

Maryland Ornithological Society



Maryland / District of Columbia Records Committee Skins Workshop February 4, 2006

Edited by Phil Davis, MD/DCRC Secretary

1. General

On February 4, 2006, the Maryland/District of Columbia Records Committee (MD/DCRC) held a Skins Workshop at the Division of Birds, National Museum of Natural History, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC. Our host was Roger Clapp of the US Geological Survey – Biological Resources/Patuxent Wildlife Research Center. Roger is resident at the museum. The committee thanks Roger for the time he dedicated to our workshop.

2. Attendees

Committee members in attendance were: Paul O'Brien (Chair), Phil Davis (Secretary), Ed Boyd, Patty Craig, John Hubbell, George Jett, Paul Pisano, and Sherman Suter. Past Chair, Harvey Mudd also attended.



Figure 1. Attendees studying cormorant specimens: (left to right) Harvey Mudd, Paul O'Brien, Sherman Suter, and Patty Craig. Image by P. Davis.



Figure 2. Attendees studying Cory's Shearwater specimens: (left to right) Ed Boyd, Paul Pisano, Sherman Suter, Paul O'Brien, and John Hubbell. Image by P. Davis.

3. Skins Studies

We began the workshop at 10:15 am, following our security check-in. We assembled in the Bird Division specimen case area on the 6th floor. Our objective was to study specimen skins related to sighting reports that are currently in review or are expected to be reviewed over the next year or skins that relate to other potential identification problems for Maryland and DC. The following were examined:

3.1 Neotropic Cormorant (*Phalacrocorax brasilianus*)

Account by Paul Pisano.

Background: In 2005 a Neotropic Cormorant [MD/2005-149] was reported in Maryland by multiple observers. This was the first report for Maryland and only one of a few for the Middle-Atlantic states. The committee took the opportunity to study Neotropic Cormorant skins, especially in relation to the small forms of Double-crested Cormorant (e.g., *P. auritis floridanus*).

Findings: The separation of Neotropic Cormorant (*Phalacrocorax brasilianus*) from the nominate subspecies of Double-crested Cormorant (*P. auritis auritis*) is fairly straightforward if the birds are seen well. However, it was unclear how easy it is to separate Neotropic Cormorant from the smaller subspecies of Double-crested, especially *P. auritis floridanus*. Skins from each species were compared; it was concluded that these two forms can also be separated if seen well, especially with respect to the shape of the gular pouch, the length of the tail, and the shape of the scapulars. However, the similar size shows that this characteristic is not a reliable field mark.

Gular Pouch. As seen in figure 3.1-1, the telltale shape of the gular pouch is readily apparent with these two individuals. The Neotropic, the upper bird, shows a white feathered edge and sharper angle along the bare skin extending from the gape. On the Double-crested, the lower bird, the angle is not as acute and appears more rounded.



Figure 3.1-1. Gular pouch shape comparison; top—*P. brasilianus*, bottom—*P. auritis floridanus*.

Size. As seen in Figure 3.1-2, these two forms are about the same size. In addition, comparison between multiple skins showed much variation in size for both species, especially Neotropic, so size is not a reliable field mark.

Scapulars. The Master Guide to Birding states, “At close range note tips of scapulars bluntly pointed in [Neotropic], rounded in Double-crested.” Comparison between Neotropic and nominate Double-crested didn’t show much of a difference in this regard, however the difference was quite apparent between Neotropic and *floridanus* Double-crested. This is because the scapulars of the *floridanus* are much more rounded than either Neotropic or nominate Double-crested, at least for the few skins we looked at. See Figure 3.1-2 for the comparison.



Figure 3.1-2. Scapulars comparison; top—*P. auritis floridanus* on, bottom—*P. brasilianus*. (Image by Paul Pisano)

Tail. The length of the tail between the two species was also consistently different, with that of the Neotropic distinctly longer. Figure 3.1-3 shows this difference well.



Figure 3.1-3. Tail comparison; top—*P. auritis floridanus*, bottom—*P. brasilianus*. (Image by Paul Pisano)

3.2 “Scopoli’s” (Cory) Shearwater (*Calonectris diomedea diomedea*) Account by Sherman Suter.

