

On Northern Oriole Plumages:
Questions for Banders to Answer

By Erma J. Fisk

On spring molt and tail feathers

Handling 31 Northern (Baltimore) Orioles on Cape Cod, Mass., in late May and early June, I have found the tails of SY birds to be faded, ragged, sometimes so badly worn that only the shafts of the central rectrices remained. Birds in black and yellow plumage had rectrices less ragged, but still worn. Obviously they had not been replaced since the postbreeding molt of the previous summer.

Both Dwight, quoted in Bent, and Roberts (The Birds of Minnesota) state that the first nuptial plumage of the Baltimore Oriole is acquired by a partial prenuptial molt involving most of the plumage except the primaries, the primary coverts and the secondaries. Mine was a small sample, but a study of skins in the National Museum, Florida State Museum, University of Miami, Manomet Bird Observatory, the Maine Audubon Camp and a group of those in the Massachusetts Audubon collection have corroborated my opinion that these statements should be corrected to include except, also, the rectrices. All rectrices of the birds taken in their first breeding season were worn to ragged. It was obvious that the tail would not have been replaced, except for an occasional fresh feather which could be a replacement, until the complete postnuptial molt.

Of black and yellow birds in their second or later breeding seasons Dwight and Roberts say that the adult spring plumage is acquired by wear. Rectrices and wing feathers therefore would be worn, and faded, not fresh.

On Sexing Females and Immatures (that is, don't, unless the brood patch is evident or the skull is incompletely ossified).

Ridgway didn't discuss tail molt but he did write "Young in first autumn and winter . . . not essentially different from those adult females without black on upper parts of throat" (In other words, sex U for all such birds). In modern corroboration of this J.D. Rising of the University of Toronto in his 1968 thesis on Baltimore and Bullock's Orioles (pers. comm.) says: "The 'female' Baltimore Orioles figured in field guides are first year birds and could be of either sex."

Of the adult female Ridgway wrote: "There are a very great amount of individual variation. A majority of specimens show more or less black on the upper parts, some having the head, neck and back nearly uniform black and the middle rectrices mostly black, thus to be distinguished from males in the second or third year only by dissection." As Dwight says the tips of the lesser wing coverts (upper wing bar) of the first fall male are "orange-tinged", and all females have this wingbar white, this character-

istic, if valid, could be used to separate male from female; but I have found on my birds that several have one or two yellow feathers among the white of the lesser coverts, which confuses the issue.

On Male Plumage Development

Note that Ridgway indicates that males in their "second or third" year are similar to adult females. Does any one know how long it takes a male Icterus galbula to attain its full black and orange plumage? My notes separate three types of tails in May and early June - the ragged bronze of the SY immature; the fully adult black and orange (though there are some more yellow than orange); and an intermediate stage which has the rest only smudged, or splotted with black. These latter birds are still speckled black and yellow-brown on the head and throat. This would indicate that it takes at least three fall molts for the fully adult plumage to be attained, but the implication in Ridgway's statement is that it takes longer.

Here are studies for banders - those lucky enough to recapture birds from previous years, those who handle females with brood spots and can check the upper wing bar, those who will compare the appearance of the rectrices with the colors of the rest of the plumage.

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ANNOUNCEMENT

On 22 May, 1975, Mrs. Katherine Price advised me that the long awaited reprint of Dwight's classic is off the presses. Please watch subsequent issues of EBBA NEWS for further details how to obtain your copy and cost.

Editor

Kathleen Klimkiewicz asked us some time ago if we would coordinate publication of new age/sex techniques with the Bird Banding Laboratory prior to publication. Her reason is largely one of economics. Whenever someone publishes completely new information, the B.B.L. receives hundreds of letters questioning new procedures, particularly when these do not particularly agree with techniques currently in effect. Rather than performing this cross-check from this level, I would prefer that the author establishes a line of communications with the B.B.L. before submitting his/her paper to EBBA NEWS, or for that matter to any publication. By doing this, you would greatly assist the Bird Banding Laboratory and through this line of inquiry you would enhance the value of your notes or thesis.

Editor