

THE RECENT REAPPEARANCE OF THE DICKCISSEL
(*SPIZA AMERICANA*) IN EASTERN
NORTH AMERICA

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THE DICKCISSEL is very erratic in its distribution, and its numbers in certain localities, even in the center of its nesting range in the Middle West, fluctuate greatly from year to year. A certain locality may have an abundance of Dickcissels only to have them practically disappear after a few years. Sometimes this fluctuation extends over a large area of one or more states so that we may speak of a "high" or "low" year for the Dickcissel (Taber, 1947).

The most remarkable feature of this erratic bird's distribution has been its recession and now its recent extension of its range to the eastern part of North America. It is well known that during the nineteenth century it nested and was a common species in a wide range extending from the Carolinas through Pennsylvania, New Jersey, and New York to Rhode Island and Massachusetts. Stragglers were collected as far south as Florida and as far north as New Hampshire and Nova Scotia (Gross, 1921). By the end of the century it had practically disappeared from the vast area east of the Allegheny Mountains. One may find many accounts of its diminution in numbers, and predictions were freely made that the Dickcissel was destined to be completely extirpated from this part of its former range (Rhoads, 1903).

It nested in Mississippi as late as 1900 (Stockard, 1905), and the last record of its nesting in the more northern section of this area was a nest found at Plainfield, New Jersey, on July 3, 1904 (Miller, 1904). The mystery of its disappearance has never been satisfactorily explained. Just as baffling is its recent reappearance in great numbers to the region it deserted fifty years ago. After 1920 stragglers again appeared in the east, and a pair nested in Georgia in 1923 (Burleigh, 1927); but the year 1928 marks the date when the Dickcissel gave the greatest promise of a general return. In that year, there were records ranging all the way from localities in Florida, the Carolinas, Pennsylvania, Maryland, and New Jersey to the Bay of Fundy. They are arranged chronologically as follows: April 11, Pensacola, Florida (Howell, 1932); April 26, Tallahassee, Florida, 1 male (Williams, 1929); May 18, Columbia, South Carolina, 1 bird (Smyth, 1930); May 19, Raleigh, North Carolina, 1 pair (Snyder and Brimley, 1928); May 25, Columbia, South Carolina, colony of fifty birds (Smyth, 1930); May 26, June 9 and 18, Darling, Penn-

sylvania, 1 male, 1 male, 1 pair (Stone, 1928a); June 5, S. C.-N. C. state line on route No. 1, 1 bird (Smyth, 1930); June 10 and 11, Sharptown, New Jersey, 1 male (Stone, 1928b); July 15 and 22, Dickerson, Maryland, 6 males, female feeding young (Wetmore and Lincoln, 1928); August 6, Hendersonville, North Carolina, 2 males singing (Pearson, Brimley, and Brimley, 1942); September 23, aboard a steamer, in the Bay of Fundy, New Brunswick, male in winter plumage (Rand, 1929); November 5, aboard a ship 140 miles off Cape Charles, Virginia, 1 female (Holt, 1932). These many records in 1928 struck an optimistic note, and observers had every reason to believe the Dickcissel was staging a substantial comeback in the East. The numbers of Dickcissels fluctuated during the next fifteen years but with no notable increase in this period over the numbers reported for 1928.

It is difficult to ascertain the relative abundance of Dickcissels from year to year when based on individual reports. However, the detailed records of numbers in "New England Bird Life," 1936-1944 published by the New England Museum of Natural History, and its successor, "Records of New England Birds" published by the Massachusetts Audubon Society, 1945 to the present, are at least helpful in hinting of the status of the Dickcissel in New England from year to year. The number of individuals reported each year by these two publications are as follows: 1937, 1; 1938, 3; 1939, 1; 1940, 6; 1941, 1; 1942, 0; 1943, 3; 1944, 0; 1945, 4; 1946, 18; 1947, 9; 1948, 19; 1949, 50; 1950, 51; 1951, 72; 1952, 122; 1953, 288. This represents a total of 647 Dickcissels in 398 separate reports in the New England states alone. It will be seen that from 1948 on, the increase was extraordinary, with 288 reported in 1953. The 647 were distributed by states as follows: Maine, 53; New Hampshire, 6; Vermont, 6; Massachusetts, 489; Rhode Island, 44; and Connecticut, 49. The extremely large number reported from Massachusetts is due in part to the larger number of active field observers in that state, but even so, it is obvious that the density of the present influx of Dickcissels to New England is centered in the state of Massachusetts.

