



BANDERS' SHOPTALK

BY ERMA J. FISK

Further Information on Sexing Blue-gray Gnatcatchers....

In the November-December issue of EBBA News, Volume 34, Number 6, I discussed the sexing of Blue-gray Gnatcatchers. Unfortunately, a key sentence was omitted in the printing, which rather garbled what I was trying to prove.

In my discussion I quoted Weston in Bent- "The distinguishing mark of the male gnatcatcher in breeding plumage. . . . the black forehead and line over the eye. It seems to be not generally known that this distinguishing mark is not present in winter specimens." He states further: "young males lack the black frontal band during the first fall and winter and females never have it" (Italics mine). At the end of my discussion our interested editor added a paragraph of his own, using Dwight as his base of information. He indicated that since the black frontal band and supra-loral lines are acquired by a partial prenuptial molt males can be sexed from the first breeding season on.

(Continued on page 59. Ed.)

Due to unforeseen circumstances beyond our control, we are not able to present the reports under "Region I" of Atlantic Flyway Review. Region II reports may be found on page 63 of this issue. The lacking report for Region I will be printed in the May 1972 issue, along with that of Region III and IV.

Allow me to thank Dr. Robert P. Yunick and those banders who contribute under the Region II group, for their cooperation in bringing us an excellent coverage of this area.

The Editor

On the basis of my previous argument, and on #118-80530 recently netted for the fifth time in four years, with winter and summer experience with over 50 of the species, I wish to go out on a limb, disagree with our Editor's suggestion, and expand Weston's statement by saying that apparently all males lack the black V except in breeding season.

As HY in October, 1968 #118-80530 had no frontal band, nor predictably, in January 1969. But he lacked it also in October, 1970, after the summer molt. On February 2, 1971, returning in partial prenuptial molt, he clearly showed black feathers emerging from quills in the V pattern (photo, Everglades National Park collection). But again returning in winter plumage on October 11, 1971, he showed no black. Evidently this characteristic is assumed in the February molt, lost in July-August molt and birds taken outside these dates cannot be sexed.

Erma J. Fisk, Homestead, Florida. 11-29-71.

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September 1, 1971 Erma J. Fisk, 17101 S. W. 284 St., Homestead, Fla.

The practice of skulling each bird one handles is raising problems of ageing-identification by plumage alone. For instance:

OVENBIRDS: The tertial tips alone should not be relied on as a characteristic for HY birds. Two unossified birds taken at Manomet Aug. 21-23, 1971 lacked the rusty tips. At my banding station in Florida by late October these tips are often worn off HY birds. On the other hand a fall Florida HY bird of 1970, retaken in both February and March still had its rusty tips.

HOUSE WRENS: Contrary to Wood (A Bird-Banders Guide to Determination of Age and Sex of Selected Species) I find these cannot be aged by the presence, or absence, of white tips on the wing coverts. A July adult, singing on territory at South Orleans, Mass., in 1970 was taken with tips. A bird taken at Homestead, Florida in October, 1967 as HY returned a year later, October 1968, with tips which had increased from 3 on each side to 8 on the right, 6 on the left. A bird examined at Irish Grove, Md., on Sept. 18, 1970 was unossified, with no tips. Of two unossified birds taken at Manomet, Mass, August 7, 1971, one had tips, one not.

Of nine October 1971 birds at Homestead, 3 were adults with tips varying from 3-5; one adult had no tips; 3 HY had from 3-7 tips, 2 HY had no tips.

How do we classify birds whose degree of ossification does not conform to what we have considered adult or immature plumage? A Least Fly-

catcher taken October 29, 1970 with white wingbars at Homestead was only 80% ossified. Do we know how long it takes a Least to ossify entirely? Perhaps two years? Should we age them by plumage, by skull, or put them in as unknown?

Male Yellowthroats with black masks well bordered by gray in fall have always automatically been considered adults. But Sept. 25 - Nov. 5, 1970 at Homestead, of 21 birds in this plumage 7 had only one or two degrees (on a scale of 3) of ossification. It would be interesting to see what stations like Island Beach and Kiptopeke, which handle large numbers of Yellowthroats, could come up with on this.

