

# Additional records and notes of birds in the Virgin Islands

“Recent immigrations, whether natural or human-assisted, illustrate current, dynamic forces of biogeography.”

Robert L. Norton

CHANGES IN THE insular avian composition of the Virgin Islands have been infrequently recorded. The most recent accounts since 1960 indicate an increased use of tropical habitats by migrants and immigrants (Bond, 1974, 1976, 1977; LaBastille and Richmond, 1973; Leck, 1975; Mirecki, 1976; Norton, 1979; Raffaele and Roby, 1977; and Robertson, 1962).

The northern Virgin Islands represent a fairly uniform group of small islands on the Puerto Rican Bank. The exception is Anegada where the elevation is a mere 8 meters. The other major islands, St. Thomas, St. John, Tortola and Virgin Gorda, all have elevations above 389 meters. Vegetational succession is reclaiming much of the landscape since plantation farming ended in the 1850s. Seral stages of succession include a period of xeric dominance which Kepler and Kepler (1970) suggest serve as dispersal routes for the occurrence of xerically adaptive land birds immigrating from similar habitats on the mainland.

The dominant groups of migrants using these islands in transit or for overwintering are: eleven duck species, twenty seven shorebirds, and thirty seven passerine species, principally wood warblers. Two avian predators are also recorded in this region, although rarely.

Recent immigrations, whether natural or human-assisted, illustrate current, dynamic forces of biogeography. These forces also alert scientists to the phenomenon of turnover and equilibrium ratios for small islands (MacArthur and Wilson, 1963; Mayr, 1965; Simberloff and Abele, 1976; Terborgh, 1973 and 1974) of which the Virgin Islands, as a group in the center of the Caribbean Archipelago, lend themselves.

Bond (1973, 1976, 1977) outlines the

spread of the Glossy Cowbird (*Molothrus bonariensis*), for example, in the region as an introduced species. The evidence is convincing, but what host or hosts are paving the way for expansion on the Bank? Raffaele and Roby (1977) discuss, also convincingly, the immigration of the Lesser Antillean Bullfinch (*Loxigilla noctis*) to St. John in 1971. How rapidly and what effect does the bullfinch expansion have on established avifauna? These questions will be discussed in regard to breeding species of relict populations on the Puerto Rican Bank.

The annotated accounts of recent observations in the northern Virgin Islands treat migrants and residents separately. Nomenclature follows Bond (1971).

## MIGRANTS

**Pintail (*Anas acuta*).** One adult male was observed at Europa Bay pond, St. John, Apr. 4, 1979; providing a new record for that island. Bond refers to Pintails as rare in this area.

**Peregrine Falcon (*Falco peregrinus*).** This is a regular but rare migrant in the Virgin Islands. I observed a male at Saba Island, off St. Thomas, Mar. 22-23, 1979, while I was banding incubating Audubon's Shearwaters (*Puffinus lherminieri*).

**Sora (*Porzana carolina*).** Previously unrecorded from St. Thomas, a single bird was observed at the sewage treatment plant, Nadir, Dec. 17, 1978. As many as five Soras were counted Mar. 10, 1979, at Francis Bay pond, St. John (SRW, RLN).

## CHARADRIIDAE

Three species of this family seen on neighboring islands had not been recorded from St. Thomas. The following records serve to complete the pattern of migration for Semipalmated Plover (*Charadrius semipalmatus*), Black-bellied Plover (*Pluvialis squatarola*) and Ruddy Turnstone (*Arenaria interpres*) on the Bank. Twenty-six Am. Golden Plover (*Pluvialis dominica*) were observed on a wet golf course on St. Thomas Sept. 13, 1979, about a week after Tropical Storm *Frederic* passed the Virgin Islands.

## SCOLOPACIDAE

Several species have been recorded as regular migrants and occasional summer visitors. As with Charadriids, many species lack documentation on islands closely situated on the Bank. The following are perhaps not significant by date or location, but serve to complete the pattern of occurrence on the migratory path.

**Common Snipe (*Capella (Gallinago) gallinago*).** Previously unrecorded from St. Thomas, it has been observed as early as Aug. 9 (RRV, RLN) and through early April.

**Solitary Sandpiper (*Tringa solitaria*).** Two birds were observed Aug. 9, 1979; providing St. Thomas with first documentation.

