically determined condition.

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## Topic of Note

**Eds. Comment:** As announced in the October issue, the Topic of Note for the next issue of Ontario Birds (April) is natural foods of passerines in winter. Observe passerines feeding (not at feeders) in winter, 1 December–28 February or while the ground is snow covered, identify exactly what they are feeding on and send us a short note on it. The more individual observations you can make, on the same or different bird species, the better. Notes will be due the end of February 1986. Botanically-oriented ornithologists (or vice versa) who have volunteered to assist with the identification of winter plants are: Dan Brunton, 2704 Marie St., Ottawa, Ontario K2B 7E4 (613-829-7307); Dale Hoy, 726 Pickering Beach Road, Ajax, Ontario L1S 3K8 (416-683-5791); Donald Sutherland, 325 St. Clair Ave. E., Toronto, Ontario M4T 1P3 (416-488-7492) and Mike Oldham, R.R. #2, Ruthven, Ontario N0P 2G0 (519-733-

5982). Send them as much of the food plant as possible, carefully wrapped, and they will try to identify it.

We will take a temporary reprieve from naming a specific subject for the September/October 1986 Topic of Note. Instead we would like to encourage OFO members (and others) who have submitted records of rare birds to the Ontario Bird Records Committee and had them accepted, to write up their record. This applies not only to new (first) records for the province, e.g. Swainson's Warbler, but also to species which have been reported a "few" times, e.g. Tricolored Heron, Little Blue Heron, Yellow-crowned Night-Heron, Swainson's Hawk, Laughing Gull, Scissor-tailed Flycatcher, Mountain Bluebird, Blue Grosbeak, Lark Bunting, etc. There's almost always a bit of a story that goes with finding any one of these birds; our readers would like to hear yours!