

Spotted Towhees in New York State

A female Spotted Towhee at Baldwin Harbor Park, Nassau County, NY 2 Jan-26 Feb 2021 was the ninth record for NYS (but only the second since 1990) and the fourth for Long Island. Found during the Southern Nassau County CBC by compilers Patricia Lindsay and Shai Mitra (co-author of this note), this was, remarkably, *not* the first for that count: New York's first record was found by Robert H. Grant while scouting for this venerable CBC in late December 1956 and seen again on count day and later (but see below). Late fall 2020 to early spring 2021 was particularly good for Spotted Towhees in the Northeast, accounting for two in Ontario (of 34 total: Riley *et al.* 2021), one in Massachusetts (of 6 total), and Rhode Island's first, pending review (eBird 2021).

The Baldwin Spotted Towhee remained for more than a month (see photo, p. 156), presenting many birders their first opportunity to see this species in New York, in part because the last long-staying bird occurred in 1985, and in part because this taxon was considered "only a subspecies" at that time (in fact, from 1957 until 1995). While reviewing the prior records, we discovered several errors, inconsistencies, and gaps in the various published and online accounts, and we endeavored to collect and preserve the details as accurately as possible, in consultation with some of the original finders and observers. Our sources include the original *Kingbird* and *Field Notes/American Birds/North American Birds* accounts, Post (1965), Buckley (1998), species comments in eBird, and communication with Richard Guthrie, Dominic Sherony, and Jeanne Skelly. In cases of discrepancies and differences in level of detail among sources, we have depended on first-hand testimony and original reports over summaries.

One of these records concerns me (DJF) personally. As a 15-year-old birder in November 1957, I found and identified a female Spotted Towhee in a utility area of the Bronx Zoo. I reported it to Ted Peszell and other adult birders who frequented Bronx Park and confirmed the identification. Reports of rarities spread only by personal contact at that time, before the Internet and even an RBA telephone line, and so meetings of the Linnaean Society of New York usually began with reports of interesting sightings.

I don't recall whether Peszell or Charles Young reported the towhee at the meeting, but when the president asked for details, the vividly memorable answer came instead from the back of the room: "It *is* a Spotted Towhee, and I have it right here!" Paul Buckley had obtained permission to certify this record by collecting (i.e., shooting) the bird, which now resides in the American Museum of Natural History (AMNH 707778). In his entry on this species in *Bull's Birds of New York State* (ed. E. Levine, 1998), Paul mistakenly attributed the discovery to Ted Peszell. His account reveals that he collected not only this bird, the second New York State record, but also the first, Grant's Jones Beach bird!

That specimen, also an immature female, is now at the New York State Museum in Albany (NYSM 19019). Although the sacrifice of this and the Bronx Zoo bird seems quite alien to present-day sensibilities, the preservation of the

specimens allowed for critical subspecific determination at a time when photographing wild birds was immensely more difficult than it is today. Buckley (1959) identified these specimens, and another from New Jersey, as the subspecies *arcticus*, which close study and digital photography continue to confirm as the source of most or all Northeastern records, including this year's bird at Baldwin.

Records of Spotted Towhees in New York State

Dates	Site	Observers	Sex	Kingbird
29 Dec ¹ 1956- 16 Feb 1957	Jones Beach SP, Nassau	Robert H. Grant	F	7: 36 15: 203
30 Nov– 23 Dec 1957	Bronx Zoo, Bronx	Douglas Futuyma	F	15: 203 ²
3 Dec 1964- 1 Feb 1965 ³	Bellport, Suffolk	Mrs. H Wegner, Dennis Puleston	M	15: 131 15: 203
“about 3 wks” Feb 1976	Chili, Monroe	Robert Coffee	M	26: 101-103
28 Nov 1982	Maspeth, Queens	Polgars, fide T. H. Davis	M	33: 80
late Dec 1984- Feb 1985	Greenville, Greene	Chris Ketcham, Richard Guthrie	M	35: 146
22 Dec 1990	ca. Conesus L Marine P, Livingston	Dominic Sherony, Jeanne Skelly	M	41: 103-107
17 Nov 2019	Tifft Nature Pres, Erie	Brad Felton	M	70: 22
2 Jan- 26 Feb 2021	Baldwin Harbor P, Nassau	Patricia Lindsay, Shaibal Mitra	F	this issue

¹ Post (1965) and Buckley (1998) give the date of discovery as 28 Dec.

² record not published in Region 10 Regional report but treated by Post (1965) and Buckley (1998).

³ Puleston reported that Mrs. Wegner had been seeing the bird for about three weeks previous to 3 Dec, when Puleston learned of it, and that it was last seen 24 Jan 1965 (Post 1965).

LITERATURE CITED

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Eastern Phoebe with fish, East Hampton, *Suffolk*, 4 Mar 2021, © Alfred Ross. See note on p. 125.



Spotted Towhee, Baldwin Harbor Park, *Nassau*, 13 Feb 2021, © David LaMagna. See note on p. 126.