

## THE BREEDING STATUS OF THE GRAY CATBIRD IN FLORIDA

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Although Howell (1932) stated that the Gray Catbird (*Dumetella carolinensis*) "breeds sparingly in northern and central Florida," some recent field workers in this state have viewed his statement skeptically. Of Howell's seven references to Florida breeding, four were made by Oscar Baynard, some of whose records of other species still lack confirmation. Three of Baynard's reports of nesting catbirds — those at Clearwater, on the Blackwater River (Hillsborough Co.), and in Alachua County — are completely undocumented, but he "found a pair. . . nesting in a clump of myrtle bushes" near Dade City (Pasco Co.) on 13 April 1930 (Howell 1932). Arthur Wayne (1895:365) considered the species a breeder at Waukeelah (Jefferson Co.), but presented no evidence, and H. L. Ferguson (Howell 1932) claimed to have "found a nest. . . on the Chassahowitzka River." Worthington and Todd (1926:227), working near Choctawhatchee Bay in 1903, stated merely that "a nest was found on May 9." Although Howell mentioned seeing "3 pairs that seemed to be located for the season" at Sebring (Highlands Co.), 25 April 1923, he further quoted Henry Nehrling as stating that the species rarely left Gotha (Orange Co.) before 9 May. More recent observations have been made of catbirds that seemed to be "located for the season" only to disappear later in spring. Thus, Howell's account presents a few definite statements of Gray Catbird nestings in Florida, but little or no documentation and no proof of these. We do not know the basis for the statement in the A.O.U. Check-list (1957) that the catbird has nested as far south as Cape Sable (Monroe Co.).

More recently, there have been several summer records of probably non-breeding catbirds from widely scattered Florida localities: Pensacola (Escambia Co.), 23 June to mid-August 1962 (Weston 1965), and 14 June 1975 (Stewart 1975); near West Palm Beach (Palm Beach Co.), 23 July 1956 (Stevenson 1976); Lake Alfred (Polk Co.), 13 August 1970 (Ogden 1970); WCTV television tower (Leon Co.), 22 July 1971 (Ogden 1971); Homestead (Dade Co.), 21 July into August 1971 (Ogden 1971), and 30 June-8 July 1972 (Ogden 1972); Jacksonville (Duval Co.), late June and early July 1972 (Ogden 1972); St. George Island (Franklin Co.), 16 June 1975 (W. Wilson Baker, pers. comm.). Although several of these summer birds were in song, no evidence of nesting was found.

The southernmost breeding records of Gray Catbirds in Alabama and Georgia suggest the likelihood of nesting in north Florida. In Alabama a breeding record at Greenville is 100 km from the Florida line, but summer sight records at Andalusia and in southern Henry County (Imhof 1962) are within 45 km of Florida. In Georgia the catbird's breeding range has ex-

tended closer to Florida in recent years. Burleigh (1958) gave no indication of its breeding farther south than Fitzgerald, but by 1975 the species began nesting at Thomasville, only 22 km from the Florida line (Crawford and Neel 1976).

Until the summer of 1977, the only recent record of Florida nesting was in "late May or early June 1973," when a nest with three naked young was found in Jacksonville by Alan Ashley, near the site of the Jacksonville summer record cited above. Two days later the young were dead in the nest and covered with ants (S. A. Grimes, *in litt.*, 20 Aug. 1977).

No credible early-summer record of the Gray Catbird was known near Tallahassee (Leon Co.) until Menk saw two near the old airport, at the southwestern edge of the city, on 2 June 1977. This low, wet area with black willows (*Salix nigra*), wax myrtle (*Myrica cerifera*), elderberry (*Sambucus canadensis*), groundsel (*Baccharis halimifolia*), blackberry (*Rubus* sp.), and various forbs, appeared to be ideal breeding habitat. On 5 June we found at least two adults and one full-grown fledgling with a yellow rictus. These birds remained near a stand of large myrtles (7 to 8 m high) where Stevenson returned on 6 June and found a nest containing two well-feathered nestlings in a wax myrtle about 4 m above the ground (specimens and nest to Tall Timbers Research Station, No. 3551 and 3552). Other nearby call notes similar to those of the two nestlings, along with the presence of at least three concerned adults, suggested either a second nest or a fledgling.

On 4 July we found that all shrubs and trees around the stand of large myrtles had been cut down, leaving only 0.65 ha (1.6 a) of suitable, though isolated, habitat. However, some catbirds remained, and we found a second nest containing two eggs 2 m up in a myrtle. The eggs had hatched by 13 July, and the young apparently had fledged by 26 July (Menk).

On 10 July we found a third nest containing three eggs and attached to overlapping limbs of two myrtle bushes about 5 m above the ground. On that day we also located three empty nests of similar construction, two of which were also in wax myrtles. These appeared to be of recent construction, but one or more may have been used in 1976.

Returning on 30 July, we found that nest No. 3 held one young almost ready to fledge, suggesting the possibility that one or two others had already fledged. Furthermore, one of the formerly empty nests (No. 4), 3.1 m high in overlapping branches of two swamp cyrillas (*Cyrilla racemiflora*), now contained two half-grown young catbirds (photo, 3 Aug., to Tall Timbers). Thus three different catbird nests contained three eggs or young simultaneously during much of July — an almost certain indication of three adult pairs.

Two other catbirds were recorded in north Florida during the summer of 1977. One was seen in NE Bay County by Mary Gray (pers. comm.) and

others on 4 June and 4 July, and Stevenson heard a catbird singing on 11 July in a wax myrtle thicket at Lake Seminole (Jackson Co.). At the latter locality much suitable habitat is present, and nesting there seems likely.

The available evidence suggests that the Gray Catbird nested in northern and central Florida prior to 1932, later withdrew from that part of its range, and is now beginning to reoccupy it. Regarding the Tallahassee site, two points might be made: (1) The species probably has nested there for more than one season, as one or both of the empty nests in the dense myrtle thicket may have survived in good condition since 1976. Also a catbird seen by Menk about 1 km east of the site on 2 August 1975 seems much too early for a fall arrival. Furthermore, it is unlikely that three pairs would nest there in the species' first appearance. (2) This breeding station is in jeopardy. The area is zoned for commercial development, some of which has already occurred immediately east of the nesting thicket, and we know of no equally good habitat within a few km of the site.

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