

NOTES ON THE DISTRIBUTION OF SOME WISCONSIN
BIRDS. II.
BREWER'S BLACKBIRD (*EUPHAGUS CAROLINUS*).

BY A. W. SCHORGER.

Plate XVII.

THE presence of Brewer's Blackbird in Wisconsin previous to the years 1926 and 1927 was rare. The recent extension of its range is quite remarkable. Roberts¹ dwells on the expansion of this species in Minnesota during the last half-century.

References to Brewer's Blackbird in the literature are few. Kumlien and Hollister² state that the only known case of nesting took place at Lake Koshkonong in June, 1862; and that two or three specimens had been taken there in the last sixty years. King³ took a male in July in a marsh east of Princeton, Green Lake County.

The year 1926 marked the beginning of the influx. On June 9 of that year, Mr. John Main⁴ found a pair nesting in the Lake Wingra marsh at Madison. The nest contained three young. Ford⁵ subsequently published a note, on data furnished by Mr. A. J. Franzen, that extended the breeding range to Walworth County, Wisconsin, and on to the vicinity of Waukegan, Illinois. The first record for Walworth County was in 1926 also, Mr. E. G. Wright having collected a male there on May 29. In 1928, Eifrig⁶ mentioned casually that Brewer's Blackbird was a common summer resident near Hayward, Sawyer County.

Through the courtesy of various correspondents, it is now possible to state that Brewer's Blackbird is at present a common summer resident, breeding in a narrow area extending from Polk County in the northwest, to Walworth County in the southeast. In Polk County, Rev. P. B. Peabody has found Brewer's Blackbirds nesting at the edge of the Sawyer tamarack swamp. A colony of seven birds was found in May, 1930, and a nest with young was located. The colony increased to twelve pairs in 1931.

¹ Roberts, T. S. 'The Birds of Minnesota,' 1 (1932), 71; 2, 314.

² Kumlien, L. and Hollister, N. The Birds of Wisconsin, (1903) 89.

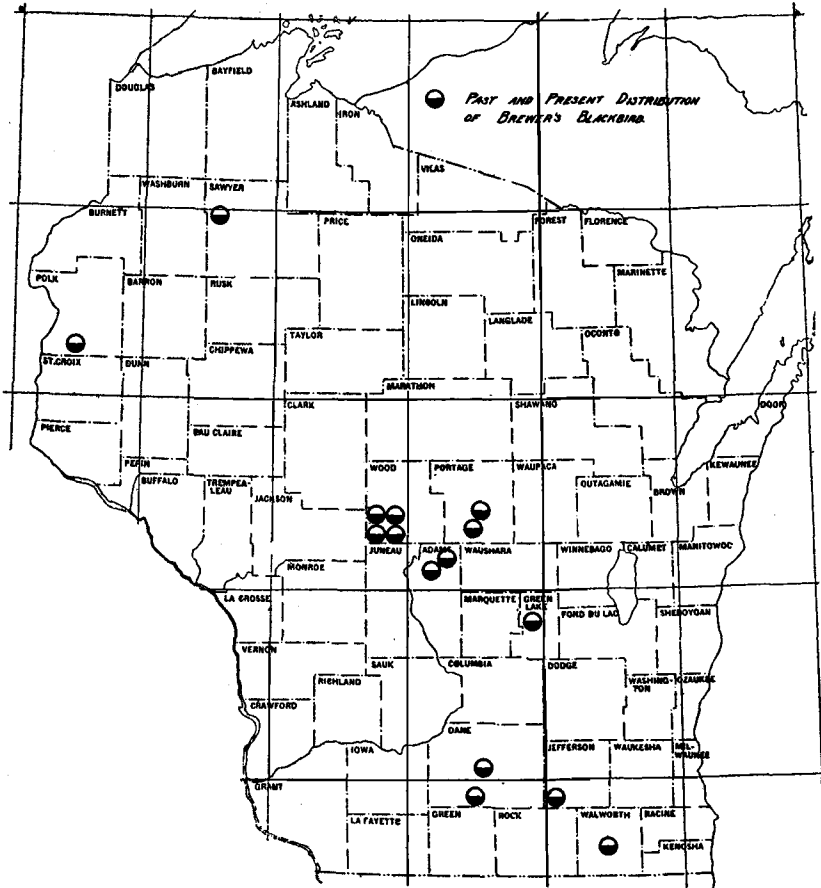
³ King, F. H. Geology of Wisconsin, 1 (1873-1879) 551.

⁴ Main, J. S. Auk 43 (1926) 548.

⁵ Ford, E. R. Auk 47 (1930) 565.

⁶ Eifrig, G. Wilson Bull. 40 (1928) 216.

I am indebted to Mr. F. J. W. Schmidt of the Wisconsin Conservation Department for very full notes on the occurrence of the species in the central portion of the state. He estimates that there are 500 birds in Wood, Portage, Adams and surrounding counties.



Near Babcock, Wood County, he found numerous small colonies of six to twelve birds in the years 1931 and 1932. Two colonies were found also in Portage County and two in the northeastern corner of Adams County.

The Lake Wingra marsh at Madison was unoccupied in 1927

and 1928 but since then a few pairs have nested yearly. I found three pairs there in the spring of 1932.

In Walworth County, Mr. A. J. Franzen of the Field Museum has found Brewer's Blackbirds nesting in a marsh eight miles north of Delavan. Here he collected a set of four fresh eggs on May 28, 1928,¹ and found several pairs present in the years 1929 and 1930. Specimens were collected.

