

FEATURED PHOTO

VARIATION IN IRIS COLOR OF FEMALE BREWER'S BLACKBIRDS

BERT McKEE, P. O. Box 307, Pescadero, California 94060

ALVARO JARAMILLO, San Francisco Bay Bird Observatory, P. O. Box 247, Alviso, California 95002

The pale irides of the Rusty Blackbird (*Euphagus carolinus*) have often been cited as a useful feature distinguishing this species from the female Brewer's Blackbird (*E. cyanocephalus*). Recent scrutiny of the latter species in central California, however, has shown that females regularly show pale irides, often indistinguishable from those of the Rusty Blackbird. Paler-eyed female Brewer's Blackbirds have been noted for many years, from the west coast to at least Texas (J. Morlan pers. comm., Oberholser 1974), but they have rarely been discussed in print and have generally been considered rare or aberrant (Oberholser 1974, Hamilton 1995).

A first step in determining iris-color variation in female Brewer's Blackbirds is to distinguish these birds from young males. Prior to the first prebasic molt (July to September), juvenile Brewer's Blackbirds show (1) obvious pale, fleshy gapes, (2) shorter, paler bills than the adults, (3) evenly brown coloration throughout the wings and tail, and (4) loose-textured plumage, in the field visible primarily on the flanks (Pyle 1997, Jaramillo and Burke 1999). While it would be extremely rare for a male in full juvenal plumage to show entirely whitish or yellow eyes, irides in the range of pale brown to dark honey are not uncommon. The young male's pale eyes and blackish plumage typically begin to show by August; thus, brownish Brewer's Blackbirds showing pale eyes between fall and early summer are undoubtedly females, not young males.

The irides in Brewer's Blackbird are laden with white reflective organelles, which give them their pale color; in females, melanin granules on the surface of the iris mask the reflective granules, giving them largely dark eyes (Hudon and Muir 1996). It is variation in the amount of melanin pigment that creates the variation in females' eye color. To obtain a measure of the percentage of winter females that show pale irides, McKee observed 252 females in coastal San Mateo County, California, in January 1999. Of these, nine (4%) showed irides that appeared whitish or pale yellow in the field. At very close range, the irides some of these birds showed a small amount of dark flecking. Another 15 individuals (6%) had irides that contrasted with the darker pupil but were more heavily flecked with dark pigment; at a distance they generally appeared pale brown or honey-colored. The remaining 90% showed blackish or dark brown irides, not contrasting noticeably with the pupil. We have found several adult females in which one iris appeared much lighter than the other and noted that intermediate and darker irides often show a reddish cast in strong sunlight.

Pale-eyed female Brewer's Blackbirds may be a pitfall for the unwary, but an awareness of variation within Brewer's and Rusty blackbirds, as well as careful consideration of molt, wear, and structural features, should allow the identification of most individuals in the field—only heavily worn females in summer might readily be confused. McKee photographed the Brewer's Blackbird on the back cover at Andrew Molera State Park, Monterey County, California, on 11 October 1998. This bird's fresh-looking blackish wings indicate that it has recently undergone its prebasic molt; its extensively brown plumage show it to be a female. A Rusty Blackbird in October would show obvious rusty feather edges on the head, wings, tertials and back, pale-edged undertail coverts giving a "scalloped" look, a shorter tail, shorter legs, a more pointed and often deeper bill, and a more heavily patterned face with marked contrast between a pale supercilium and dark lores.

FEATURED PHOTO

We thank Jon Dunn, Paul Lehman, Joseph Morlan and Ronald Thorn for sharing useful information on Brewer's Blackbirds. Thanks also to Jocelyn Hudon for his detailed descriptions of blackbird irides, and for his helpful review of the manuscript.

LITERATURE CITED

- Hamilton, R. 1995. June photo quiz answers. *Birding* 27:298-301.
- Hudon, J., and Muir, A. D. 1996. Characterization of the reflective materials and organelles in the bright irides of North American blackbirds (Icterinae). *Pigment Cell Research* 9:96-104.
- Jaramillo, A., and Burke, P. 1999. *New World Blackbirds: The Icterids*. Princeton Univ. Press, Princeton, N.J.
- Oberholser, H.C. 1974. *The Bird Life of Texas*. Univ. of Tex. Press, Austin.
- Pyle, P. 1997. *Identification Guide to North American Birds*. Part I, Columbidae to Ploceidae. Slate Creek Press, Bolinas, CA.

HAWK WATCHING, BIRDING, AND OTHER FUN IN VERACRUZ, MEXICO

The amazing number of raptors migrating through the Mexican state of Veracruz (up to one million in a day!), combined with a large diversity of resident raptors, make this part of eastern Mexico a hawk-watcher's dream. With the help of Mexican ornithologists who have been monitoring raptors, WFO is sponsoring a trip this fall to Veracruz. If weather conditions are right we could see up to 500,000 or more individual raptors. We will visit varied coastal and inland habitats, including rain forest, that should produce around 260 to 320 species of birds, ranging from the Sungrebe and Boat-billed Heron to the Keel-billed Toucan and Collared Araçari to the Red Warbler and Dwarf Jay.

Besides birding, we will watch butterflies (many beautiful species identifiable with a unique field guide by southern California butterfly enthusiast Wanda Dameron) and other wildlife. We will visit a grand archeological museum, a botanical garden, and pre-Columbian ruins, as well as savor some of the history, culture, and wonderful food of Veracruz. Although the emphasis of this trip is birds, especially hawks, the trip is a sampler of the natural and cultural history of Veracruz, not a life-lister's marathon. The pace will sometimes be fast, but the walks are mostly easy with some hill climbing. Profits go to WFO and Pronatura, a Mexican conservation organization working toward a research center in Veracruz.

Schedule: Sunday 3 October (meet at the Veracruz airport at 2:30 PM, when the 1:40 Mexicana flight from Mexico City is scheduled to arrive) to 13 October (return to airport in time for 3:15 PM flight).

Leaders: Jim Royer, David Yee, and Pronatura ornithologists

Cost: \$1700, payable with a deposit of \$850 by 1 July and the remainder by 1 September 1999. This includes all food, accommodations, guides, entrance fees, boat trips, and transportation in air-conditioned vans. Air fare your point of origin to Veracruz excluded. Minimum 5 participants, maximum 12.

For more information and detailed preliminary itinerary contact Jim Royer (evening, 805-528-8933; jcadroyer@aol.com) or David Yee (209-365-1526; dyee@cwws.net).