

NESTING OF BLUE GROSBEAKS (*Passerina caerulea*) AT THE FORMER FRESH KILLS LANDFILL, STATEN ISLAND, NEW YORK, IN 2014

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Abstract—One of two pairs of Blue Grosbeaks present at the Fresh Kills Park (formerly the Fresh Kills Landfill) during the summer of 2014 successfully fledged at least one chick. This is the second confirmed breeding record in Staten Island and about the sixth for New York State. Blue Grosbeaks nested at the Meadowlands, near North Arlington, NJ beginning in 1973-1975 and at Bucks Hollow on Staten Island in 1982. Since 1999, Blue Grosbeaks have been present each summer in the Long Island pine barrens region, especially Riverhead, Calverton, and Eastport, and have nested there several times. These records represent the forward edge of a northward expansion that has been underway since the 19th century.

On 17 July 2014 at 8:20 pm, Fibikar and Cales caught an adult male Blue Grosbeak in a mist net set to catch bats. The exact location was along a paved road running north-south, just east of Route 440 and south of the bridge over Fresh Kill. We photographed the bird and released it (Figure 1, p. 48). A week later (25 July), Brown brought a mist net and audiofile and captured and banded what was presumably the same adult male. The bird, which was at least two years old, weighed 28.2 g, and had a “large” cloacal protuberance (MAPS terminology), typical for a breeding male. On 30 July, Veit and Michelle Donohue followed the adult male that was carrying a caterpillar into a thicket of European Buckthorn (*Rhamnus cathartica*), and found a vocalizing, prefledged and approximately half grown chick (Figure 2, p. 48). Over the course of the next month, we followed the birds around and tried, unsuccessfully, to mist net them. We did see a total of two different adult males, two brown female-type birds, plus the aforementioned chick. We conclude that two pairs of Blue Grosbeaks were present and that one pair, at least, bred successfully. We last saw one brown bird on 23 August.

HISTORY IN NEW YORK

The first nesting of Blue Grosbeaks in the New York City area were at North Arlington, New Jersey (near what is now the Richard DeKorte refuge) in 1973 (Bull 1975). Birds remained at that location until 1975, but apparently did not generate additional nesting pairs. Shortly afterwards, a pair nested successfully at Bucks Hollow on central Staten Island (Siebenheller and Siebenheller 1982, Andrlé and Carroll 1988), but did not return in subsequent years. During 1999-2014, several pairs of Blue Grosbeaks were present all summer in the Pine Barrens region of central-eastern Suffolk County, Long Island. These birds, centered in the Riverhead to Eastport area, consisted of several pairs involving immature (second calendar-year) males as well as some pairs with adult males, and have been documented as breeding on at least four occasions: 1999, 2002, 2006, and 2013 (Birol 1999, S. Mitra, in litt.). In 2010, Blue Grosbeaks, including individual adult males, were present at Mt Loretto, Staten Island during June and July, but no further evidence of nesting was obtained.

VAGRANCY AND RANGE EXPANSION

Blue Grosbeaks have appeared during both spring and fall as migrants or vagrants with increasing frequency in both New York and in the northeast as a whole (Zeranski and Baptist 1988, Veit and Petersen 1993). Bull (1964) listed a maximum of seven birds in one spring (1961) for the New York City area, and Levine (1998) showed an increase, including a one day spring total of 13 birds at Jones Beach in April 1993, plus records of summering birds, and appearances inland to Orange and Westchester Counties. Mitra and Lindsay (2005) show peak spring totals from Long Island (*Kingbird* Region 10) of 11+ in 1983, 15+ in 1993 and 13 in 2005. Similar patterns apply to Connecticut (Zeranski and Baptist 1988) and Massachusetts (Veit and Petersen 1993). Especially large numbers of migrants or vagrants occurred simultaneously with both unsuccessful and successful nesting in both the early 1970s and in very recent years. Thus, there appears to be coupling between the northward push of vagrants and increased attempts at nesting (e.g., Veit 2001; Zuckerburg et al. 2009).

SIGNIFICANCE OF RECLAIMED HABITAT AT FORMER LANDFILL

The 2200 acre Fresh Kills Park represents the largest tract of undeveloped land in New York City, and potentially one of the largest areas of native grassland in southeastern New York. Much of the habitat right now seems especially suitable for Blue Grosbeaks—grassy fields interspersed with stands of shrubbery (bayberry, multiflora rose) and trees (smooth and staghorn sumac, ailanthus,

hackberry). Thus it seems likely that a population of Blue Grosbeaks has the potential to flourish with the Fresh Kills Park.

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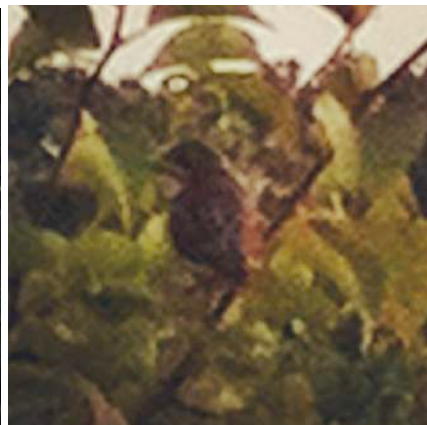


Figure 1 (left). Adult male Blue Grosbeak at Fresh Kills Park, *Richmond*, 17 July 2014.
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Figure 2 (right). Blue Grosbeak chick at Fresh Kills Park, *Richmond*, 30 July 2014.
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