EYE COLOR: The accepted way of ageing White-eyed Vireos is by the eye- white or a very light gray for adult, brown or brown gray for immature. I regret to puncture this simple system. Between Sept. 25 - Nov. 5, 1970 I banded 121 WEVs and had 5 returns going back to October 1968.

1 bird, banded in January 1969, retaken 3 times, still had a dark gray eye.

20 birds with 100% ossification had gray eyes of varying shades, none the adult light.

11 ossified birds had gray-brown, brown-gray, or brown eyes.

9 birds with white eyes, or gray sufficiently light to be assumed adult, skulled from 10-75% ossified only. These birds were examined in bright Florida sunlight with a 12 power jeweler's loupe. I was involved in a special study on them. Of the remaining birds 6 were incompletely processed, 75 fitted the usual eye-age concept. Until more information is available it is my suggestion that all fall WEVs be carefully skulled and records kept, particularly at the permanent banding stations. I had hoped that repeats during the winter would clarify some of the questions the above raised, but my repeaters were all white-eyed and ossified except for one. This, 75% ossified with gray eyes on October 2, returned with gray eyes but 100% ossified on January 6. I get both migrant and resident birds at Homestead.

EYE COLOR IN CATBIRDS: I had over 100 Catbirds, repeating frequently in my Homestead, Florida acreage the winter of 1970-71. I had the opportunity, lacking in northern stations closed by cold, to follow through the changes of eye color, which is accompanied by the blackening of the inside of the mouth. The gray eye of the juvenile has been lost by the time the birds reach me. The brown which succeeds it can hold all through the winter (I handled two brown-eyed birds the first week of May 1970 at Manomet and was astonished by one adult in July 1971 at Manomet). But in the majority of birds this brown darkens and by mid-March and April it has become a plum color which becomes increasingly difficult to separate from the almost black, "huckleberry" of the adult (ASY) bird. So that by April 1st I am listing most of my birds as AHY, being no longer able to tell SY from ASY. For me eye color is easier to judge in the blazing Florida sunlight than under artificial light.

Color is subjective, but handling more than 700 birds during the season, I felt confident of the differences I could see.

EYE COLOR IN CEDAR WAXWINGS: I have a paper in preparation on these, based on 200 birds studied in spring and some summer birds at Manomet. In bright sunlight eye color - corroborated by several observers - varies from reddish, to a dark chocolate, almost black, brown, with an intermediate stage of a dark pupil ringed with maroon. Sexual observations of the amount of black on chin and throat can be affected by the lighting, even a twist of the bird's head casting a shadow on a concolor throat, so care should be taken.

EYE COLOR IN MOCKINGBIRDS: Mockingbirds are abundant in South Florida, and return often in the nets. The gray, or gray-brown of the juvenile is distinctive. My doubtful assumption is that a very clear yellow or orange denotes an older adult. But one, two, three and even four years after banding I handle returns with eyes indistinguishable in their mixtures of yellow and green from those of first year birds. I used to hope that clear white outer rectrices might denote an older bird, but experience has disproved this.

BLUE-GRAY GNATCATCHERS: This species is common in South Florida, but they slip so readily through even a small-mesh net that few are taken. In the past three years I have banded 49, with 7 returns, from late September into March, and handled a few summer birds at Manomet. Of these only two had the black eye-line popularly supposed to denote the male. One was a mid-January bird, one, banded as unknown on October 4, 1968 returned February 2, 1971 with the black tips of an eyelid (i.e. pre-nuptial molt) just emerging from the quills (photo, Everglades National Park collection). Weston, writing in Bent's LIFE HISTORIES OF NORTH AMERICAN THRUSHES, KINGLETS AND THEIR ALLIES, page 356, says - "The distinguishing mark of the male gnatcatcher in breeding plumage . . . the black forehead and line over the eye" (italics mine). "It seems to be not generally known that this distinguishing mark is not present in winter specimens." On page 352 he states - "young males lack the black frontal band during the first fall and winter, and females never have it." In view of this, and my own experience, I would judge that only birds in breeding plumage can safely be sexed, and no fall birds at all. Perhaps some of the permanent banding stations can add to this knowledge.



