

## A NONDESCRIPT BLACKBIRD FROM ARIZONA

BY ALLAN BROOKS

THE capture in North America of a bird that cannot be assigned to any known species or even genus is a noteworthy event and while it is inexpedient to describe a species from a unique specimen, still there can be no harm in publishing its characters in the hope that such a record may lead to a more thorough exploration of the general region where it was taken so that further specimens, if existing, may be procured.

The bird in question, now in the U. S. National Museum, is a rather large, wholly black individual of the Icterine family that was taken by the late J. E. Law and the present writer at a large tank overgrown with cat-tails on the ranch of Mr. L. C. Way some nine miles south of Mammoth, Arizona, on March 15, 1928. It was associated with a large flock of Red-winged Blackbirds (*Agelaius phoeniceus sonoriensis*), mostly males; these were not breeding at that time.

When we arrived at Mr. Way's ranch on March 14, the bird was casually identified as a Brewer's Blackbird although it looked very large for that species. On the following day a good opportunity to examine it with an eight-power binocular at once proved it to be a new bird; the dark brown iris and the strong Quiscaline bill were evident. We at once assumed that here was a straggler from the South and we were pledged not to collect or to fire a gun anywhere in the neighborhood of this tank! Our host would not return until the evening so we had to be content with following the bird about and noting its characters and actions.

Mr. Way arrived before sunset and readily gave his consent to a violation of his sanctuary. Law shot the bird and with the same shot dropped two male Redwings which had seemed to be clear of the radius of the charge. Unfortunately the tip of the upper mandible was shot off but its contour had been well noted before in life.

In the hand the bird proved to be about the size of a male Yellow-headed Blackbird with the following measurements and characters: male; organs much enlarged, of the same size as in the two Redwings killed at the same time; iris dark brown (sepia); bill and feet black; entire plumage black, slightly glossed with bluish purple, wings and tail more greenish; upper tail coverts falling short of the tip of tail by 60 mm.; tail with thirteen rectrices, strongly graduated, the outer feathers 20 mm. wide, falling short of the central pair by 32 mm., in form quite flat without trace of plication; wing pointed much as in *Agelaius*, first four primaries of almost equal length, formula 4-3-2-1-5 (from outer primary). Bill: culmen slightly curved, top