**White-rumped Sandpiper (*Calidris fuscicollis*).** This species was observed closely at Emmaus, Coral Bay, St. John, Sept. 9-16, 1979. Its larger size,

compared to the Least and Semipalmated sandpipers, easily set it apart from the other peeps. Eight birds were observed carefully and the white rump noted during preening and flying. They undoubtedly occur throughout the area during migration, but have gone unrecorded from St. John.

**Least Sandpiper** (*C. minutilla*). Obviously overlooked on St. Thomas, Least and Semipalmated sandpipers are the most common of the peeps during migration. Least is not recorded as frequently as *pusilla*, but arrive by Aug. 2.

**Western Sandpiper** (*C. mauri*). This is still another peep that should be expected throughout the area, but went unrecorded from St. Thomas until Aug. 9, 1979, when two birds (RRV) were observed near the sewage treatment plant.

**Sanderling** (*C. alba*). Undoubtedly overlooked in the northern U.S. Virgin Islands, it was observed Oct. 4, 1976, in St. Thomas and Sept. 2, 1979, in St. John. These are the first recorded occurrences for these islands.

**Short-billed Dowitcher** (*Limnodromus griseus*). The dowitcher has been overlooked and previously unrecorded from St. Thomas until Dec. 17, 1979, when observed at the sewage plant.

**Stilt Sandpiper** (*Micropalama himantopus*). Stilt Sandpiper is another example of a species overlooked in the northern Virgin Islands. First records for St. Thomas (Jan. 2, 1978) and St. John (Mar. 4, 1979) belie the apparent abundance of the species as evidenced by estimates at Europa Bay pond of  $200 \pm$  (RRV) Mar. 16.

**Cliff Swallow** (*Petrochelidon pyrrhonota*). Four birds were observed feeding with a group of Barn Swallows (*Hirundo rustica*) on windswept Bordeaux Mountain road Sept. 15-22, 1979. It may be no coincidence that two hurricanes passed close to the Virgin Islands at the time of first sightings of swallows Aug. 30 - Sept.

4. The Cliff Swallows were observed very carefully on three consecutive days for comparison of the effects of different lighting conditions during observations totalling over an hour. They could not be confused with Cave Swallow (*P. fulva*) which breed in Puerto Rico, since they were lacking buffy face, throat and forehead. All individuals had dark, chestnut throat and sides of head. At least one bird had a bone-white forehead, the others were less distinctly marked; but the squarish tail and pale chestnut rump were instantly visible at a distance. Bond (1971) records Cliff Swallow as a rare transient in the West Indies. One observation is noted from St. Croix (Philibosian and Yntema, 1977).

#### PARULIDAE

Warblers represent a great seasonal immigration to the island habitats. Their effect on the local population of arboreal passerines is not fully known. Robertson (1962) predicted a trend of increased observations of different Parulids favoring heavier or moist forests and that a re-evaluation of migrants/winter residents in the National Park would confirm this. My observations during a period of residency at Lameshur Bay from February 1978, to October 1979, tend to confirm this statement. Maturing forests are continuing to appear semi-open under the canopy and dry/scrub forests are grazed by feral donkeys, keeping them semi-open. Wintering warblers and vireos (*Vireonidae*) can be expected in these habitats at any elevation, but they prefer those habitats first documented by Robertson.

**Swainson's Warbler** (*Limnothlypis swainsonii*). Norton (1979) reported the first occurrence in this area which appears to have been confirmed by another observer (JB) unaware of the first sighting. It was observed Jan. 19, 1979, in the precise location of the Reef Bay Trail, St. John, described earlier.

**Cape May Warbler** (*Dendroica tigrina*). An observation Apr. 13, 1979, in Road Town, Tortola, provided the first record for the British Virgin Islands (B.V.I.).

**Blackburnian Warbler** (*Dendroica fusca*). Two separate observations from Lameshur, probably of the same bird, within a few days of Dec. 27, 1978, seem to confirm the first occurrence in the Virgin Islands (AP and RE/JB).

**Palm Warbler** (*D. palmarum*). A single bird was observed on Apr. 13, 1979, in Road Town, Tortola, providing the first observation for the British Virgin Islands.

**Common Yellowthroat** (*Geothlypis trichas*). Apparently considered accidental on the Bank (Philibosian and Yntema, 1977), but several observations during the past winters and this spring (1979) from various locations suggest over-wintering, as is the case with many "rare" Parulids. Winter dates of Dec. 17, 21 and Jan. 2 on St. Thomas, Jan. 19 (JB) on St. John, and a spring date of Apr. 13 on Tortola, provide evidence of at least casual winter residency. The latter two records are new for those islands.

