

SOME NOTES ON BLACKBIRDS

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It is the intent of this paper to review the status of seven species of blackbirds in an area of three square miles in Bronx County between October 1981 and August 1983. The writer has been active in this region for more than thirty years, and was impressed by events during this particular period of time. The records were compiled during walks taken almost daily.

RED-WINGED BLACKBIRD (*Agelaius phoeniceus*). This species was originally a common marsh-nesting bird. Of late, because of drainage and invasive spoilage, our local wetlands support fewer pairs each year. However, it appears that this adaptable species has taken to nesting in drier portions of the terrain, such as hillsides near water or marshy habitat.

Samples of the typical fall movements are:

29 October 1981	187	Van Cortlandt Park
24 November 1981	25	Van Cortlandt Park
14 November 1982	455	Van Cortlandt Park
25 December 1982	30	Van Cortlandt Park
4 November 1983	275	Seton Park

These counts are cited to show the decline from just a few years past, when in Riverdale great clouds of redwings, mixed with grackles and other blackbirds, streamed over in a large flight line at Riverdale and 238th Street. These large numbers came from the direction of Van Cortlandt Park, to the northeast.

RUSTY BLACKBIRD. (*Euphagus carolinus*). This species is found almost exclusively around the lakes and swamp waters in our area. The great majority of the records are from Van Cortlandt Park. However, one was noted several years ago on the dry brushy margin of Jerome Park Reservoir.

Typical records:

18 October 1981	5	Van Cortlandt Park
7 October 1981	7	Van Cortlandt Park feeding with redwings in wet field
27 October 1982	19	Van Cortlandt Park feeding as above birds

Normally found from October to April in Van Cortlandt Park.

BROWN-HEADED COWBIRD (*Molothrus ater*). For many years a fair sized flock of cowbirds was noted at the Bailey Avenue entrance

lawns to the Van Cortlandt Park golf course, usually with the advent of cold weather. However, nothing prepared the observer for the widespread proliferation in the fall of 1981. Records before and after showed the more normal status of this parasitic bird — flocking after breeding season.

Its presence signaled success of the species during the nesting season. However, during the four years of breeding censuses the bird never appeared as commonly as anticipated. The few in the local breeding area seemed elusive, with hosts possibly Red-eyed Vireos, Song Sparrows and House Wrens.

On 13 October 1981 I found 50 cowbirds in Van Cortlandt Park. The weather was unusual for so early in the fall, for hoar frost covered most of the low vegetation on the edge of the swamp, and all of the lawns on the Parade Ground, as a very early cold front moved in. Many small birds were on the move. Sighted on the Parade Ground was a Baird's Sparrow, uncorroborated, and a small flock of extremely dark Savannah Sparrows.

The records for Brown-headed Cowbird for the fall of 1981 are:

18 October 1981	75	Van Cortlandt Park. Normal.
20 October 1981	230	Jerome Res. First intimation.
22 October 1981	180	Seton Park. Feeding on dry chickweed (<i>Stellaria media</i>).
24 October 1981	450	Inwood Park. With a few redwings, all immature birds.
30 October 1981	425	Seton Park, with 35 grackles.
4 November 1981	125	Seton Park.
7 November 1981	217	Jerome Park Reservoir.
8 November 1981	80	Seton Park, with 220 grackles, 9 redwings.
12 November 1981	150	Riverdale - flying over.
13 November 1981	125	Riverdale - flying over.
21 November 1981	250	Jerome Park Reservoir, with 25 sub-adult redwings.
28 November 1981	35	Seton Park - declining.
29 November 1981	1	Van Cortlandt Park - with 2 grackles
11 December 1981	50	Dyckman Park - with starlings and House Sparrows.

COMMON GRACKLE (*Quiscalus quiscula*). This species breeds in the Riverdale area in small numbers, limited to coniferous trees in parks and on estates. Grackles, when present, which is most of the year, follow a flight movement to and from Van Cortlandt Park, performed each morning from the park, and to the park swamp area each evening, where the blackbirds spend the night amid the dense growths of phrag-

mites (*Phragmites australis*), appearing at dawn to fly back to diurnal feeding grounds. These flights continue even in the midst of the breeding cycle. It is not uncommon, except in mid-winter, to see grackles passing overhead to and from the direction of Van Cortlandt Park during all daylight hours. Each fall and early winter, this species moves through Riverdale in small to large flocks, accompanied by redwings and cowbirds. A few grackles apparently winter among the dense phragmites beds, where at dawn an observer may find grackles, redwings and Rusty Blackbirds in varying numbers.

17 October 1981	275	Seton Park
24 October 1981	109	Riverdale
28 October 1981	400 +	Riverdale
3 November 1981	6	Van Cortlandt Park swamp
3 November 1981	240)	Riverdale, flying over
	90)	
15 October 1982	350	Van Cortlandt Park with 5 cowbirds
20 October 1982	380	Inwood Park
27 October 1982	260	Van Cortlandt Park, with 19 Rusty Blackbirds and 91 redwings.
7 November 1982	8925	Riverdale, including 50 cowbirds. Flew by in a continuous stream, 15-20 birds wide, at 350 feet in SSW direction parallel to Hudson River; in two separate flocks. Greatest number in my records.
8 December 1982	250	Seton Park. Late.
26 December 1982	4500 +	Woodlawn Cemetery. Possibly part of flock of 7 November.
12 January 1983	1	Inwood, wintering bird.