Background: A photograph was taken of several Cory’s Shearwaters in Maryland waters on an August 2004 pelagic trip. A former Maryland/DC birder, Ottavio Janni who currently lives in Italy, looked at the images and suspected that one of the birds was of the nominate, “Scopoli’s” subspecies. Janni had a fellow European birder look at the images who agreed with the assessment. The MD/DCRC was advised and we have placed that image [MD/2005-048] into a reviewable category since it is a “form or subspecies” unusual for the region. This image will be reviewed in the future. We took the opportunity to study skins of the Scopoli’s Shearwater and compare it to the normal form generally seen on Maryland pelagic trips.

Findings: Current literature described three subspecies of Cory’s Shearwater:

- (a) The nominate subspecies, Scopoli’s Shearwater, *C. d. diomedea*: breeds in the Mediterranean; taxon originally described by Scopoli; specimen records from North American waters;
- (b) Cory’s Shearwater, *C. d. borealis*: breeds on islands in eastern Atlantic; the most widespread subspecies, and the one that is most abundant off North America;
- (c) Cape Verde Shearwater, *C. d. edwardsii*: breeds on Cape Verde Islands off Africa; photographed off North Carolina;

According to Brian Sullivan in Jonathan Alderfer, *Complete Birds of North America* (National Geographic Society, Washington DC, 2005): “compared to Cory’s, Scopoli’s “shows more extensive white on the underwing: the white extends out onto the primaries. It also has somewhat paler upperparts and a less heavy, duller yellow bill.” The Cape Verde form “is very different from the others and is relatively easy to identify. It is smaller and darker overall, with more slender wings, a longer tail, a darker cap, an often paler mantle that contrasts with its darker wings, and a slim, mostly grayish or fleshy gray bill.” Thus, it shows some similarity to Greater Shearwater, but lacks “bright white collar and dark marking on the underwings and belly.”

We examined specimens and separate wings of both Cory’s and Scopoli’s; for Cory’s: white of underwing extends only onto basal part of primaries; for Scopoli’s: white clearly extends much farther out onto the primaries.

Differences should be detectable with good looks, but care should be taken to not be misled by lighting producing silvery underwings (as for the Sooty/Short-tailed distinction). So the ideal situation for claim’s of Scopoli’s off North America would be in direct comparison with Cory’s.

Photos from N Carolina suggest that *edwardsii* should stand out from other two subspecies.

Suter checked the Slater Museum of Natural History (University of Puget Sound) web site for spread wing specimens; however, they do not have any Cory’s in their collection.

3.3 Hammond's Flycatcher (*Empidonax hammondi*)

Account by Ed Boyd.

Background: In the fall of 2003, a Dusky Flycatcher (*Empidonax oberholseri*) was reported from Rock Creek Park in Washington, D.C. At the 2004 Skins Meeting of the MD/DC Records Committee, members examined Dusky, Hammond's (*Empidonax hammondi*) and Least (*Empidonax minimus*) Flycatchers to make comparisons in reviewing the submission of this record to the committee. Although the flycatcher in Rock Creek Park was not photographed, the two very experienced observers completed an exceptionally thorough write-up.

On November 23, 2005 an *Empidonax* Flycatcher was found along the North Central Railroad Trail north of Monkton, Baltimore County, Maryland, which could establish Maryland's second record of this species. The bird remained in this area until the last confirmed sighting on December 14, 2005. This individual was exceptionally well documented through numerous photographs.

Although the committee had just examined *Empidonax* Flycatchers at the 2004 meeting, current members, some of whom were not at the 2004 meeting, wanted to revisit the issue to look at the skins again. This year we only compared skins of Hammond's and Dusky Flycatchers.

Findings: The 2004 committee report showed the following general points between the two flycatcher species:

- **Bill:**

Hammond's: Bill very small and slender. Not noticeably wider at the base. Basal color of lower mandible pale for first 1/3 of length while anterior 2/3 was dark.

Dusky: Bill slender and not noticeably wider at the base. Bill is noticeably longer than that of Hammond's. Lower mandible color variable, but the majority of individuals show pale base and dark anterior portion. Percentages of dark to pale portion is quite variable; the pale areas can be anywhere from 25% to 75% of lower mandible length.

