New Hampshire Bird Records

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New Hampshire Bird Records

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Pat Niswander in front of a polar bear trap in Churchill, Manitoba, 2012. Photo by Bob Quinn.

IN APPRECIATION OF

Pat Niswander

This issue of *New Hampshire Bird Records* with its color cover is sponsored by the Concord Bird and Wildflower Club, and the New Hampshire Audubon Nature Store and Staff in recognition of Pat Niswander's long-time contributions to both organizations. Pat is a long-time member and President of the Concord Bird and Wildflower Club, and has led many field trips. She has been volunteering in the NH Audubon Nature Store for more than 25 years and is a long-time contributor to *New Hampshire Bird Records*. We are delighted to honor Pat with this issue.

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Can You Identify This Bird?

Answer on page 62.
Photo by Len Medlock.

Answer to the Photo Quiz

by David B. Donsker

This issue's Photo Quiz features a songbird, or passerine, perched on a branch of a fir tree. Using the twigs of the tree to judge its size we see that it is a medium-sized, slender bird with all black plumage. The only break in the sea of blackness is a staring white eye. Its bill is sharply pointed and very slightly down-curved at the tip. Its tail is fairly long and slightly flared and rounded at the end.

In eastern North America, all black or blackish songbirds are limited to relatively few species belonging to only four families: male Purple Martin, a member of the swallow family, *Hirundinidae*; three corvids, American Crow, Fish Crow, and Common Raven; our only starling, European Starling; and several species of American blackbirds in the family *Icteridae*.

Purple Martin can be dismissed quickly. As with all swallows, Purple Martin is a short-legged, short-billed, long-winged species. Its general configuration is quite different from this bird with its longish, sharply pointed bill and well exposed, thin legs or tarsi. Unlike our quiz bird, the martin's long wings nearly reach the tip of the tail when it is perched. The martin's bill is all gape; the exposed horny tip is comparatively puny. Swallows feed completely while in flight. Thus, their short legs are used primarily to perch. The tarsi are short and, unlike our featured bird, are virtually invisible.

Our three species of black corvids are all huge passerines. In fact, Common Raven is our largest songbird. In comparison to our featured bird, these three species are massive in general. All have large, stout bills rather than thin pointed bills. In all three species, the wings are long in comparison to tail length with the tips of the wings more closely approaching the end of the tail than is seen in this bird. The raven's wings are intrinsically long. The crows' wings look proportionally longer because they are relatively short-tailed species. The raven and the crows all have black, not white eyes.

Of our smaller black birds, European Starling stands out as the short-tailed outsider. The only true American blackbirds that share the short, square tail and sharply pointed, triangular wings of the starling are our two species of meadowlark. In North America, at least, meadowlarks with their golden-yellow breasts and streaky brown upperparts are anything but black birds. Although the starling's short, square tail is quite unlike the long, rounded tail of our featured bird, the starling does share with it a straight, pointed bill. In breeding plumage, the starling's bill is yellow, a sure giveaway. In non-breeding plumage, the bill reverts to its basic black, so the color of the bill can not always be used to separate starlings from true blackbirds. Unlike our featured bird, the starling has a dark eye.

The members of the family *Icteridae* (which, in addition to blackbirds, includes the aforementioned meadowlarks, as well as orioles, Bobolink, cowbirds, and grackles) that have all black, or substantially black, plumage are relatively limited in the Northeast. These include Brown-headed Cowbird, Common Grackle, Red-winged Blackbird, Rusty Blackbird, and a rare western vagrant, Brewer's Blackbird.

Of all these, the cowbird is the least like the others. Unlike its relatives, the bill of the cowbird is short and stout with a rather finch-like conical shape. The male cowbird has a brown head which, even in a black-and-white photograph, appears paler and duller than the rest of the plumage. This is opposite to our featured bird. Careful examination of the photograph reveals that the head of our quiz bird looks blacker than the subtly duller, paler black of the bird's upperparts, particularly its back, shoulders and wings. Further, the eyes of Brown-headed Cowbird are black, not white.

Although the scarlet shoulders, or epaulets, of male Red-winged Blackbird give the species its common name and are the major field mark of this common species, at times, especially when the bird is not displaying, they may be concealed. Under these circumstances, Red-winged Blackbirds may be a bit puzzling since they may appear all black. Unlike other all black blackbirds, however, Red-winged Blackbird is a rather stocky species. It has a fairly short tail and broadly rounded wings. Its bill is sharply pointed, but it is broad at the base making it appear thicker, and proportionally shorter, than its relatives. Importantly, Red-winged Blackbird has a dark eye unlike the grackle and the two other medium sized blackbirds mentioned above.