EASTERN MEADOWLARK (*Sturnella magna*). The almost complete absence of this species for the last several years was relieved by these two records.

25 October 1981	2	Seton Park. In tree top.
20 December 1981	1	Dyckman Park. Christmas census, flying high toward New Jersey.

BREWER'S BLACKBIRD (*Euphagus cyanocephalus*). This western species has been appearing in our state with greater frequency, with suspicion of late that it might be breeding. In California, where I stayed for six months, the bird is a common resident. At that time I felt that if ever I saw a Brewer's Blackbird again I would recognize the species. On 18 October 1981, I sighted a bird in a large flock of grackles at Van Cortlandt Park which after careful study I decided was a male

Brewer's Blackbird. All of the blackbirds were in deep lawn grass, but both species in the flock acted similarly: *i.e.*, walking about the lawns with a dignified step. Though two-thirds the size of a grackle, its black feathering was similar to that of the larger bird. What were different were the small bill, slimmer than that of the redwing, the short tail, the short legs and the steel-blue sheen of the head area. In comparison with the redwing and Rusty Blackbird, both present within ten yards, the Brewer's Blackbird was calmer, with the intentness of a grackle in searching for food, without the tail-twitching of the redwing, and the love of damp areas that the Rusty Blackbird sought. Also present for comparison were cowbirds. Wishing to corroborate my record of this rare bird, I went back to the same place an hour later at the end of my tour, and picked out the Brewer's Blackbird this time among grackles, redwings, cowbirds and Rusty Blackbirds on the wet lawn, a sunken area, just south of Van Cortlandt Mansion, one corner of which was flooded by recent rains.

While checking out late breeding birds in the Van Cortlandt Park swamp area on 2 August 1983, I noticed a small flock of European Starlings on the golf green, along side of the railroad tracks. Among them was a blackbird, neither a Rusty Blackbird nor a redwing. The former at this date was nesting many miles north of our region, while the latter was just about getting young out of the nest. The solid black feathering, again the stately walk, and the size similar to the redwing, brought my mind to only one species, the Brewer's Blackbird. The date, of course, was most puzzling, but the field marks were unquestionably an adult male Brewer's Blackbird. The flock was observed in perfect light, at close range until some golfers approached and frightened the starlings and blackbird away. The following day the place was visited to strengthen the record of the rarity, but few birds remained from the hundreds the day before.

Four days later, 6 August 1983, on a bird trip to Riverdale Park on the steep slope of the river valley, a spot where I often stop to scan the river for water birds, I noticed an altercation on one of the bare limbs of a Tulip Tree. Sitting on the uppermost branch was a blackbird, under attack from a male Northern Oriole and a male Northern Cardinal. The blackbird was being treated as an intruder. However, this same limb was the display perch for several redwings nesting farther down the slope, which called and cavorted without upsetting the nesting birds in the surrounding countryside. This strange battle alerted me, for at times an unusual bird such as an owl or hawk is revealed in the hubbub. I moved as close to the tree as possible, and after a careful study decided the bird was a Brewer's Blackbird, possibly the same one noted a few days before. An examination of the local geodetic

map showed this area to be almost 1500 meters west of the golf course at Van Cortlandt Park. Under constant harassment, the high perching blackbird flew down the hill toward the river edge and into dense brush.

BOAT-TAILED GRACKLE (*Quiscalus major*). In the summer of 1981 I visited Brigantine, NJ, and was fortunate enough to see a pair of Boat-tailed Grackles. This encounter was the closest to my home I had seen the species up to then. On 24 March 1982, while watching birds in Van Cortlandt Park swamp, I heard and then saw several male Red-winged Blackbirds calling and acting disturbed. The birds flew up to a tall streamside willow tree. After walking around obstructing foliage, I had a clear view. On the top of the willow, under perfect light conditions, I sighted through my ten-power binoculars at less than fifty feet a female Boat-tailed Grackle. The male of this coastal species offers no problem, being almost twice the size of a redwing, its enormous tail making it look even larger. The female bird I saw was brown-backed, with a tawny eyebrow, a tawny breast, and a brown patch through and around the eye, the tawny of the underparts extending to the chin. The attacking redwings appeared much smaller, due to their lesser bulk. The constant harassment by the smaller blackbirds affected the grackle. After twenty minutes of watching I could absorb no more of the markings, and when the bird finally flew upstream into a dense stand of trees, I was certain of my identification. Later visits in the days following proved fruitless. What was unusual about this record of a Boat-tailed Grackle was the early date and the distance from the salt-marsh terrain that the species occupies along the Atlantic coast.

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