
Books

Orioles, Blackbirds, & their Kin/ a Natural History. Alexander F. Skutch. 1996. University of Arizona Press, Tucson. xvi + 294 pp. Cloth \$50.00 U.S., paperback \$21.95 U.S.

In this volume, Central America's best known naturalist has produced an outstanding survey of the icterids, grouped into 16 chapters covering single species (Bobolink, Jamaican Blackbird, Yellow-headed Blackbird, Oriole-Blackbird, Giant Cowbird, Yellow-billed Cacique), genera (*Agelaius* blackbirds, meadowlarks, *Dives* blackbirds, *Euphagus* blackbirds, grackles, *Molothrus* cowbirds, orioles, pouch-weaving caciques, oropendulas) and a hodge-podge of poorly known South American species. A seventeenth, concluding chapter summarizes the group as a whole (considered by Skutch to constitute a family). A ten-page "bibliography," index and biographical sketch conclude the book.

The information on North American species that I know best is accurate. Coverage is reasonably thorough, given the amount of space that can be allocated to a given species in a volume treating 94 species. I found 7 1/2 pages for Red-winged Blackbird a bit skimpy, given the rich literature on this species. Skutch's treatment of this species provides a good overview of what is known of its biology, but misses some details. For example, its recent colonization of non-marsh habitat is not mentioned, and although the competitive and territorial interactions between Red-winged and Tricolored blackbirds and between Yellow-headed Blackbirds and Marsh Wrens are discussed, those between Red-winged and Yellow-headed blackbirds are not. Although "buffy white" accurately describes the border behind the red epaulets of Red-winged Blackbirds in some areas, these are bright yellow in northern populations and lacking entirely in Caribbean populations. Skutch does not mention this variation or the fact that Caribbean females are black, unlike the streaked, brown females of North American populations.

Although he mentions that young Yellow-headed Blackbirds rest on floating vegetation after leaving the nest, he does not mention that adults often forage on such substrate. The recent breeding range expansion of Orchard Orioles is not mentioned, although a paper by Spencer Sealy based on a new breeding population is cited. These omissions are relatively minor, and the text covers most aspects of the life histories of North American species well. That Skutch keeps abreast of current research is illustrated by the fact that he mentions the re-splitting of Baltimore and Bullock's orioles in spite of the fact that the "1995" issue of the *Auk* in which the split was announced was published only shortly before the book.

There is plenty of specific interest to banders in this book, such as comments on plumages and molts in the species accounts. That alarm calls of Yellow-shouldered Blackbirds elicit mobbing behavior by conspecifics, cowbirds and grackles was shown when the Yellow-shoulders were caught in mist nets. Color-banding and other color markings are mentioned as helping to determine that monogamy and polygamy in Brewer's Blackbirds vary among years depending on sex ratio and the degree of their pair-faithfulness from year to year, that Great-tailed Grackles are double-brooded and that Brown-headed Cowbirds are generally monogamous except for occasional matings between females and non-territorial wandering males during the absence of territorial males. Radio-telemetry is mentioned as helping to sort out the amount of mate and site fidelity in cowbirds. Also mentioned is an instance of a banded female cowbird feeding a fledgling with which she was trapped, but not feeding others. That Oropendulas have long lives is suggested by the five females banded as young that were found actively building nests 26 years later. Although not specifically mentioned, details of territoriality, social organization and numerous other life history details of several species were based at least partly on studies of banded populations.

Errors are restricted to occasional lapses into older names (e.g. Bronzed Grackle, Common Meadowlark) or spellings (e.g. yellow-throats), understandable by an author whose career has spanned many nomenclatural changes. A mismatch in the spelling of Sealy (correctly, p. 197) vs. Sealey (incorrectly, p. 274) is the only instance of an error in the references, and all references cited in the text are included in the "bibliography."

Skutch is a very good writer, and writes especially enthusiastically when recounting specific anecdotes from his personal experiences. The "bibliography" shows that his research of the literature has also been wide, with most books and many major journal papers on icterids being consulted. Notable omissions are Robert W.

Nero's 1984 book on Red-winged Blackbirds and accounts published to date in the "Birds of North America" series. He has also not consulted the many notes and papers on icterids in various provincial and state bird and natural history journals. These would not have altered general aspects of species accounts, but would have added some details to accounts of North American species. Spanish literature is also conspicuously absent, and would have allowed more thorough coverage of Cuban species, and presumably some of the scantily-covered South American species. In spite of its shortcomings, this book provides a very good, highly readable account of icterids in general and an excellent starting point for any literature hunt on a particular species in this diverse and fascinating group of birds.

Martin K. McNicholl