On ossification, molt and late skulling: Dates in Wood are (I judge) for averages, and skulling should be continued into the winter. In Florida I have had Myrtles (2) on January 2 with 2 degrees of ossification (on a scale of 3); an Indigo Bunting Feb 7, 1971, two degrees. Of 8 American goldfinches taken Jan 10, 1971, 6 were incompletely ossified (2 degrees). Two immature goldfinch taken in molt had dates of Dec. 20, 1970 (head and body) and Jan. 11, 1971 (head only).

(A further Addendum received in late September from Mrs. Fisk while visiting Powdermill Nature Reserve reads as follows.... Ed.)

"A house wren at Powdermill Nature Reserve, 9-8-71-

Adult bird with white tips on wing coverts

Im. bird no tips 9-10-71

Another HY Ovenbird, to be added to that list I made, with no rusty tertial tips, same place and date.

A Northern Waterthrush, skull unossified, lacking the buffy tertial tips which are supposed to indicate an immature."

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INJURIES AND DISEASE OBSERVED AT A SOUTH FLORIDA BANDING STATION 1971

A Blue Jay survived at least from fall 1970 to spring, 1971 with a broken mandible.

A Blue Jay with a leg broken and healed upside down netted in November 1969 returned in otherwise apparent good health December 29, '70.

An adult male Cardinal survived over a year blind in one eye, being finally taken from the net by a hawk.

Three winter goldfinch had prominent enlargements on the lower mandible, at the extreme tip.

A male Painted Bunting with two abscesses on its neck, one the size of a N.J. blueberry, was retaken ten days later with scar tissue only. I had given it no treatment.

Many Mockingbirds show tumors on legs, head or neck. These can be single, or several, with the bird in too poor shape to band. None of these have repeated, except where a small hard tumor may be on the foot.

A myrtle warbler was taken lacking half its lower mandible.

Foot virus, or pox, is common on my wintering Red-winged Blackbirds. The feet are scaled, enlarged, crusted, and bleed easily as this crust is torn by a net strand. In some cases there are extensive soft flanges. The tarsi also are effected and enlarged, so that banding is impossible. I have had a few House Sparrows similarly affected, and seen the condition also on Chachalacas (*Ortalis r. ruficauda*, in Tobago, West Indies). According to Patuxent, these conditions affect birds that flock in winter.

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ATLANTIC FLYWAY REVIEW Region II. Edited by: ROBERT P. YUNICK

The inland Northeast stations of AMFO found concurrence on one aspect of the past fall's migration, but otherwise in their own individual ways offered differing assessments of the season. They concurred on the extreme mildness of the weather, and this prompted some people to rationalize lower bird takes in terms of a delayed migration. However, a take of nearly twice the norm at Vischer Ferry made it appear as though it were not a matter of delay brought on by balmy weather, but rather a matter of being at the right place at the right time to benefit from what the weather had to offer. A comparison of the results at Vischer Ferry and Ellenville, which are only about 80 air-miles distant in a north-south direction, exemplifies this.

Briefly, the highlights of the reports that follow are:

Marshfield, Vt. - A successful season with an impressive take, for an inland station, of nearly one bird per net-hour. Increases were noted for some warbler and thrush species.

South Londonderry, Vt. - White-throated sparrows were slow to migrate and there was a scarcity of some sparrows. Ruby-crowned kinglets were late and scarce. This station serves as a lesson to one interested in the art of what can be done with water-drip traps.

Vischer Ferry, N.Y. - Record takes of many species with about double the normal yield due to favorable weather. White-throats, Swainson's thrushes, blackpoll warblers and hummingbirds especially abundant.

Salisbury, N.Y. - Low sparrow numbers - not moving due to mild weather.

Friendsville, Pa. - Birds were scarcer this year than last with frontal activity believed contributing to low yield. Especially decreased were warblers.

Thanks are in order to the people who ran these stations and especially to those who contributed the reports.