

STRAYS AND STRAGGLERS

By John V. Dennis

Part II

The subject of strays and stragglers and why they appear where they do is one of major interest to bird-banders and one to which banding has made a contribution by supplying undeniable factual evidence. In Part I, I discussed the return of strays to the exact out-of-range localities where they were first seen or banded. I suggested that through imprinting, the bird, if at the right stage of immaturity, substituted in its consciousness the new locality over the inherited one as an accepted part of its range.

It may be asked, does such acceptance by occasional birds have any permanent effect so far as the species as a whole is concerned?

It is my belief that if enough strays of the same kind appear at the same localities over a long enough period of time there is a permanent effect. Sometimes the result is the establishment of an outpost of winter range, perhaps separated by hundreds or even thousands of miles from the normal winter range. Again the result may be a deviation in the normal migration route. Repeated appearances of strays in regions unsuitable for winter occupation may actually lead to a migration through those regions each year by a segment of the species. Something of this kind appears to have taken place in New England, for example, where each fall season sees a marked movement of western species; most notably, the Lark Sparrow, Western Kingbird, and Dickcissel, and of perhaps one or more southern species. Of particular interest is the fall movement of the Yellow-breasted Chat, a southern species, into New England and to some extent into the Maritime Provinces.

The movement of birds in this group through New England and adjacent regions is often accompanied by lingering; that is, the species in question act for a time as though they were going to take up winter residence. Now and then Chats and others do attempt to spend the winter. Many settle down near feeding stations. Most seem to stay as close to the coast as possible. The milder maritime climate is undoubtedly a factor in selecting coastal locations.

It would seem as though the Chats and others did have an attachment, it might be called, to the region, and this, in turn, suggests an adaptation that has come about through countless cases over many generations of immature birds having been subject to locality imprinting at a time when perhaps weather factors made them involuntary visitors.

The severity of northern winters permits few of these visitors to remain. The exodus of Chats, Lark Sparrows, Western Kingbirds, etc., in fact, begins well before winter sets in. Coastal mist netting stations from Nova Scotia to Maryland begin recording such birds in late August. Timing their appearances, as a rule, with the cold fronts that bring the big movements of other migrants, these birds move along with the rest.

When they arrive in the region and by what route is a mystery. The coastal mist netter, I am convinced, with few exceptions, is viewing the exodus. This exodus continues into late fall and usually only a few Chats are still around at the time of the Christmas bird counts.

Farther south there is less need of moving on to escape the hazards of cold or of a diminishing food supply. It becomes possible for a number of stray species to achieve new outposts of winter range in parts of the South. With its mild winters Florida leads all other sections as a haven for strays from all over the continent.

Not only is the climate more suitable but Florida's situation geographically is such that coastal plains in two directions bring it an influx of fall migrants. Probably Florida receives the largest share of its western element via the north Gulf Coast. But the Atlantic coastal plain must bring sizable additions in the way of strays that first appear in the Maritime Provinces, New England, and the Middle Atlantic States. This is the movement, which I have suggested, is observed at the coastal mist nesting stations.

As with the tourists that arrive in Florida at about the same season, there is not much tendency on the part of the strays to linger in northern Florida. South Florida, from about the Palm Beaches and Sarasota southward, is the ultimate goal. Perhaps a few of the strays possess enough migratory urge to strike out overwater en route to ancestral wintering grounds in the tropics. Certainly a fair number get down into the Florida Keys.

One has only to look under the Florida Region of the Field Notes to gain an insight into the extent of the western penetration into Florida. For example, the June 1957 issue reports no less than 24 species of western affinity during the winter of 1956-57, and most of these in the southern section. A closer look at the western element in Florida shows that a number of species can no longer be regarded as strays but should be regarded as regular winter visitors.

Swainson's Hawk, known casually in Florida in the last century, now occurs regularly each winter. The normal winter range is in Argentina! Scissor-tailed Flycatchers and Western Kingbirds, that share a common winter range through much of southern Mexico and Central America, also occur together in south Florida. Records of the Scissor-tailed Flycatcher go back to the last century (Howell's Florida Birdlife) while the first Western Kingbird record was one taken in February, 1918.

Probably all three of the species just mentioned have benefitted through clearing of the land for agriculture in the region immediately south of Miami. This clearing gained in momentum following World War II. It is in these croplands that several hundred Swainson's Hawks can be found during most winters. In the Keys and in farming districts of South Florida can be found sizable flocks of Scissor-tailed Flycatchers and Western Kingbirds (the two almost always associated together). The flocks adhere closely to certain localities through the winter.

