

THE FIRST DOCUMENTED BREEDING OF BLUE GROSBEAK ON LONG ISLAND AND SECOND IN NEW YORK STATE

Orhan Birol
P.O. Box 890
E. Quogue, NY 11942
Birol@hamptons.com

ABSTRACT

A pair of Blue Grosbeaks (*Guiraca caerulea*) was found nesting off Rte 25 west of Riverhead in Suffolk County. The pair was first observed on 31 May 1999, and the nest with five fledglings was found on 22 Jun. The only other confirmed nesting in the state was in Latourette Park, Richmond Co. (Staten Island) in 1982 (Siebenheller and Siebenheller, 1982). Nesting was suspected in four other locations since then (Paxton, 1998), but confirmation was never obtained.

INTRODUCTION

The species was RBA material until the mid-1940's, when it became of more or less regular occurrence, certainly on Long Island, with spring records in April and May and fall records in September and October. At the same time, the breeding range crept steadily northward through New Jersey, (Leck, 1984) and as far as Bergen County in that state (Paxton, 1998). With as many as eight to thirteen individuals being seen on the South Shore of Long Island during single early spring flight days, the discovery of a breeding pair should come as no surprise. Whether this species will join the northern march of southern avifauna (i.e. Red-bellied Woodpecker, Tufted Titmouse, Northern Mockingbird, Northern Cardinal) remains to be seen. ATLAS 2000, the upcoming five-year state breeding bird census, may supply an answer to that question.

OBSERVATIONS

"Breeding evidence should be carefully looked for in weedy edges on LI and in the lower Hudson Valley, since this species is quiet and discreet around the nest" writes Robert O. Paxton (1998). Indeed yes! These were

the words which gave the author encouragement in his persistent returns to the site where he had first seen the pair of Blue Grosbeaks on 31 May 1999.

The pair of Blue Grosbeaks, the nest and subsequently the fledglings were all discovered and photographed on and around a gently sloping ridge which forms the eastern border of an early successional pitch pine/black cherry tree field sandwiched between the edge of a plowed field on the east and a very noisy working sand excavation site on the west. The female was seen first. She was about 10 feet away, and was in full view for about 40 seconds as she sat twitching her tail on the lower branches of a black cherry tree on top of the ridge at about 11:00 AM. A portion of the male's body, with its chestnut wingbars in view, was visible within a cluster of leaves about five feet from the female.

According to Hal H. Harrison (1975) the nesting habitat for the Blue Grosbeak is in "Old fields overgrown to brambles; brushy edges, scrubby thickets, open groves, hedgerows". In the field where the grosbeaks nested, the area to the west of the ridge contains pitch pine and black cherry trees scattered among an extensive ground cover of sweet fern which ends at the bottom of the ridge. The ridge is covered with grasses, some black berries, a huge poison ivy complex and 4-5 scattered black cherry trees. The pair of Blue Grosbeaks and their nest were discovered near the middle of this ridge. Between the east side of the ridge and the plowed field is a narrow area of grasses, bayberry bushes, sweet fern, a few eastern red cedars and scattered mugwort, dewberry, milkweed, dogbane, St. Johnswort and a few species of goldenrod. The site is located along NY 25 in Calverton, NY.

Four subsequent visits to the site produced Northern Bobwhite, Killdeer, Red-bellied Woodpecker, House Wren, American Robin, Gray Catbird, Brown Thrasher, Cedar Waxwing, Prairie Warbler, Common Yellowthroat, Chipping, Field, Vesper and Grasshopper sparrows, Northern Cardinal, Brown-headed Cowbird and American Goldfinch, but no Blue Grosbeaks. The site was also visited by a half-dozen much more experienced birders than the author, who also failed to find the grosbeaks.

On 14 Jun 1999 at 8:05 AM the author relocated the male Blue Grosbeak (Fig.1) singing on top of a black cherry tree but the female was not seen. On 22 Jun 1999 at 8:35 AM the author and Jim Clinton, a local birder, observed the male and, ten minutes later, the female, who was carrying food in its beak, and heard them apparently communicating with each other by "click" calls. Between 10:00 and 10:30 AM the author successfully photographed both adults. At around 11:00 AM he discovered the

nest, containing 5 nestlings, in a large poison ivy bush. Attempts by the author to photograph the nest with the nestlings in it were unsuccessful.

According to Hal H. Harrison (1975) the nest of a Blue Grosbeak is "Placed in low tree or bush, tangle of vegetation (vines, briars), 3-8 ft (0.9 - 2.4 m) above ground, typically at edge of an open area. Compact, rather deep structure of grasses, bark strips, leaves, weed stems, snake skins, cotton; lined with rootlets, hair(sometimes), grasses. Inside diam. 2 3/8 in. (6 cm). Depth 2 in. (5.1 cm)". In this case, the nest was discovered about six feet above the base of the east slope of the ridge, about three feet from the soil of the slope. It was constructed mainly of dried grasses woven within a fork in a poison ivy branch, but it also contained parts of a thin plastic bag and pieces of corn leaves. The nest (Fig.2) was collected later and found to have an inside diameter of 3 1/4 inches and an inside depth of 2 inches.

The author and Jim Clinton revisited the site on 28 Jun 1999 at 8:00 AM. The nest was empty, but intact. A two hour search for the fledglings produced only "chips" coming from three different black cherry trees and two undetermined locations. Both adults were observed close to these locations and were heard "clicking" numerous times. At one point, the author observed the female and something fluttering behind some cherry leaves which could have indicated that she was feeding one of the fledglings. At 11:45 a fledgling was discovered by the author on a black cherry tree from which "chips" had not been heard before and the fledgling was photographed, albeit not well enough for reproduction here.

I would like to thank Jim Clinton for believing my initial report on the Blue Grosbeaks, visiting the site with me even after the site was checked by more experienced birders than myself with no results, for his helpful suggestions on how to write this article, and his invaluable experience which he shared with me, and to Daniel O'Shea for the loan of his camera.

LITERATURE CITED

- Harrison, H. H. 1975. *A Field Guide to Bird's Nests*. Houghton Mifflin Co. NY
- Leck, Charles F. 1984. *The Status and Distribution of New Jersey Birds*. Rutgers University Press, New Brunswick, NJ. p.158
- Paxton, R. O. 1998. In: *Bull's Birds of New York State*, Emanuel Levine, Ed., Cornell University Press p. 540.
- Siebenheller, N. and W. Siebenheller. 1982 Blue Grosbeak Nesting in New York State: a First Record. *Kingbird* 32:234-238



Figure 1. Male Blue Grosbeak



Figure 2. Nest of Blue Grosbeak