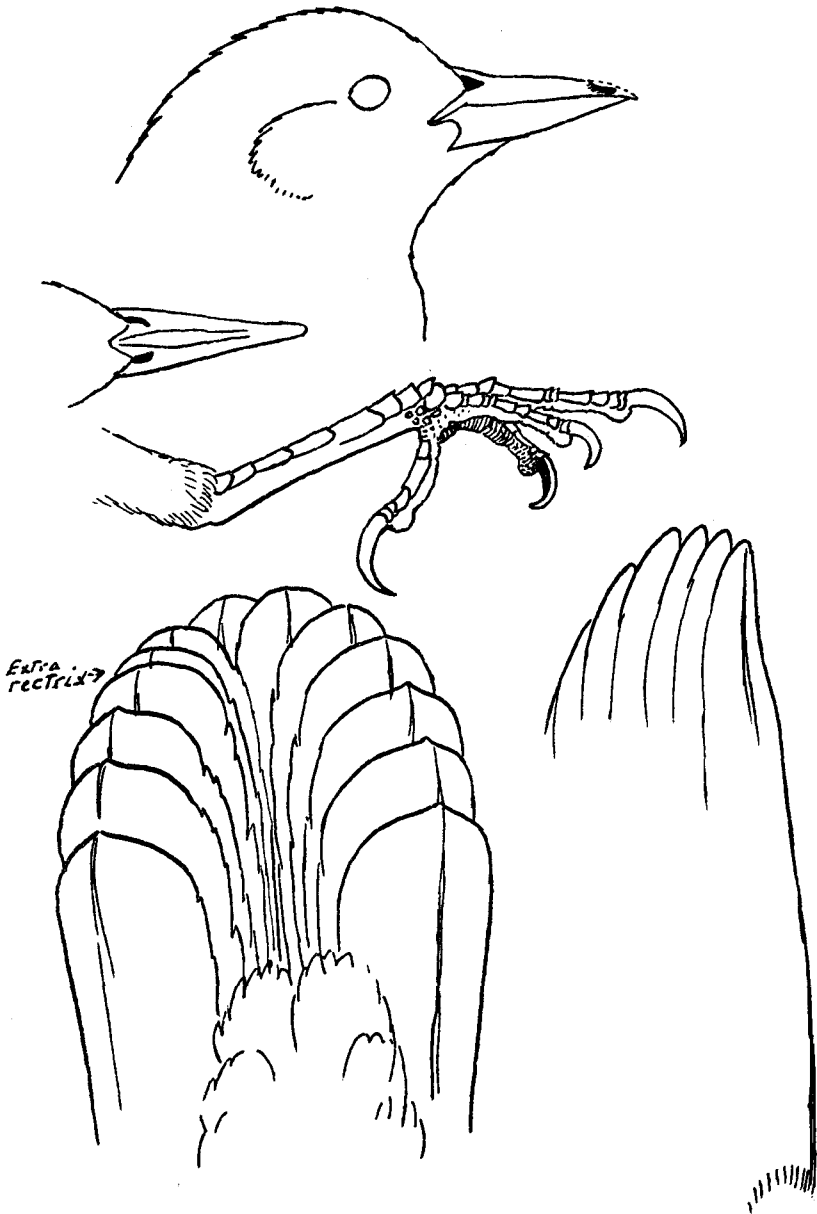


FIG. 1.—Structural details of a nondescript Blackbird from Arizona.  $\times 0.87$ .

flattened medianly, palate as in *Holoquiscalus*. Feet large and stout with short tarsus and strong claws. Measurements: wing, 150 mm.; tail, 126; culmen (tip broken), 29; depth through nares, 12.5; tarsus, 37; mid-toe, 29; with claw, 37.

When freshly killed the plumage of the body had a slightly ribbed texture suggesting *Tangavius* and with a velvety rather than a silky surface.

When separated from the Redwings, the bird walked about sedately, frequently posing with its head thrown back, the bill pointing straight up and the neck slightly extended.

As we were unable to identify the bird from anything in Ridgway's 'Birds of North and Middle America,' the skin was sent to the U. S. National Museum where the late Dr. C. W. Richmond and Dr. Alexander Wetmore gave it their fullest consideration. The former wrote to me as follows: "My present idea is that it is a *Quiscalus* of a very new species and probably of a very limited range . . . it is out of the range of any ordinary *Quiscalus* but there is no reason why an unknown *Quiscalus* should not occur there." Dr. Wetmore said: "I lean to the opinion that someone will obtain others and demonstrate it definitely as a new species of *Holoquiscalus*." Neither considered it to be a hybrid. To many the possibility of such an entirely new and distinct species (and probably a distinct genus) will be regarded as an impossibility; to these, doubtless, the theory of a hybrid will afford a refuge, but all possible crosses are discounted by the appearance of the bird itself. The most plausible parentage that has been suggested is *Quiscalus* × *Tangavius*. This would present several difficulties. Where do these species occupy the same breeding territory? The former has a straw-colored iris, the latter a red one; this bird has a dark brown, nearly black iris. Finally, the offspring of divergent genera would certainly be infertile, whereas this bird was very near breeding condition by its sexual organs. The only abnormality is the presence of an extra rectrix but careful examination shows this to be a freak feather, imposed in the normal spacing of the regular twelve rectrices.

In the spring of 1933, I spent three months working the boundary line from western Texas to eastern Arizona in the hopes of encountering the strange blackbird again. All swamps were worked but the only all-black blackbirds found breeding were at El Paso, Texas, and Las Cruces, New Mexico, where there were colonies of Great-tailed Grackles (*Cassidix mexicanus mexicanus*). I twice visited a fine swamp that intersects the New Mexico-Arizona boundary. This was the Cienega of San Simon; many years before in 1913 I had stood on the summit of the Chiricahua Mountains in eastern Arizona and noted the long patch of misty green in the desert to the east and determined some day to investigate it. Twenty years later the opportunity came and here I hoped to encounter my stranger. But the

only blackbirds were Redwings, but not the subspecies that accompanied the nondescript of the San Pedro valley; the San Simon birds were *nevadensis*. So somewhere in the breeding grounds of the Sonora Redwing some collector may turn up the subject of this article. Was not an entirely new species of jay, *Cyanocorax dickeyi* Moore, discovered recently in a well-worked district of Sinaloa by Chester C. Lamb?

*Okanagan Landing,  
British Columbia*