If we arrange the 647 New England records according to the months of the year we have the following: January, 77; February, 44; March, 25; April, 28; May, 4; June, 0; July, 0; August, 34; September, 128; October, 114; November, 88; December, 105. According to this tabulation, the Dickcissels make their appearance in New England during the month of August, reach their maximum during September and October, and later drop off until May. None were reported for the months of June and July, although there are a few summer

New England records not included in "Records of New England Birds" (Packard, 1952). Most of the reports tabulated above are for one or two birds, rarely as many as 3 to 5, the average being 1.6 birds to a report. Many of these winter records are of individuals that visit feeding stations. Often the Dickcissels are associated with English Sparrows; the latter belong to a different family and are radically different, especially in their nesting habits. At the feeding stations these two birds somewhat similar in size and appearance have common feeding habits that bring them together. The observations made at the feeding stations have greatly augmented the number of records. In fact, feeding stations may be a factor in the great numbers that appear in New England during the winter months.

In going through the "Audubon Field Notes," the general statements found in the regional reports indicate that the bulk of the Dickcissels that come to the East in the fall appear in the Middle Atlantic states, New England, and the coastal region of Canada. (For Canada see also Godfrey, 1954.) This distribution suggests that the Dickcissels of the northeast come directly in a west-east migration, probably aided by the prevailing winds at that time of the year, from the breeding grounds in the Middle West and travel in a path north of the barrier of the higher Appalachian Mountains. They continue on eastward until finally stopped by the barrier of the Atlantic Ocean, the bulk of them reaching it on the Massachusetts coast and from there fanning out northward to Maine and Canada. Some also may move southward from Massachusetts. This assumption seems reasonable when we consider that the great majority of the records are from the coastal area of New England, and Dickcissels have even been found on islands such as Block Island, New York; Nantucket, Martha's Vineyard, West and Plum islands, Massachusetts; Monhegan and other islands in Maine; and Machias Seal Island, New Brunswick. Furthermore, some continue on and have taken refuge on boats at sea (Fleisher, 1926; Holt, 1932; Libby, 1954; and Rand, 1929). Scholander (1955) reports a Dickcissel landed October 8, 1937, on a ship at 36° 16' N., 67° 52' W., which is approximately 375 miles from land, and no doubt some of the more adventurous birds are lost at sea.

In the spring, I believe the bulk of the Dickcissels that spend the winter in the northeast return directly to the great nesting area in the Middle West by a direct east-west migration over the route previously mentioned. There are an increasing number of records in the area between the east and west to suggest this route, but many banding records are sorely needed to establish the truth of this as-

sumption. This west-east and east-west migration has a parallel in the case of several other species, for example in the Evening Grosbeak in which it has been gradually developed but now is a fixed practice. The Evening Grosbeak now nests in the northeastern section of the United States and southeastern Canada, and it might reasonably be expected that in the future the Dickcissel will again be nesting in New England. However, it is not safe to predict what will be the future status of a bird like the Dickcissel that has proven so erratic in its numbers and distribution.

As yet I know of no recent authentic nesting of the Dickcissel in New England and eastern Canada. All of the eastern nesting records thus far have been from the more southern states. John W. Aldrich's map of the breeding distribution of the Dickcissel, taken from U. S. Fish and Wildlife species distribution maps and from the Service's species distribution card file, show the following approximate number of localities in the states east of the Mississippi and Ohio rivers: Mississippi, 1; Alabama, 6; Georgia, 2; Tennessee, 2; Kentucky, 1; West Virginia, 2; Virginia, 2; Pennsylvania, 2; and New Jersey, 1 (Aldrich, 1948). The dates and the names of the places where the Dickcissels are breeding are not given. There have been a large number of recent nesting records, chiefly in the Gulf and southern Atlantic states since Aldrich's map was published in 1948.

I am inclined to believe that the Dickcissels nesting in our southern states reach there from the south in the spring rather than coming directly from the west in the fall over the route suggested for our northern winter visitors. During the spring migration from northern South and Central America, it is conceivable that some of the birds on reaching the mid-southern United States are diverted to the eastern part of the United States instead of following the Mississippi Valley route to the main nesting area. Some of the birds may arrive by the Trans-Gulf Route (Lowery, 1946). Many of the dates of arrival in our southeastern states correspond to the dates of the spring arrivals in the lower Mississippi Valley.

Regardless of how the northern and southern contingents of Dickcissels arrive, the sudden change in the status of this bird in the eastern part of the United States is extraordinary. A remarkable feature of their change in behavior is the tendency for an increasing number to migrate east for the winter instead of following the traditional migration to their winter quarters in the south. This whole matter deserves close attention and further study.

It is also interesting to note that there is a recent tendency for the

Dickcissel to extend its nesting range to the north and west from the Middle West and for a greater number to nest in the southern part of the mid-western area.

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11 Boddy Street, Brunswick, Maine, December 10, 1954.