- **Plumage Coloration:**

Hammond's: This species generally shows the strongest coloration. Undersides a fairly bright yellow-olive on lower breast and belly. Some individuals are a bit variable, showing grayish or grayish-olive on the breast. The mantle color was olive, while the crown and nape tinged grayish. The eye-ring is conspicuously white.

Dusky: Birds are generally drabber than Hammond's with the mantle being a dull grayish-olive, with the nape and crown being slightly grayer. The underparts generally were a pale grayish-white with some birds showing a slightly darker gray wash on the breast. Some birds also showed a yellowish tinge on the belly. There was a contrast between the rump and the tail, the tail being darker. The eye-ring was conspicuously white.

- **Molt:**

Hammond's: Birds molt prior to commencing migration. This generally makes them brighter than other closely related species.

Dusky: Birds molt after migration is completed. Birds tend to be duller than Hammond's Flycatchers until they arrive on their wintering grounds.

- **Tail Length:**

Hammond's: No measurements taken, but tail length appeared shorter on Hammond's Flycatcher in comparison to similar species. This could be in part due to the length of the primary extension on this species.

Dusky: In comparison to similar species, Dusky had a noticeably longer tail.

- **Primary Extension:**

Hammond's: Has a very long primary extension; reaches to about ¼ tail length beyond base of tail.

Dusky: Very short primary length; reaches to, or just short of, base of tail.

At this year's Skins Workshop, the committee focused mostly on the details of bill length and color, color of the outer edges of the undertail, and primary projection.

- **Bill:** Despite color changes attributable to the effects of skin preparation, storage and aging of the specimen's soft parts, the committee observed that there appeared to be an extensive amount of variation to the color patterning on the lower mandible of both species. Although most individuals fit into the patterns mentioned in the 2004 report, there appeared to be enough variation to raise doubt in using mandible coloration alone as a field mark. Direct comparisons of bill length showed some overlap between extremes in both Hammond's and Dusky Flycatchers. It appears that the extremes may be difficult or impossible to safely separate in the field and should only be used to support other visual clues.
- **Tail:** The 2004 group showed that tail length was a good indicator of species. Our group also found that both Hammond's and Dusky Flycatchers had grayish edging on the outer web of the undersides of the outer tail feathers. However, the edging tended to be visible on the full length of the tail and more pronounced in Dusky Flycatcher. Hammond's tended to be fainter and only visible on the upper 2/3 of the tail, at most.
- **Primary Extension:** This field mark tended to be the most reliable. In all individuals, the primary extension on Hammond's Flycatcher was extremely long in direct comparison to other species with which it might be confused. As the 2004 group noted, this projection helped give Hammond's Flycatchers a very short-tailed appearance.



Figure 3.3-1. Size variation in individuals shows consistently long primary projection.
(Image by Ed Boyd)



Figure 3.3-2. Image shows variability in both lower mandible color and overall bill length.
(Image by Ed Boyd)

3.4 Ash-throated Flycatcher (*Myiarchus cinerascens*) vs. Nutting's Flycatcher (*M. nuttingi*)

Account by Patty Craig.

Background: A recent flurry of Ash-throated Flycatcher (*Myiarchus cinerascens*) reports prompted the records committee to look at the study skins of this and another similar-looking species. The committee compared the Ash-throated Flycatcher with the Nutting's Flycatcher (*Myiarchus nuttingi*). The Nutting's Flycatcher is not a species expected in Maryland, but its resemblance to Ash-throated Flycatcher was sufficient to warrant the comparison.

Findings: Immediate impressions from the comparison of Ash-throated and Nutting's Flycatchers were that Nutting's Flycatchers appeared slightly smaller, narrower billed and had significantly more color saturation on the underparts. The Nutting's Flycatcher's gray on the breast and upper belly and yellow of the lower belly and vent areas were more intense. The Ash-throated Flycatcher has been noted for having a smaller bill (nares to tip 12.6-17.1, width at tip of nares 5.9-8.3, Pyle) than most of the other native American *Myiarchus* Flycatcher's - Dusky-capped Flycatcher (*Myiarchus tuberculifer*) being the exception with a shorter and possibly narrower bill.



