

AGEING AND SEXING BLACKBIRDS

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(Reprinted from EBBA 1964 Workshop Manual, Volume III)

INTRODUCTION

This paper was prepared to assist banders in ageing and sexing blackbirds, grackles, and cowbirds. The Bureau of Sport Fisheries and Wildlife has a special research interest in the migration habits of these birds, and since the various age and sex groups differ slightly in their migrations banders should make every effort to age and sex all individuals that they capture. Many of the measurements and weights presented here are based on very small samples. This emphasizes the need for additional measurements and weights of birds of known age and sex. It is hoped that through the cooperation of banders much larger samples can be made available in the near future.

Blackbirds of the Eastern United States are sexually dimorphic. With the exception of the common grackle, males can be readily distinguished from females after postjuvinal molt on the basis of size or plumage or both. Ageing blackbirds is more difficult mainly because most blackbirds in first year plumage are similar to adults. However, since the postjuvinal molt in several genera of blackbirds is usually incomplete, immatures can be separated from adults because of the retention of certain juvenal feathers. Juvenal feathers retained include some or all under greater primary and secondary coverts and some tertiaries. Such feathers are browner (less blackish) and have margins which are more frayed. Ageing criteria for blackbirds over 2 years old are not known.

AGE TERMINOLOGY

The Bird Banding Laboratory uses certain terms for age classes of birds that may differ from those used by some nonbanders. Thus, terms which designate age classes are defined below to avoid confusion.

In banding parlance a young bird up to the free-flying stage is a local. In altricial species (blackbirds, etc.) a bird is local for days as a nestling and for only a few more days thereafter. In precocial species (gulls, etc.) it is local only briefly as a nestling but for weeks thereafter. After a young blackbird leaves the nest and is strong enough to make a sustained flight it is termed an immature. However, some nonbanders use the term juvenile^{1/} for a bird of this age class until the postjuvinal molt is complete, after which it is called immature. On January 1 the bird is called a subadult. In other words,

^{1/} Note: The term "juvenile" refers to a young bird; the term "juvenal" to the young bird's plumage.

a subadult is a bird that was hatched in the calendar year prior to the year of banding, and which has not acquired full breeding plumage.

All measurements are in millimeters. The length of the wing is a chord measurement. All weights are in grams. Unless otherwise indicated measurements noted are from original data by the author.

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NE-49 PROJECT

By Philip Granett

NE-49 is the symbol used to designate a recently approved regional project entitled "The Control of Bird Depredation." This project, sponsored by the State Agricultural Experiment Stations in the Northeastern area, is a cooperative endeavor to find effective, reasonable ways of reducing or eliminating the damage some birds cause to cultivated crops.

The long search for remedies to the age old problem of crop damage from birds makes it obvious that a quick simple solution is unlikely. The objectives of the NE-49 project are to acquire a fundamental knowledge of birds including bird ecology, behavior and physiology, to improve methods of assessing damage and to devise ways to protect such crops as corn, other grains and fruit. Procedures to protect crops include a search for acceptable ways of reducing bird populations, investigations of plant cultural practices and cropping systems, and biological, chemical or mechanical means of diverting birds. Blackbirds such as red-winged blackbirds, grackles, starlings and cow-birds will be considered particularly because they do most of the damage in this region; other species such as robins, orioles, or blue jays may be studied, too, because of the damage they may cause to fruit.

Of the 12 agricultural experiment stations in the northeast area, seven, those in Massachusetts, New York, Connecticut, Pennsylvania, New Jersey, Delaware and Maryland, will be actively engaged in achieving these objectives. In addition, because it has a strong interest and background in these problems, the Ohio Agricultural Experiment Station will be an active contributor. Further, individual investigators in the Bureau of Sport Fisheries and Wildlife located in Massachusetts, Delaware and Maryland have attended organization meetings and have indicated they will contribute to the project efforts.

Each of the states or agencies have selected areas of research in which they can make the most significant contributions. We hope to get cooperation not only from the research people but from anyone who they contact or who might have an interest in birds. What we need to learn also is how best to get the cooperation of the birds and their environment.

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