



Maryland / District of Columbia Records Committee
Skins Workshop
30 March 2012

Edited by Bill Hubick, MD/DCRC Chair

1. General

On 30 March 2012, the Maryland/District of Columbia Records Committee (MD/DCRC) held its annual Skins Workshop at the Division of Birds, National Museum of Natural History, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC. Our host was Claudia Angle. The committee thanks Claudia for the time she dedicated to supporting this workshop.

The agenda and taxa to be reviewed during the workshop (and species account author) included the following:

Taxa	Authors
1. Rusty and Brewer's Blackbirds	Patty Craig
2. White-faced and Glossy Ibis	John Hubbell
3. Nashville Warbler subspecies	Bill Hubick
4. Notes on <i>Aechmophorus</i> Grebe specimens	Rob Ostrowski

Note that the official museum database and specimen tag abbreviation for the Smithsonian is "USNM," based on its original name, United States National Museum.

2. Attendees

Committee members in attendance were: Tyler Bell, Gwen Brewer, Patty Craig, Matt Hafner, Joe Hanfman, John Hubbell, Rob Ostrowski, Sherman Suter, Bill Hubick (Chair), Phil Davis (Secretary).

3. Skins Studies

We began the workshop at 10:00 am, following our security check-in. We assembled in the Bird Division specimen case area on the sixth 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 potential identification problems for Maryland and DC. The findings from the specimens we examined are summarized below.



Photo 2-1. Committee members studying skin specimens. Left to right: Tyler Bell, Sherman Suter, Bill Hubick, Patty Craig, Rob Ostrowski, Matt Hafner. Photo by Phil Davis.

3.1 A comparison of *Euphagus* Blackbirds: Brewer's Blackbird (*Euphagus cyanocephalus*) and Rusty Blackbird (*Euphagus carolinus*)

Account by Patty Craig

3.1.1 Background

The Rusty Blackbird, *Euphagus carolinus*, is a regular but declining winter resident in Maryland found in forested swamps, bottomlands, fresh marshes and wet fields throughout the state. The species breeds in boreal bogs in North America, mainly in Canada and Alaska.

The very similar Brewer's Blackbird, *Euphagus cyanocephalus*, is a vagrant that has been recorded in most of the Maryland counties during the cooler half of the year. Its normal breeding range in North America is the western United States and western to central Canada. The wintering range is from Vancouver Island and western Oregon diagonal across the US to the Florida panhandle and south into Mexico. An irregular wintering range for this species extends to northeastern Virginia. The habitat of the Brewer's Blackbird is of more open areas including muddy fields, pastures and salt marshes. There is overlap in the wintering habitat preferences of the two species, and both species regularly turn up in large winter blackbird flocks.

At the 2012 Annual Meeting, the committee voted to add Brewer's Blackbird to the Maryland review list, citing the notable decline in reports of this species in Maryland in recent years. This, along with the notorious difficulty in distinguishing these two species led to our reviewing these specimens.

3.1.2 Findings

The most problematic plumages for the *Euphagus* blackbirds are the adult male breeding plumages. Therefore, we began our analysis with trays of late winter and spring males of both species. Immediately, the difference in the extent, color and quality of the iridescence of the feathers was noticeable (see Photo 3.1.2-1). The Rusty Blackbirds' plumage was duller and the black was suffused with dull green in some light throughout the body and wings. The Brewer's

Blackbirds' plumage on the body and wings featured a much brighter iridescence reminiscent of grackles. The iridescence on the Brewer's Blackbirds was blue or purplish blue on the head (as the species name implies) and green on the body (see Photo 3.1.2-5 and 3.1.2-6). Also noticeable was the coloration of the remaining unworn body feather edges of the winter plumage before complete breeding plumage was acquired by wear. These feathers of the crown, head, neck, belly, breast, flanks and back (including wing feathers and especially the tertials on Rusty Blackbirds) being much warmer in the Rusty Blackbirds' plumage than the Brewer's Blackbirds' plumage. The range of variation of the gray brown coloration of the individual Brewer's Blackbirds' plumages (excluding the wings that are always black in the males) never had the warmth of any the Rusty Blackbirds' plumages (see Photos 3.1.2-2 and 3.1.2-3).

The depth of the base of the bill on the Brewer's Blackbirds was the most striking difference in the structure of the two species' bills though this feature was not discrete. According to the "Identification Guide to North American Birds" the range of male Rusty Blackbirds' bills is 6.0-6.9 millimeters (mm) deep at the tip of the nares where as the range of the Brewer's Blackbirds' bills is 6.7-7.9 mm. Comparison of the structure of the bill in the Rusty and Brewer's Blackbirds shows a longer, thinner-based bill with a straighter culmen on the Rusty Blackbirds and a shorter, thicker-based bill with a curved culmen on the Brewer's Blackbirds (see Photos 3.1.2-3 and 3.1.2-8).

