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Yellow-headed Blackbird bandings in New Jersey

Dorothy Foy

As a New Jersey resident who has never visited the Midwest, I considered my chances of observing a Yellow-headed Blackbird (*Xanthocephalus xanthocephalus*) almost nonexistent until a few years ago.

Records of this species were exceedingly few in Ship Bottom but, as Lady Luck would have it, a male Yellow-headed Blackbird — my first — was sighted in the area of Barnegat Light on 7 July 1976. This area is close to a marsh and a vacant strip of barrier beach which has native plants growing in profusion; red cedar, bayberry, pokeberry, and phragmites are among the more common. The houses in this area are relatively new and have few plantings; there are, however, a couple of mimosa trees and at least one weeping willow.

The bird was seen sitting on top of a TV antenna tower in the back yard of one of the houses. It was photographed the following day and several times on 10 July. I set up two mist nets as well as several four-cell Potter traps, and very early on the morning of 14 July opened them. The blackbird was very nervous because of the "new" items in the yard and always dropped straight down from high above onto a feeder. There was no horizontal movement from side to side; it was always straight down and straight up when he came in to feed. Efforts to trap this lone bird were unsuccessful. My husband and I did, however, band three other Yellow-headed Blackbirds that year, all in the fall: (1) 25 August 1976, AHY-M; (2) 6 September 1976, HY-M; (3) 3 October 1976, HY-M.

In 1977 we observed 8 Yellow-heads in Barnegat Light and, of these, 6 were banded as follows: (1) 11 August 1977, HY-U; (2) 14 August 1977, AHY-M; (3) 1 September 1977, HY-U; (4) 14 September 1977, HY-U; (5) 15 September 1977, HY-U; (6) 29 September 1977, AHY-M.

The incidence of HY birds prompted me to investigate if these birds were perhaps hatched in this area, or if they were summer wanderers. Were these birds merely displaced migrants, or is a "wintering" population establishing itself on the East Coast? I also wondered just how many other Yellow-headed Blackbirds were banded or recovered in New Jersey during this period.

I requested from the Bird Banding Laboratory informa-

tion on all bandings and recoveries in New Jersey through 30 November 1979. I found that there were no recoveries and only 14 banded! Of these 14, 9 had been banded by us in 1976 and 1977. The 5 banded by others were: (1) November 1964, South Amboy, SY-M; (2) November 1965, South Amboy, U-F; (3) August 1973, Manahawkin, HY-F; (4 & 5) November 1978, Barnegat Light — 2 birds.

I felt as though I were renewing acquaintance with an old friend when a magnificent male in breeding plumage appeared on one of my feeders on 30 April 1980; he was banded as an ASY-M and left the same day. This ASY-M was the first one banded at my home in Ship Bottom — about 6 miles (10 km) south of Barnegat Light. He uttered many calls that sounded like a rusty hinge on an old door! A few days later, in one of the pyracantha bushes bordering one side of my back yard, I saw an SY-M. This male stayed only a few hours and was gone (without banding) shortly after nets were set near the feeder; he did not make any attempt to go into the traps. Here, again, I noted the same feeding behavior as before: straight down onto the feeder and straight up — no side to side movement.

I have been in communication with various people who are not banders for additional sightings of Yellow-headed Blackbirds. Jim Akers of Brigantine (pers. comm.) observed an adult male in June of 1977, perched on a telephone wire in his backyard. Occasional reports emanate from Brigantine National Wildlife Refuge, but most are not verified. There is one exception — an immature male seen 13 August 1976. Other New Jersey sightings that have come to my attention are:

Rumson (feeder) — Sept. 1979

Forked River (feeder) — Sept. & Oct. 1979

Manahawkin State Wildlife Reserve — 1978 & 1979

Barnegat NWR — 1978 & 1979

The majority of birds in our area have been photographed either in hand or in the wild. Because this species is considered "rare" by New Jersey Audubon standards, some of the photos are on file at Scherman Sanctuary, Bernardsville. The species is not included in



the New Jersey basic Bird List as published in the May 1976 issue of *New Jersey Audubon Magazine* by the Bird Records Committee.

It seems significant that all the Yellow-headed Blackbirds in New Jersey have been found between the longitudes of 0740 and 0741. This encompasses a great variety of terrain, none of it so far inland as to be called central or western New Jersey.

Of the birds banded, one was a spring bird. Is this species slowly moving eastward and breeding in New Jersey, or are the bandings and sightings accidental?

In subsequent trips to the Manahawkin State Wildlife Reserve and a portion of Barnegat National Wildlife Reserve, we have found no nesting sites.

I would like to thank Kathy Klimkiewicz of the Bird Banding Laboratory for her help. I would also like to thank my husband, Roger, for his suggestions during the gathering of information for this paper. I especially wish to thank Rich Kane of the New Jersey Audubon Society for sharing the following information from the Audubon files.

Sightings and color photos:

1. Male (color photo) at feeder, Saddle River (NJ) 2-16 April 1961 (George Komorowski).
2. Male at feeder banded and color photo 12 November 1964 near South Amboy (Betty Knorr).
3. Female at feeder banded and color photo 30 November and 17 December 1965 near South Amboy (Betty Knorr).
4. Color photo by Chris Sturm of a bird (actually one of several that summer) seen at Brigantine NWR 13 August 1976. (Not banded.)
5. Color photo by Mike Hannisian of a bird in April 1976 near Lafayette, Sussex Co. (Not banded.)
6. In winter 1975 a bird in Kearny was photographed (name of photographer not known for sure).

There are many more sight reports than bandings, and some of the sight-reported birds may have been photographed without documentation. ♦

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