With its pale eye, rather long tail and black, pointed bill, it would be very easy to conclude that our featured bird is a Common Grackle. Our regional subspecies of Common Grackle, "Bronzed Grackle," even shows a bit of contrast between a dark head and paler (bronzy) body plumage that may be subtly suggested in the quiz bird. So, if you came to that conclusion, you are not alone. To the unwary, it would be easy to confuse the subject of our Photo Quiz with that rather common and ubiquitous species. There are several features of our subject that distinguish it from Common Grackle, however. Perhaps the length and shape of the tail is the most critical differentiating point. Although our quiz bird has a rather long tail, the tail of Common Grackle is even longer. The long tail of the grackle is especially exaggerated in males, but even in the shorter-tailed females, it is proportionally longer than that of our featured bird. A further distinguishing feature of the tail of the grackle is that it terminates in a wedge or spoon shape. In contrast, the tail of our quiz bird has a slightly rounded or club shape. The bill of the grackle is heavier, longer and thicker than the acutely pointed bill of the quiz bird.

The two medium sized blackbirds in the genus *Euphagus*, Rusty Blackbird and Brewer's Blackbird, are closely related to grackles and, to the unwary, are easily dismissed as their more common relative. Both of these pale eyed blackbirds, however, are smaller, shorter tailed and more slender billed species than grackles. They are very similar to each other, differing primarily in subtleties in the iridescence of the plumage, tone of the color of the iris and the shape of the bill. In comparison to Brewer's Blackbird, Rusty Blackbird is less glossy overall, has a slightly shorter more bulbous tipped tail, and has a longer, more acutely pointed bill that is sometimes slightly down-curved at the tip. The similarity between these two species is somewhat less of a problem in the Northeast where Brewer's Blackbird is only a rare to very uncommon vagrant from the western and midwestern states. In fact, New Hampshire has no accepted record for this species. An excellent clue to their identification is that these two similar species favor quite different habitats. In general, Brewer's Blackbird is a bird of open and agricultural land while the more reclusive Rusty Blackbird

prefers wooded swamps. This is certainly true on their mutually exclusive breeding grounds but is also generally true during migration. Rusty Blackbird prefers to keep its feet wet and can be seen most commonly at the edges of flooded woodlands and riverine habitats. It may also occasionally venture into pastures and fields, especially if the later are also flooded. If Brewer's Blackbird is ever to be discovered in New Hampshire, it will likely be found in those pastures and fields or be spotted in a wintering mixed blackbird flock in some barnyard.

Rusty Blackbird breeds in the boreal spruce-fir forest of Alaska, Canada, and New England. There it breeds in boggy spruce-fir woods and around beaver ponds. That habitat is the ultimate clue to the identity of our quiz bird. The fact that it is perched in a fir, a critical component of its breeding habitat, virtually confirms the identification as Rusty Blackbird and largely excludes other blackbirds of more open country, marshland or deciduous woodland.

This Rusty Blackbird was photographed by Len Medlock at East Inlet in Pittsburg, NH on May 22, 2010. The Connecticut Lakes region, the Lake Umbagog region, and, to a lesser extent, the White Mountains encompass the breeding range for this species in our state. Even there, it is a rare and local summer resident. Rusty Blackbird is an early spring migrant in New Hampshire, arriving in our state from its wintering grounds in the southeast in late March and early April. By the time they prepare to leave the state in autumn, first year birds and adults have molted into the rusty-tipped feathering of its winter plumage from which the common name of this species is derived.

Unlike most of our other blackbirds, Rusty Blackbird populations are in an unexplained sharp decline. It is the focus of research efforts in both the United States and Canada in which New Hampshire Audubon is taking an active role.

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Abbreviations Used

BBC	Brookline Bird Club
BBS	Breeding Bird Survey
CA	Conservation Area
CC	Country Club
CFT	NH Audubon Chapter Field Trip
FT	Field Trip
IBA	Important Bird Area
L.	Lake
LPC	Loon Preservation Committee
NA	Natural Area
NHA	New Hampshire Audubon
NHBR	New Hampshire Bird Records
NHRBC	NH Rare Birds Committee
NWR	National Wildlife Refuge
PO	Post Office
R.	River
Rd.	Road
Rt.	Route
SF	State Forest
SP	State Park
SPNHF	Society for the Protection of NH Forests, Concord
T&M	Thompson & Meserves (Purchase)
TNC	The Nature Conservancy
WMA	Wildlife Management Area
WMNF	White Mountain National Forest
WS	NHA Wildlife Sanctuary
~	approximately
WTP	Wastewater Treatment Plant

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