The shape of the tails on the prepared specimens was not as easy to ascertain, but appeared consistent with published accounts as in "The Sibley Guide to Birds" that says the Rusty Blackbirds' tails are long, club-shaped. The length of the Rusty Blackbird specimens was overall slightly smaller than the Brewer's Blackbird specimens though length in field guides has them the same.

Upon completion of the comparison of the males we then turned our attention to the females of the two species. We chose trays of female Rusty Blackbirds collected from January to March and Brewer's Blackbirds from January and February.

The structure on the females was consistent with the males only on a slightly smaller scale. The overall coloration of the female Rusty Blackbirds was the same as the remnant feather edges of the males—a very warm brown. The Brewer's Blackbird females were a gray-brown reminiscent of female Brown-headed Cowbirds. The comparison of iris color was not available to us since we were observing prepared specimens, but of course this is very valuable in the field. The separation of female Brewer's and Rusty Blackbirds should not present as much of a challenge in the field as the males of these species (see Photos 3.1.2-7 and 3.1.2-8).



Photo 3.1.2-1: Male Brewer's Blackbird (above) and Rusty Blackbird (below). *Euphagus* photos by Bill Hubick.



Photo 3.1.2-2: Male Brewer's Blackbird (above) and Rusty Blackbird (below).



Photo 3.1.2-3: Male Brewer's Blackbird (above) and Rusty Blackbird (below) .



Photo 3.1.2-4: Male Brewer's Blackbird (above) and Rusty Blackbird (below).



Photo 3.1.2-5: Male Brewer's Blackbird (left) and Rusty Blackbird (right).



Photo 3.1.2-6: Male Brewer's Blackbird (top) with three male Rusty Blackbirds (below three). Note the obvious difference in glossy iridescence.



Photo 3.1.2-7: Female Rusty Blackbird (left) and Brewer's Blackbird (right).



Photo 3.1.2-8: Female Rusty Blackbird (above) and Brewer's Blackbird (below).

A gallery of higher resolution Brewer's and Rusty Blackbirds images from this Smithsonian Institute visit is available at <https://picasaweb.google.com/108685809044381197070/BrewerSVsRustyBlackbirds>.

3.1.3 Summary

The MD/DCRC's decision to add Brewer's Blackbird to the Maryland review list was based on the marked decline in recent Brewer's Blackbird reports in our area. This, of course, comes at the same time as an alarming decline in our population of wintering Rusty Blackbirds. The committee hopes that the addition of Brewer's Blackbird to the review list will lead to more thoroughly documented reports of the species so that we can better understand their current status in the region.

3.2 White-faced and Glossy Ibis **Account by John Hubbell**

3.2.1 Background

As White-faced Ibis have become more commonly reported from Worcester County, questions have arisen regarding the reliability of plumage field marks other than facial pattern and the possibility of hybrids with Glossy Ibis.

3.2.2 Findings

Both immature and adult specimens of White-faced and Glossy Ibis were examined. No useful information was gathered regarding immature birds. Facial pattern is key to distinguishing immatures of the two species, and bare parts are not well preserved in museum specimens.

The gold plumage field mark depicted by Sibley was clearly discernible on a wing specimen (see Photo 3.2.2-1).



Photo 3.2.2-1: White-faced Ibis wing

The same field mark was more difficult to see on full body specimens but was discernible (see Photo 3.2.2-2). Birds in the field would probably have more fluffed up feathers than on the specimens, which would make the field mark more obvious.



Photo 3.2.2-2: Glossy Ibis upperparts

Glossy Ibis specimens showed green color on the same feathers, not gold (see Photo 3.2.2-3).



Photo 3.2.2-3: Glossy Ibis upperparts

Given the small number of specimens examined, it's not possible to say whether this field mark is diagnostic for White-faced Ibis or merely suggestive. Sibley describes the feature as “averaging gold” on White-faced Ibis and “averaging green-blue” on Glossy.

3.3 Nashville Warbler Subspecies and Virginia's Warbler Account by Bill Hubick

3.3.1 Background

The most exceptional bird recorded in Maryland in 2012 was a Virginia's Warbler found by Jim Stasz and Ed Boyd at Pickering Creek Audubon Sanctuary in Talbot County. This unexpected first state record lingered from January 26th until at least March 18th, much to the delight of Maryland's birders and many regional visitors. Virginia's Warbler was an obvious candidate for study at this year's workshop, especially since it had not yet been written up by the committee and wasn't even named in the 63 species that received votes in "Maryland's Next 10 Bird Species," written by Matt Hafner and me in July 2009.

Because we generally compare species with their closest North American relatives, we knew we'd be pulling out the trays of Nashville Warblers. This provided a welcome excuse to explore any physical differences noted between the eastern and western subspecies of Nashville Warbler, *O. r. ruficapilla* and *O. r. ridgwayi*, respectively. Because the Pickering Creek bird's documentation left little concern over its identity, we focused our study on the Nashville Warbler subspecies, keeping the Virginia's Warblers specimens handy for personal edification and additional comparisons.