Figure 3.4-1. Ash-throated Flycatcher— ventral. (Image by Patty Craig)



Figure 3.4-2. Ash-throated Flycatcher— dorsal. (Image by Patty Craig)



Figure 3.4-3. Nutting's Flycatcher—ventral. (Image by Patty Craig)



Figure 3.4-4. Nutting's Flycatcher— dorsal. (Image by Patty Craig)



Figure 3.4-5. Comparison of Ash-throated (foreground) and Nutting's Flycatchers—ventral. (Image by Patty Craig)

Wing patterns were compared. Although in the literature Ash-throated's rufous primary edges were supposed to contrast more with the white edges to its outer secondaries than Nutting's primary edges to Nutting's buff secondary edges, this was not apparent in the skins. According to Wesley E. Layton (Specific Limits and Distribution of Ash-throated and Nutting Flycatchers, *The Condor* 63(6): 421-449, 1961), this criterion is only of good value in fresh plumage and of no value in worn birds; thereby explaining our findings. The wings were slightly shorter and less pointed in Nutting's Flycatcher.



Figure 3.4-6. Nutting's (left 3) and Ash-throated Flycatchers (right 2) wing patterns compared. (Image by George Jett)

Special attention was paid to the often noted field mark of the adult Ash-throated Flycatcher's rufous and brown pattern of the outer rectrices, i.e. the brown of the outer web wrapping around the tip to the inner web. (Juvenal outer rectrices have the brown limited to the shaft.) Three specimens of the Ash-throated Flycatcher found in two trays (approximately 70 individuals) did not have brown tips to the tail. One had a rufous tail and at least one of the others had lost the tip to wear. The Nutting's had a variable tail pattern that very often included brown at the tip, but "expanding less abruptly at the tip than in Ash-throated Flycatcher" according to Pyle.



Figure 3.4-7. Variation in Ash-throated Flycatcher tail pattern. (Image by George Jett)



Figure 3.4-8. Comparison of Nutting's (left 3) and Ash-throated Flycatchers (right 2) tail patterns showing only the extremes. *Note coloration of underparts. (Image by George Jett)

3.5 “Calaveras” (Nashville) Warbler (*Vermivora ruficapilla ridgwayi*) vs. nominate Account by Paul O’Brien.

Background: In September 2004, a Nashville Warbler was reported from Rockville, Maryland. This bird was suspected of being of the western, *ridgwayi* race, also known as the “Calaveras” (Nashville) Warbler. This report is reviewable as a form or subspecies unusual to the region [MD/2005-052].

Findings: The committee examined specimens of Nashville Warbler, *Vermivora ruficapilla*, of the nominate eastern *ruficapilla* and western *ridgwayi* subspecies to evaluate the likelihood that published plumage differences would be useful in the field. The criteria were selected from Dunn, J.L. and Garrett, K.L., *A Field Guide to Warblers of North America*, 1997, Houghton Mifflin. The authors contend that *ridgwayi*, differs from *ruficapilla* in three plumage characters.

1) The upper back "is slightly grayer, less green, and the rump is a brighter yellow-green", giving the effect of reduced head to back contrast but stronger back to rump contrast. In general, this was seen to be true, but the variability was too great in both subspecies to rely on head to back contrast. On the other hand, the brighter yellow rump was readily apparent in most skins.

2) "The yellow of the underparts is slightly clearer and brighter, less washed with greenish". This was the most noticeable character difference between the two subspecies, *ridgwayi* having a purer lemon yellow than *ruficapilla*.

3) "On average there is more white in the vent area and belly of *ridgwayi*, but this character appears to be quite variable". The same impression was apparent in the USNM collection, thus only in the extremes would this character be helpful.

Various internet discussions of tail-bobbing as a distinctive character in *ridgwayi* frequently note that *ruficapilla* also bobs its tail at times. This has been the experience of early morning migrant counters at Higbee's Beach in Cape May. However, under those circumstances the birds are agitated, as are most migrants after a night-long flight. More relaxed birds casually foraging might not exhibit such agitated behavior.

The upshot is that a rapidly tail-bobbing Nashville Warbler that is not agitated and has unusually bright lemon yellow rump and undersides might be suspected as *ridgwayi*.

