

Mass Migration of Blue Jays Along OffshoreMississippi and Louisiana Islands

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From October 10 to October 16, 1972, continual groups of blue jays (Cyanocitta cristata) were observed in flight along Petit Bois Island, Mississippi and Dauphin Island, Alabama.

Flocks were generally composed of about 100 individual jays and apparently included no other passerines. During this period of time several thousands of jays transported themselves in a westerly direction along these islands enclosing Mississippi Sound. These islands lie roughly 10 miles offshore from the mainland and are separated by about 4 miles of open water.

Dead blue jays were to be found in the swash line of the Sound side of both islands. Counts of these bodies indicated densities in excess of 1500 birds per mile. The decomposed state of these dead individuals suggest that these flights might have commenced as much as a week earlier than our actual observations.

Observations were not made along the remaining islands during this period of time, however, interviews with commercial and sport fishermen disclose that this phenomenon occurred as far south and as far west as the Chandeleur Islands in Louisiana. Two accounts describe fatigued jays as resting in the riggings of boats quite distant from any landfall.

Although one account which appeared in the October 16, 1972 Mobile Register described gulls attacking migrating jays along Dauphin Island, we have not personally observed such conflicts.

This mass migration is a very strange occurrence and, as far as can be ascertained, has no precedent. The birds evidently headed out over open water with no apparent destination and many fell into the water and drowned, being too fatigued to continue. Some unsubstantiated reports from oil rig workers off the Louisiana coast indicate that numerous blue jays were perched on the oil rigs during the migration period.

The reason for this abnormal behavior of the blue jays is not known and can only be conjectured at the present time.

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First Record of the Red Crossbill In Mississippi

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On 29 October 1972 I found a freshly killed Red Crossbill (Loxia curvirostra) in the middle of a gravel road near the headquarters of Noxubee National Wildlife Refuge. The specimen was found in Winston County, just west of the Noxubee-Winston county line. The bird was prepared as a study skin and is catalogued as skin number 676 in the ornithological collections at Mississippi State University. An automobile accident prevented us from searching for additional crossbills immediately, and we have found none on subsequent trips to the area.

This specimen, a male (testes: 1.5 x 2.0 mm), was moderately fat and weighed 37.9 grams. The skull is incompletely ossified, suggesting that the bird was less than one year old. Seeds of loblolly pine filled the bird's crop.

Crossbills breed in many areas in the northern half of North America and also in mountainous areas of more southern latitudes. Populations of these birds have become adapted to the conditions of their breeding environment to the extent that ornithologists (e.g., Griscom, 1937; Bent, 1968) distinguish different races on the basis of differences in wing length, bill length, and bill depth. Our specimen, with a wing length of 95 mm, bill length of 16.6 mm, and bill depth of 10.2 mm, most closely resembles Bent's Crossbill (Loxia curvirostra bentii) (Bent, 1968). This race normally breeds in the pine hills of southeastern Montana, eastern Wyoming, western North and South Dakota, and the Rocky Mountain region of Colorado. Bent reports the accidental occurrence of this race as far east as Tennessee.

This is apparently the first record of the Red Crossbill from Mississippi. The species has been reported on at least one occasion from Louisiana (Lowery, 1960) and is uncommon in Alabama, though it has possibly nested in the mountainous areas of the northeast (Imhof, 1962).