3.3.2 Findings

We have long been on the lookout for suspicious, tail-pumping Nashville Warblers in fall and winter in the Eastern U.S. Conventional wisdom has been that active tail-pumping is supportive of *ridgwayi*, but confidence in field identification of this species seems to be low. We set out to look for trends between the two subspecies and found them to be less subtle than we expected (see Photos 3.2.2-1 through 3.2.2-9).

We started by looking at the full trays and considering obvious differences in impression. The impressions were more striking than expected. The *ridgwayi* specimens were far cleaner and brighter yellow in their lower parts coloration than *ruficapilla*, which featured much dingier yellow underparts. We attempted to keep our comparisons between similar aged birds, but quickly found that we could pick out the *ridgwayi* birds from a ventral line-up of *ruficapilla* consistently. The bright, clean yellow of *ridgwayi* was consistent from throat to vent. (see Photo 3.2.2-1).

The vent of *ridgwayi* was generally a much cleaner white, compared to a dirty grayish on *ruficapilla* (see Photo 3.2.2-2).

Viewing the specimens dorsally provided additional differences. The *ridgwayi* specimens tended to have much lighter, cleaner gray crowns and napes that contrasted strongly with the olive-yellow upperparts. The *ruficapilla* specimens tended to show darker grayish crowns suffused with olive tones that often contrasted less with upperparts coloration. (Virginia's Warbler specimens were gray from crown through the upperparts until the yellow rump.) Rump coloration also tended to be much brighter and cleaner in *ridgwayi* specimens, contrasting much more with the olive upperparts than on *ruficapilla* specimens we reviewed (see Photo 3.2.2-2 and 3.2.2-3).



**Photo 3.2.2-1: Western Nashville Warblers (left) and Eastern Nashville Warblers (right).
Photos in this section by Bill Hubick.**



Photo 3.2.2-2: Western (left) and Eastern (right) Nashville Warblers.



Photo 3.2.2-3: Western (above) and Eastern (below) Nashville Warblers. Note the overall brighter plumage in Western, especially bright yellow rump.



Photo 3.2.2-4: Eastern Nashville Warbler (top), Western Nashville Warbler (middle), and Virginia's Warbler (bottom).



Photo 3.2.2-5: Eastern Nashville Warbler (top), Western Nashville Warbler (middle), and Virginia's Warbler (bottom).



Photo 3.2.2-7: Three Virginia's Warbler specimens.



Photo 3.2.2-8: Virginia's Warbler tail details showing natural wear on outer tail feathers. A couple photos of the Talbot County Virginia's Warbler showed this feature, which in certain light almost suggested white outer tail feathers.



Photo 3.2.2-9: Virginia's Warblers (left), Western Nashville Warblers (middle), and Eastern Nashville Warblers (right). Note the obvious differences in lowerparts, with Western Nashville showing consistently clean, bright yellow and Eastern Nashville Warbler showing dingier yellow. Western Nashville averaged cleaner gray heads and cleaner white vents.

A gallery of higher resolution Nashville and Virginia's Warbler images is available at <https://picasaweb.google.com/108685809044381197070/NAWAAndVIWA>

3.2.3 Summary

While these findings may have limited value under field conditions, they do seem to provide some useful clues for identifying the birds worthiest of thorough documentation. If you want to document candidates for Western Nashville Warbler in the East, our review of the USNM suggested the following traits (in addition to tail-pumping, of course):

- Very bright, clean yellow underparts
- Very clean white vent
- Clean, light gray hood contrasting with olive upperparts
- Bright yellow rump contrasting with olive upperparts.

3.2.4. Notes on *Aechmophorus* Grebe specimens Account by Rob Ostrowski

3.5.2 Findings

At the annual MD/DCRC meeting, when members were discussing which taxa to examine at the upcoming skins meeting, it was agreed that the *Aechmophorus* grebes should be pulled and examined. This is a wise choice, given the similarity between Clark's and Western Grebes, and the potential of producing a valuable identification document to aid birders in their quest for another state record. Unfortunately, it was soon discovered that at least one skin was mislabeled, and possibly a few others. This is most likely the result of old specimens (at least four were collected before 1960, and one before 1900!) not being revisited after the AOU split the two species in 1985. The Secretary informed Claudia Angle, our host at the Smithsonian, of the mislabeling, and it was generally hoped that the specimens would be revisited by museum personnel in the near future.

4. Adjournment

The workshop ended at approximately 3:00 pm.



Photo 4-1. Members taking a lunch break in the Richmond Library. Clockwise: Tyler Bell, Matt Hafner, Rob Ostrowski, Patty Craig, Sherman Suter, Gwen Brewer, Bill Hubick, and John Hubbell. Photo by Phil Davis.

5. Acknowledgements

Many thanks to the species account authors. Special thanks to Claudia Angle, our USNM sponsor, for again hosting us.

Respectfully submitted,

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