News, Notes, Comments

Comment: Juvenile Gray Catbird Molt

The last issue of *N. Am. Bird Bander* contained a note (Keith, R. et al. 24:143-144) describing what is characterized as a complete prebasic molt in a juvenile Gray Catbird *(Dumetella carolinensis).* Based on the information supplied, this appears to be a noteworthy observation on molt, but one more appropriately referred to as "abnormal" rather than "complete" for the following reasons.

1) Complete prebasic molt includes three tracts of flight feathers–primaries (P), secondaries (S), and rectrices (R). No mention is made of any rectrix molt; and for a bird at the stage of having regrown P1-4, the tail should have been in molt and appeared fan shaped.

2) The condition of the primaries and secondaries described for this bird is not consistent with normal PS molt sequence. In most passerines undergoing normal, complete prebasic molt, the flight feather molt commences at P1 and progresses outward. At approximately when P1-3 are completely renewed, and P4-5 are undergoing molt, molting of the secondaries begins at S1 and progresses inward. Also at approximately this same time, rectrix molt commences at rectrix pair 1 and progresses outward. The exact timing of this sequence may vary slightly from species to species and among individuals, but generally this is the normal sequence.

As molt progresses, the rectrix tract is usually first to complete, then the primary, followed lastly by the secondary tract at S6. Again, this order may vary from species to species, and appears to do so in Gray Catbird in that the secondary tract may complete before the primary tract

The following two recorded molt patterns from catbirds in New Jersey at approximately the same stage of primary molt, (though slightly advanced through complete renewal of P5 vs P4 as in Keith et al.'s bird), illustrate the sequence of normal prebasic molt:

Bird 1 - 3 October 1987
P1-5 new and fully grown, P5=68mm; P6-9 sheathed at base and growing, P6=64mm, P7=56mm, P8=40mm, P9=22mm, P10 not noted.

S1-3 new and fully grown; S4-6 sheathed at base and growing, S4=54mm, S5=47mm and S6=43mm.

R1-3 new and fully grown =87mm; R4-6 sheathed at base and growing, R4=83mm, R5=83mm and R6=68mm, creating a distinctly fan-shaped tail.

All upper wing coverts, tertials, and alulae new.

Bird 2 - 28 September 1989
P1-5 new and fully grown, P5=68mm; as above P6-9=66,58,44 and 22mm, respectively; P10 not noted.

S1-4 new and fully grown, S4=58mm; as above S5-6=50 and 45mm, respectively.

R1-6 new and fully grown.

All upper wing coverts and tertials new; inner and middle alula new, outermost growing with sheath at base.

The observed secondaries in Keith et al.'s bird do not fit the normal pattern. They state that the secondaries "appeared fresh and recently replaced." Given the breeding cycle of this species at the latitude of Michigan, this bird was probably a late-June fledging making its secondaries only two months old by 20 August. Thus, the original secondaries may have never molted and could still have appeared relatively fresh.

The bird's molt condition is certainly unusual given its apparent age, and observations of this sort should be documented (and I commend the authors for doing so) to better understand avian molt and all its intricacies. There is not sufficient evidence presented, in my opinion, to characterize this bird as undergoing a complete prebasic molt.

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