On May 5, 1932, in a field along the Sugar River, two miles west of Belleville, Dane County, I located a marshy area where eight pairs were nesting.

It is of special interest that in Wisconsin, at least, Brewer's Blackbird nests in dry marshes from which the previous year's growth has been burned. The species is noted throughout its range for adaptation to a wide variety of nesting sites, but in a review of the literature no mention of a burned area was noted. The Belleville colony was established in a burned area of approximately five acres that contained a few isolated spots, five to ten feet in diameter, that the fire had not touched. I assumed that the nests would be situated in the cover afforded by the unburned places, but the most careful search was fruitless. In the burned area, however, the nests were found, entirely devoid of cover.

Since the Wingra marsh is burned annually, it seemed important to determine if burning is a prerequisite to nesting. Fortunately, abundant evidence was obtainable by correspondence to show that there is deliberate selection of burned areas. Rev. Peabody informed me that in Polk County the marsh had been burned. The conditions were similar to those long familiar to him in Kittson County, Minnesota, where he had found the species nesting. The marsh in Walworth County was also reported by Mr. Franzen as having been burned.

Excellent information on central Wisconsin was furnished by Mr. Schmidt. It appears that there were few if any Brewer's Blackbirds in the region prior to 1931, there having been only a few local burned areas. In 1930, approximately 400 square miles of sand and peat land were burned over. In the spring of that year a fire raged from the east side of the Yellow River as far south as New

¹ According to Mr. Franzen, the date June 3, 1928, given by Mr. Ford, *l. c.*, is incorrect, due to a misunderstanding.

Miner, Juneau County. The area burned in September, 1930, would be bounded roughly by a line drawn from City Point to Pittsville, Babcock, Mather, and back to City Point. The nesting colonies in Portage County were two miles north and three miles west of Bancroft where several patches of peat burned in 1931. The flocks in Adams County were likewise nesting in a burned peat marsh two miles north and ten miles west of Hancock.

It is difficult to offer a satisfactory explanation for the selection of burned areas for breeding. The most logical reason would appear to be greater relief from enemies. Skunks, weasels, and other vermin would tend to hunt least on land devoid of cover since there would be less chance of finding their usual prey. This hypothesis is weak in view of the fact that in the Belleville marsh Bobolinks and Short-billed Marsh Wrens were nesting commonly in the unburned sections. A particular food arising from burning the grass cannot be a factor, since from my experience Brewer's Blackbird feeds by preference on cultivated land, and food for the young was always brought from a distance.

Observations made on the Belleville colony showed that the nests were concealed as well as the terrene would permit. This marsh consisted of hillocks, and was sparsely studded with willows and alders only two to three feet high. On May 14, I found four nests, all of which were placed in the "valleys" between the hillocks, and six to twelve inches from their tops. At the proper angle, the eggs were plainly visible. The new growth of grass at this time was slight. I found a nest on July 2, probably a second attempt, that was an exception to the above. The vegetation was now luxuriant and the nest was placed on the top of a hillock.

The Wingra marsh in general is smooth in surface. Here the nests examined were placed in slight cavities so that they were level with the ground. A nest found by Mr. Schmidt at Babcock, May 31, 1931, was on the bare ground and level with it; and another found May 30, 1932, was placed on the bare peat, but not in a hole, under the top of a fallen aspen.

Of the four nests found at Belleville on May 14, 1932, one contained two eggs and one Cowbird's egg; two, four eggs; and one, five eggs. I collected the set of five eggs on May 16 and found that they were incubated about eight days. On the 20th, a fifth nest

was found containing five young about five days old, indicating that deposition of eggs began the first of the month. A nest found in the Wingra marsh on May 21 contained three eggs. Another nest found at Belleville on July 2 contained one egg and two callow young. Only one bird survived and this is shown in the accompanying photograph taken July 9. The young grow rapidly as this bird had left the nest by the 16th. It was in the immediate vicinity as the parents were present and showed the usual concern. All the other Brewer's Blackbirds had left the marsh.

The nests were constructed of brownish black grass and rootlets and were lined with stiff grass and hair. The inside dimensions of the four nests measured were remarkably uniform, averaging 4.0 by 3.5 inches at the top and 2.4 inches in depth. The colors of the eggs and nesting material blend so well with the background that the nests are not easily detected though in plain sight. In two cases the females flushed when I was about ten feet from the nest; in all others, the nests were found by search.

On entering the marsh, the males fly over and around the intruder a few times uttering the characteristic "tchick." We are lacking in consonants that can express the exact tone. They soon disperse and are joined by most of the females. In a few minutes all of them have settled on the bushes and continue their listless protest which is accompanied in both sexes by raising and spreading the tail. When the nest contains young, the parents will remain in its vicinity though the observer is only fifty feet distant. By remaining partially concealed, the exact location can be determined readily.

In one case a male, apparently through nervousness, varied its notes from the "tchick" to a peculiar, low "belching" or gulping note; and even uttered the familiar musical "turulee." The song is indistinguishable from that of the Rusty Blackbird. When the young, barely able to fly, are hidden in the grass, the female in bringing food does not approach them directly. There is much preliminary flying back and forth from one perch to another. Whether the low "sweee-sweee-sweee" uttered by her is a warning note or a demand call for the young bird to indicate its location was not determined.

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NEST AND EGGS OF BREWER'S BLACKBIRD.
YOUNG BIRD EIGHT DAYS OLD