

A NOTE ON BREWER'S BLACKBIRD IN NEW ENGLAND

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The status of Brewer's Blackbird (*Euphagus cyanocephalus*) in New England is open to speculation. There is no existing specimen from any of the New England states, nor from the New York City region, as it is defined by John Bull (1964). Proctor and Sibley in their recent checklist (1973) relegate the Brewer's Blackbird to hypothetical rank, which means, "No specimen, no photograph, no valid sight record." Neither Forbush (1927), Griscom and Snyder (1955), nor Bailey (1955) even mention the Brewer's Blackbird in their annotated works on Massachusetts birdlife.

How, then, is it that since 1965, three New England states have sight records of Brewer's Blackbirds on Christmas Bird Counts? The first of these was a bird on the Saxtons River census in Vermont (1965), followed in 1966 by a bird on the Hartford, Connecticut, count. In 1968, three showed up on the Newport, Rhode Island, census. Since then, four additional records have appeared in the annual Christmas Bird Count editions of *American Birds*, published by the National Audubon Society. To these reports should be mentioned a small handful of poorly documented sightings in Massachusetts by inexperienced observers or of birds proved to be something other than Brewer's Blackbirds.

How to evaluate the winter records listed above poses a challenging, but unresolvable, question. Is the Brewer's Blackbird actually beginning to winter in very small numbers in New England, or are people just thinking that they see them? Earl Godfrey (1966) states that the Brewer's Blackbird is, "A recent arrival in eastern Ontario, it is extending its range eastward." If this is the case, it seems logical to suppose that a small percentage could show up in New England while en route to the southeastern United States, where substantial numbers now seem to winter in certain localities.

With this background, the following notes from my journal on 27 October, 1973, seem pertinent:

"At about 2:30 P.M. I was returning from the outer beach in East Orleans, near the North Beach parking area, when I noticed two blackbirds feeding near one of the trash disposal barrels at the edge of the parking area. I recognized them as not being typical of any of our local blackbirds and at once began to take a closer look. They were both alike in the following particulars:

- 1) Size was nearly the same as a Rusty Blackbird and the overall shape was very similar. The tail was medium in length and quite rounded in flight. There was no keel in the tail or notch in the end.
- 2) Bill was quite small, at least as small as in the Rusty Blackbird, and quite pointed. Very different from the massive bill of a Common Grackle.
- 3) Plumage was generally an overall dull grayish-brown with only a slight greenish highlight on the wings and tail. There was no trace of an eye line, nor any hint of rusty scaling on either the back or the breast. The smoky colored breast was very faintly and indistinctly vertically striped with blurred dark stripes. The iris was a dark brown with no trace of pale color.
- 4) The birds walked like Rustys, tails held down when walking and feeding, not up, like the Brown-headed Cowbird. They jettied their tails when alarmed.
- 5) The birds seemed very tame, as they so often are in the West, and they were readily approached to within 8'-12' as they walked about the parking lot picking up refuse or while they perched on a stone retaining wall.
- 6) Several times as they flew for short distances, they uttered a very characteristic "CHICK" note, more highly pitched than the corresponding note of the Rusty Blackbird or Common Grackle. It is a note that I have heard many times in the West."

These two birds were later seen by Wallace and Priscilla Bailey, Carl Goodrich and Blair Nikula. They were present briefly at the same location on the following morning.

The next weekend, November 4th, another similar-looking blackbird was well studied by Carl Goodrich and Winthrop Harrington at Truro, Massachusetts. The same (?) individual was still present on the 7th, seen by Richard Forster.

While both of these sightings can only be given a hypothetical rating, they nonetheless should help to put the serious field student on to the increasing (?) possibility of recording a bona fide Brewer's Blackbird in New England.

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SAW-WHET OWL AT PLUM IS.  
JAMES HINDS, CONCORD



SCREECH OWL  
STEWART YOUNG, NEEDHAM



BARN OWL  
Gayle Miller, Cambridge