Howell lists the first Vermilion Flycatcher for the state as one taken in March, 1901. Within recent years this species has been a regular visitor in the Tallahassee region and casual elsewhere in Florida. White-winged Doves are also now regular winter residents in parts of Florida, especially the extreme southern portion. No one knows the source of these doves, whether our Southwest or the West Indies. This is another species first recorded in the last century. The Dickcissel also dates back to the last century as a casual stray. Now the bird may be regarded as almost common in winter. But whether or not this species should be called western is open to debate. Perhaps mid-western would be more suitable as the bird occurs abundantly through much of the Mississippi Valley. Of course, Dickcissels were at one time common breeding birds in the East and there are a few breeding stations at present. The Lark Sparrow, another western and mid-western species, was first recorded in Florida in 1872. Now it is also nearing the common winter visitor status. The first really big winter influx was in 1957. The Black-throated Gray Warbler is a newcomer among western strays, but it is already regarded as a regular winter visitor along with Bullock's Oriole, Western Tanager, and Clay-colored Sparrow.

In fact, there are so many western strays in Florida, that have suddenly taken on the characteristics of regular winter visitors within the last five or ten years, that one wonders if it isn't basically a matter of better field ornithology in finding and identifying such birds. This may well be the case in regard to such hard to find, hard to identify birds as Bell's Vireo (now quite regular around Miami), Bullock's Oriole, Tropical Kingbird, Masked Duck, Wied's Crested Flycatcher, Western Meadow-lark, Black-headed Grosbeak, Western Tanager, and Clay-colored Sparrow.

On the other hand, there are a number of other species whose appearance in the East have been so recent and spectacular that there is no question about dating their arrival. Outstanding in this regard is the appearance of the Fulvous Tree Duck about six years ago and Brewer's Blackbird about ten years ago.

Mention could be made of other western strays in Florida or the sizable stray element in the same state that is of West Indian origin. But enough has been said, I feel, to show the evolution from most casual of strays to regular winter visitor.

The original strays may have been drifted offcourse by beam winds, carried by storms, or, as suggested in Part I, may have simply moved in a new direction in response to a mutational change in inherited direction. If the last, presumably there would be repeat performances in future years by birds carrying this characteristic. If, however, the survival rate were too low, nothing permanent would be accomplished. Similarly there would not be a range expansion if only an occasional bird were drifted or blown off course. The bird that is really off the beam, like the Gray Kingbird at Cape Beale in British Columbia in September, 1889*, has nothing

*U.S. Natl. Museum Bull. 179, Life Histories North American Flycatchers, Larks, Swallows, and their Allies, A. C. Bent, 1942.

of biological significance to offer. But the western stray along the Atlantic coast is a potential pioneer that should be watched. Prevailing westerly winds in the fall will not impede the arrival of others of its kind. There are no high mountain barriers to prevent a return to the breeding range. And what is more, the bird has only to move with the general flow of migration to the southwest to find a congenial winter home in Florida or some other part of the South. The constant repetition of visits by strays to such favored locations gradually leads, so it would seem, to the acceptance of new migratory and wintering habits by a portion of the species. The "voluntary" return along the new migration route, however circuitous this route may be, and the eventual arrival at the new winter home is favored, so it would appear, by locality imprinting. But how individuals so oriented transmit this sense to their progeny or still others of their kind is totally unknown. The only evidence we have that this sense is transmitted is in the many instances in which species have first appeared as casual strays and then, after varying lengths of time, have taken on the aspect of regular visitors.

It may be assumed that even after the regular status has been obtained, certain individuals are still involuntary arrivals in that they may have been drifted by wind, caught up in storms, and the like. The picture is particularly complicated in the Northeast where in spring and fall there is one procession of weather movements after another that could account for both southern and western strays. The only criteria I have used in distinguishing between probable weather strays and those that come voluntarily are regularity in appearance and numbers. To use as an example the fall warblers of southern origin in New England, I would not regard Kentucky, Prothonotary, Cerulean, Hooded, or Worm-eating Warblers to be common or regular enough to be anything but weather strays. The Yellow-breasted Chat, on the other hand, I would consider as common and regular enough since about 1946 to be considered a voluntary migrant into the region.

Criteria need to be established for separating weather strays from birds that are more probably regular visitors or winter residents. There are cases, to be sure, when a bird's appearance is so well correlated with that of a storm or major weather movement as to rule out any other reason for its arrival. But even without such evidence there is much to be learned by examining the bird in the hand and its behavior in a free state.

Does the bird seem tired, and does examination in the hand show absence of fat, or is its weight much below the average for the species? Such bits of detail are helpful in classifying the stray. Is it a victim of adverse weather, perhaps nearly exhausted and underweight, or in actuality is the bird only responding to an internal change that is taking it, and others of its kind, outside the range limits that we, human observers, have prescribed for it?