#### ICTERIDAE

**Bobolink** (*Dolichonyx oryzivorus*). A small flock of four birds was observed at a golf course, St. Thomas, Sept. 13, 1979. This is the first report from St. Thomas. They were attacked by a Gray Kingbird (*Tyrannus dominicensis*).

**Northern (Baltimore) Oriole** (*Icterus g. galbula*). A male was observed in Road Town, Tortola, Apr. 13, 1979. This represents the first report from B.V.I.

#### RESIDENTS

ROBERTSON REPORTED on the rarity of some residents or relicts, explaining that deforestation or the introduction of the mongoose (*Herpestes auro-punctatus*) had extreme effects on species such as Stolid Flycatcher (*Myiarchus stolidus*) and Common Nighthawk (*Chordeiles minor*), respectively. Although the present observations are not conclusive, they suggest that certain species of formerly breeding landbirds still survive. Robertson also predicted a continued expansion of the Lesser Antillean element through the Virgin Islands

[Puerto Rican Bank] Since his survey in 1957, two species have become fairly well established on St. John.

**Yellow-billed Cuckoo** (*Coccyzus americanus*). Wetmore (1927) reported Yellow-billed Cuckoos observed or collected from mid-May through late August in Puerto Rico and St. Croix, the latter station being a breeding site with eggs secured in late June. Kepler and Kepler (1970) recorded Yellow-billed frequently in the dry Guanica Forest, Puerto Rico, during surveys in June and July. The species is known from St. John only by infrequent sight records and there exists no information concerning age or molt. Karraker (*in* Robertson, 1962) observed a Yellow-billed Cuckoo in Reef Bay July 20, 1959; which is consistent with the data from other breeding stations on the Bank. Two observations from St. John this fall (1979) may support the thesis of breeding in the northern Virgin Islands, although the dates of Sept. 6 at Leinster Bay and 17 (immature) at Bordeaux suggest otherwise.

**Common Nighthawk** (*Chordeiles minor*). A single bird was observed at dusk at Cassi Hill, St. Thomas, Apr. 27, 1979. The date, however, suggests that it may have been a transient. Bond (1971) reports the Common Nighthawk as a breeder on St. Thomas based on collected eggs (Nichols, 1943). Mirecki (1976) observed a small flock nesting in August on Anegada, B.V.I. There are several flat-roofed buildings in this area of St. Thomas that may give some nesting habitat to nighthawks that might otherwise suffer from mongoose predation in natural situations.

**Stolid Flycatcher** (*Myiarchus stolidus*). The Stolid Flycatcher was recently reported as breeding on Virgin Gorda (Lapper, *in* Bond, 1976) but infrequently observed elsewhere in the northern Virgin Islands. During the spring of 1979, several birds were observed on St. John in many locations such as Francis Bay, Fish and Europa Bays, and Lameshur Bay where as many as four Stolids were heard calling or singing from March through September. An adult was observed inspecting a nest hole site Apr. 27, (BA, RLN) and Sept. 11 an adult and

immature were observed at Lameshur. Stolid Flycatchers, considered locally endangered by the Virgin Islands Fish and Wildlife Dept., prefer dry semi-open scrub forest where they make short sorties for insects within the canopy or rarely from tree tops. Sorrie (1975) did not locate *stolidus* on Vieques, which has appropriate dry habitats.

**Glossy Cowbird** (*Molothrus bonariensis*). By way of some clarification on the distribution of the cowbird on the Puerto Rican Bank, Bond (1977) was in error by reporting Glossy Cowbirds from St. John prior to the sighting of a large flock on Puerto Rico. A flock of "150-175 birds at Cabo San Juan Jan. 2, 1955" was observed by Grayce (1957) which predated Kortright's 10-12 cowbirds in the summer of 1955 St. John (Robertson, 1962). This sequence would seem to indicate an eastward movement at the same time as a westward expansion from a focal point of Vieques where an introduction seems very probable.

During my residency at the Virgin Islands Ecological Research Station, St. John, I have observed Glossy Cowbirds in nearly every month of the period from April 1978, to September 1979. A flock of 12-15 frequent the mangrove in Emmaus, Coral Bay, St. John, arriving before dusk from a north-northeasterly direction (Tortola lies about 5 km north-northeast of St. John). Mirecki (1976) reported a few cowbirds from the northern sections of Tortola.