3.6 Kirtland's Warbler (*Dendroica kirtlandii*)

Account by John Hubbell

Background: There are no accepted records for Kirtland's Warbler in Maryland. In 2005, a bird stunned from a window strike was reported [MD/2005-043], prompting this skins study of Kirtland's Warblers.

Findings: The streaking on the back of a Kirtland's Warbler was the primary feature of interest in this study. Eye rings were not studied since the preparation of skins generally damages this area of the bird.

The skins of Canada Warblers were used for comparison purposes although other species need to be considered when identifying a Kirtland's Warbler in Maryland.

Field guide references used in this account are Jon Dunn and Kimball Garrett's "Field Guide to Warblers" and David Sibley's "Sibley Guide to Birds."

- **Streaking:** As can be seen in Figure 3.6-1, the streaking on the back of Kirtland's Warblers is bold and obvious. The streaks on the skins appeared somewhat wider than those shown on Plate 20 of Dunn and Garrett. The photograph on page 355 of Dunn and Garrett and Sibley's depiction of the streaks are a better match with the skins. As can be seen in Figure 3.6-2, the back of a Canada Warbler is very plain and uniform in comparison with the Kirtland's.

The images in Figures 3.6-1 and 3.6-2 also show some fine streaking on the crown of both the Kirtland's and Canada Warblers. This feature is illustrated in Dunn and Garrett for both species but is not evident in Sibley.

- **Underparts:** The breast and belly of the Kirtland's Warbler skins were noticeably duller (see Figure 3.6-3) than those of the Canada Warblers (Figure 3.6-4) and Magnolia Warblers (not shown). Sibley mentions this distinction in the text, but the differences in the skins was more striking than in his illustrations. Similarly, the plates for Kirtland's, Canada, and Magnolia in Dunn and Garrett are less obviously different than the skins were.

On most skins viewed, there was an obvious difference between the collar of the Canada Warblers and the flank streaks of the Kirtland's Warblers. However, as Figures 3.6-3 and 3.6-4 show, skins viewed from the side could make this difference less distinctive, but it's also possible that the condition of the skins may have affected the appearance of the markings.

- **Bills:** the bills of the Kirtland's Warblers were larger and thicker than the Canada Warblers'. Figure 4 shows that the lower mandibles of the Canada Warblers were pale compared to the Kirtland's.



Figure 3.6-1. Kirtland's Warblers, showing streaking on back (Image by John Hubbell).



Figure 3.6-2. Canada Warblers (Image by John Hubbell).



Figure 3.6-2. Kirtland's Warblers (Image by John Hubbell).



Figure 3.6-3. Canada Warblers (Image by John Hubbell).

3.7 European Herring Gull (*Larus argentatus argentatus/argenteus*) vs. American Herring Gull (*Larus argentatus smithsonianus*)

Account by Paul O'Brien.

Background: Some current authors describe the European Herring Gull and the American Herring Gull as separate species. Furthermore, the British Ornithological Union has split these two taxa into separate species. Former MD/DCRC Chair, Harvey Mudd, was interested in developing separation criteria to provide to local birders to enable identification and separation of this taxon from the American Herring Gull, if encountered in the field.

Findings: In an attempt to provide local birders with field identification guidelines in searching for European Herring Gulls among American Herring Gulls in MD, we examined all available specimens of first year *Larus smithsonianus smithsonianus* (American) in the NMNH collection, however, there were no first-year *L. s. argentatus* (European) to be found for comparison. The tail pattern of the two dozen or so *smithsonianus* specimens that we studied showed very little variation. The outer rectrix was almost totally dark brown on many and the white bars on the outer web on others never went beyond the same width as the dark bars. The scapulars were not too informative, especially as wear entered the picture. The bill was generally yellow at the base with only a couple of dark-billed birds. Dark bills are apparently the rule in *argentatus* as are black anchor patterns on unworn scapulars, a feature subject to wear. Adult birds are probably not good candidates for field identification at this time. Further advice on field identification of first year *L. s. argentatus* is being requested of Bruce Mactavish in Newfoundland, where some individuals occasionally occur.

4. Adjournment. The Workshop ended at approximately 1:30 pm.

Respectfully submitted,

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