

Brewer's Blackbird
8 Sep 1996
Zirbel Sl., Cerro Gordo Co., IA
*Jim Bangma/Ann Johnson
IBL 67:26, 83

Record Number: 96-68
Classification: NA

DOCUMENTATION

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Ann Johnson, 532 120th Ave., Norwalk 50211

REFERENCES

Field Reports: IBL 67:26
Records Committee: IBL 67:83

VOTE: 5 A-D, 2 NA

A-D, The bill being heavier than Red-winged Blackbird is not supportive.

A-D, If I'm not mistaken, there is a breeding population in southern Minnesota so this sighting could well be one of those birds.

NA, A black blackbird could be a redwing, grackle, rusty, Brewer's, or cowbird. The light eye seems to exclude redwing and cowbird. I'm not aware of bill difference between Rusty and Brewer's. The "tschack" call matches the word used in the NG Guide, but I have no experience in separating Brewer's by call note, and Bent describes 15 calls for Brewer's. I find blackbirds, especially males viewed briefly, extremely hard to identify. Our meager data suggest that Brewer's do not move through until mid-October. Thanks for documenting this bird--we need to study more of them.

NA, Sorry, but all black is more suggestive of Rusty in Sep than Brewer's. No mention of iridescence as in Brewer's. Both have white eye. Actually, description not adequate to even rule out Common Grackle. Brewer's bill not 'heavier' than Rusty. Very brief observation. Neither species expected in Iowa in early Sep. Both species have harsh 'tschack' call (Rusty also makes squeaky sounds).

RE-VOTE (by mail): 2 A-D, 5 NA

NA, The bill description is too heavy for Brewer's and the description does not eliminate Common Grackle.

[no vote, presumably NA], Petersen states that Rusty Blackbird has a longer bill than Brewer's, and NG notes that Brewer's has a shorter, thicker bill. However, this difference would probably not be useful except in a direct comparison. Calls of both species are similar and variable and would be difficult to judge without considerable experience. According to Bent, Rusty Blackbirds undergo a complete molt in summer beginning in mid-July. While most fall and winter birds have extensive rusty feather edgings, Bent also notes that "other winter males (probably very old individuals) have scarcely a trace of this rusty and buffy coloring, being quite like summer specimens..." Since no purplish gloss was seen on the head and neck of this

bird, as on a typical male Brewer's, I don't think it can be conclusively identified as such.

NA, Flight call "tschack", solidly black, bill size, eye color do not eliminate Rusty still in alternate.

A-D, Solidly black rules out all but Grackles, Rusty and Brewer's. Grackle: While the reporters, both experienced observers, should have gone into more detail, it appears that they did consider this possibility and discarded it based on a number of criteria. This leaves Brewer's vs. Rusty. One NA voter says "no mention of iridescence as in Brewer's". Iridescence is very dependent on lighting and position and may or may not be visible at a given moment. A Brewer's having recently completed its post-nuptial molt would show little if any iridescence. Adult Rusty Blackbirds undergo a complete post nuptial molt commencing in July. Early September is possibly the easiest time to tell adult males apart -- Brewer's at most may acquire a bit of brown tinge to the plumage while Rusty is not black at this time. At best a secondary feature, but Brewer's does have a heavier bill than Rusty. Flight call: Contrary to the statement of one NA, "tschack" is not found in any of the common field guides. The closest to it is "tschak" which is the description of Rusty Blackbird in National Geographic. Bent, and others, describe the call note of Brewer's as lower pitched than Rusty.

Brewer's/Rusty: Nat'l Geographic (check, tschak); Peterson (check, chack); Stokes (chick, chek); Master Guide (check, check). The above chart highlights the differences in various authors' interpretation of blackbird call notes. Creating mnemonics to verbalize call notes is difficult at best. The report states that the call note was "deeper" than Rusty. This is clearly subjective and may be at best be considered a secondary ID character for Rusty vs. Brewer's. It does assist, however, in ruling out other blackbird species. Not sure what difference more time would have made in this observation.

NA, Agree with points made by NA votes.

A-D, Bent notes that post-nuptial molt begins in mid-July and migration begins in early Sept. for this species. Therefore the date is not beyond reason and the color of Rusty Blackbird should already show a great or greater amount of rusty red (beige) than this bird was noted as having. Since it was described as an all black bird.

NA, no change.

**DOCUMENTATION FORM
UNUSUAL BIRD SIGHTINGS IN IOWA**

Species: Brewer's Blackbird

Location: Zirbel Slough, Cerro Gordo Co., IA

Habitat: Marsh

Date: Sept 8, 1996 **Time:** 2:00PM **Length of observation:** 1 minute

Observers:

Jim Bangma, 770 Anderson Av #8N, Cliffside Park, NJ 07010

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Background: While birding, observed a Blackbird fly into a small tree bordering the bush. After being watched for about a minute, the bird flew off overhead, calling as it flew.

Viewing conditions (light, distance, optics): Distance about 75 feet, bird to the north in early afternoon, observed through Zeiss 7x42 binoculars

Description of bird: A solidly black blackbird with a prominent pale yellowish white eye, medium length tail. The bill appeared heavier than Red-winged or Rusty, sufficiently so that we briefly considered various Cowbird species. The flight call was a low harsh tschack.

Similar species/discussion: Rusty Blackbird ruled out by solid black color, deeper call note, bill shape. Grackles ruled out by tail length, bill size and shape and call note. Cowbirds ruled out by eye color, tail length and head/bill shape.

Previous experience: Both observers have 30+ years birding experience including regular experience with Brewer's and similar species.

References consulted: The standard field guides. Additionally, various Central and South American guides checked for ID of extralimital cowbirds and blackbirds.