Cowbirds are no doubt established in the breeding fauna of the northern Virgin Islands, but hosts of the parasite have not been discovered yet from this area. A review of Friedmann, Kiff, and Rothstein (1977) and Post and Wiley (1977) suggests likely candidates: *Zenaida aurita*, *Myiarchus stolidus*, *Mimus polyglottus*, *Vireo altiloquus*, *Icterus icterus*, and *Dendroica petechia*. Since cowbirds are relatively new to the area, hosts may not have had enough time to develop rejector mechanisms to defend progeny. Perhaps the unexplained rarity of *Myiarchus stolidus* on Vieques, St. Thomas, and St. John can be attributed to parasitism.

On Apr. 4, 1978, I observed five Glossy Cowbirds being attacked and harassed by Gray Kingbirds and oc-

asionally by a Mockingbird and a Northern Oriole. The last two species may have been contagions, although probably have developed rejector behavior to different parasites.

**Lesser Antillean Bullfinch** (*Loxigilla noctis*). The local range expansion of the bullfinch was updated (Norton, 1979), but seems to be more widespread than realized. Observations virtually extend throughout the island with latest sightings from Cruz Bay (Apr. 23, 1979) in the west and Francis Bay (Mar. 10, 1979) in the north of St. John. It appears that the expansion will jump the waters which separate St. Thomas and Tortola from St. John by only a few kilometers. I have observed interspecific conflict only with the Bananaquit (*Coereba flaveola*).

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## First North American photographic record of the Redwing (*Turdus iliacus*)

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ON JUNE 25, 1980, we observed a Redwing (*Turdus iliacus*) in a wooded area off the Goose Cove Road, just south of St. Anthony, Newfoundland (51°22'N, 55°35'W). Our attention was first drawn to the bird on hearing a strange and very distinct song that fits Voous's (1960) description: a series of clear robin-like notes followed by protracted warbling sounds (see also Peterson, Mountford and Hollom 1966). We observed the bird for about one hour, as it flew among the coniferous trees in the area, alighting frequently to perch and sing.

On June 26, Montevecchi and Kirkham returned to the same location, again found the Redwing flying about and singing from a number of perches, and photographed and observed the bird for about two hours. The Redwing apparently maintained this territorial behavior in the same location for at least 16 days, as the bird was seen again on June 30 by Norm Chesterfield, and Mactavish found it singing in the same area on July 11. The Redwing was not found by a birder who searched the area on July 17.

The photograph in Fig. 1 shows the diagnostic characteristics of the Redwing: the superciliary eye stripe, wide white stripe below the cheek, streaking on the breast, and chestnut flanks. The only previous North American sighting of a Redwing was at Jamaica Bay Wildlife Refuge, Queens County, New York on February 20-24, 1959, and as noted by

Vickery (1980b) the provenance of this occurrence remains in doubt owing to the proximity of John F. Kennedy International Airport, where extraordinary escapees from bird shipments have been occasionally found.

Redwings breed in Iceland and have strayed to Greenland. The bird sighted in Newfoundland was very likely coincidental with two other European vagrants *i.e.* Pink-footed Goose (*Anser brachyrhynchus*) and European Wigeon (*Mareca penelope*) and a regular migrant from the Old World to Arctic America, a Wheatear (*Oenanthe oenanthe*) all sighted in the area in May (Vickery 1980a).

We are grateful to Dr. W. Earl Godfrey for examining the photograph and transparency and confirming the identification and to Roy Ficken for printing the photograph. The Redwing was observed during field work supported by a Vice-President's Grant from Memorial University of Newfoundland.

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Figure 1. Redwing (*Turdus iliacus*) photographed just south of St. Anthony, Newfoundland on June 26, 1980. Photo/W.A. Montevecchi.

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[It should be noted that there is general agreement among those observers who studied the Queens County, N.Y., Redwing, that despite its proximity to JFK airport, it was not an escape. *Turdus* thrushes are not often caged and not easily transported; a survivor of a transAtlantic flight would have shown damage to primaries and rectrices, which this bird did not; there was no evidence of scalyfoot infection, to which captive *Turdids* are highly susceptible; the bird's behavior in the field was typically wild. Further, the February date might have mirrored Redwing behavior in Europe, since they often move south in mid-winter. Finally, many of the rarities recorded at the Jamaica Bay Wildlife Refuge are birds that could only have arrived under their own power.—Ed.]