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Further Information on Mass Movements of Blue Jays on the Alabama, Mississippi and Louisiana Coasts in October 1972

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In October 1972 considerable interest along parts of the central Gulf (Alabama, Mississippi and Louisiana) was engendered by large flocks of blue jays flying along the coast, falling emaciated into the water and some ending up on oilwell platforms off the Louisiana coast. Newspaper stories were published in The Mobile Press and The Daily Herald (Biloxi-Gulf - port) and accounts were published in the Mississippi Ornithological Society Newsletter (Gunter 1972) and in The Mississippi Kite (McGraw et al. 1973). Since that time other ideas and information have come to light.

Stevenson ( ) gathered data on summaries of field counts of blue jays in the Southeast during a series of years extending from 1938 to 1972 but not necessarily concurrent years, in seven localities in Alabama, Mississippi and Florida. These counts cover the southern blue jay and the northern subspecies as

well. He refers to the A.O.U. Check list (1957) as saying that the northern blue jay migrates into Louisiana, southern Alabama and northeastern Georgia in the winter. Stevenson's data definitely show an increase on blue jays in various parts of the Florida and Alabama, including Gulf Coast areas, in September and October. This increase could be due to the northern blue jays coming in or local populations being pushed southward by the northern migration. In any case, at various Alabama, Mississippi and Florida locations their blue jay abundance was increased by eighty-five per cent in September and October compared to the previous six months, during the years Stevenson considered.

Dr. M. L. Wass (in litt.) of the Virginia Institute of Marine Science, called my attention to the fact that blue jays have increased enormously and may have developed some sort of lemming reaction in flying out to sea. Be that as it may, the large numbers of blue jays on the Gulf coast of Mississippi has impressed me considerably in recent years, while some other birds seem to have declined in numbers.

Dr. Wass also called my attention to a communication by Toenes in American Birds (1973), which presents an alternate idea as to why so many blue jays fell exhausted into the water. She wrote the editor that there has been an influx of jays, thrashers, and flickers on October 3 at Dauphin Island, Alabama, and that on the 6th a weak, cold front came in and the next morning blue jays were literally everywhere, flying out over the Gulf where the flight became an erratic, senseless milling. Stevenson (op. cit.) also mentioned the milling about of large flocks of blue jays when they come to large bodies of water, which they are reluctant to cross.

Toenes went on to say that this enormous concentration of blue jays lasted from October 7 to 9 when sick and dead birds began to appear. Two of these birds were sent to the pesticide laboratory of the Alabama Department of Agriculture and Industry at Auburn. The analyses showed a total of 118 parts per million of heptachlor epoxide, DDE and DDT. Ms. Toenes said that soybean fields just to the north

were being sprayed from a plane and a road in one area was covered with doves, nighthawks and song birds. She also said a quail from this area was found to be 131 parts per million of various pesticides.

This flight along the shores and over the Gulf is the same episode reported by Gunter (1972) and McGraw et al. (1973) as having occurred from October 10 to 16 a little farther west.

These combined observations show that large flocks of blue jays from the northward arrived on the coastal areas of Alabama and Mississippi in early October 1972, possibly in much greater numbers than usual, but nevertheless following a known pattern of influx of migrants in September and October. A great many of them flew out to sea where they milled about. Others flew on a hundred miles or so to the southwest where they were reported on oilwell platforms and boats around the mouth of the Mississippi in the State of Louisiana. Some turned and flew back to land, appearing to come across the water from the southeast. Apparently the birds seen on the western Alabama (Pettit Bois Island) and Mississippi coasts coming from the southeast had gone out over the Gulf at or near Dauphin Island, Alabama. Thousands of them fell into Mississippi Sound and the open sea.

Some of these birds at least were affected by large amounts of pesticides they contained. They may also have been affected by some sort of lemming reaction brought on by crowding at the edge of the land next to the sea. These observations seem to invalidate the hypothesis that these birds came from a low food area in Florida and flew northwestward across the Gulf of Mexico.

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The Yellow-headed Blackbird in Mississippi

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On 26 March 1973 I collected an immature male Yellow-headed Blackbird (Xanthocephalus xanthocephalus) on the south farm of Mississippi State University in Oktobbeha County. The bird was prepared as a study skin and is catalogued as M.S.U. skin number 699. It was moderately fat, had an incompletely ossified skull, and weighed 86.0 grams. This is the first specimen record of the Yellow-headed Blackbird for Mississippi, although the species was observed in 1965 at Moss Point in Jackson County. In a letter to Mr. B. E. Gandy dated 8 Sept. 1965, Alice Tait reported an immature male Yellow-headed Blackbird had visited a feeding station on the ground in her back yard on 9, 10, 24, 25, and 26 April 1965. Apparently the same bird was seen daily from 11 to 23 April at another feeder about a quarter of a mile away.

The Yellow-headed Blackbird is characteristically a bird of the Great Plains and parts of the western