

1-1990
Joe Engler
Fish Springs

RUSTY BLACKBIRD

On Sunday, January 7, while driving along the main canal of north Avocet unit, I observed a winter plumage blackbird. The light buff supercilium, light breast and rusty and brown coloration brought to mind a rusty blackbird, which I have seen in the eastern U.S. I was not very familiar with the variations in Brewer's blackbird plumages at this time. Since I had several birders waiting for me, I left the area to join them.

I returned at about 2 pm with field guides and camera. The other birders came by shortly to observe the bird also. The sky was generally overcast but the sun broke out of the clouds on numerous occasions to put full sunlight on the bird. Observations were made north of the bird, so the sun was behind and to the west of it. Vehicles were positioned as to not have the sun directly behind the bird. The bird was observed at a distance of 50-75' away, and was somewhat wary as it flew on several occasions. The bird was feeding on a mudflat and amid a sparse stand of winter-dead bulrush. Killdeer and least sandpipers were feeding in the same area. Observations were made for about 1-1.5 hours. In general, the bird was cooperative and gave views from all angles, as well as perching on bulrush stems.

The bird was again observed on January 8, in the afternoon for a short period. A few photos were taken but the distance is probably to great and sky too overcast for any good photos. Field marks were again noted. The bird was foraging on the same mudflat, with killdeer and least sandpipers nearby. The bird was heard giving its check call once, I believe right before it flew.

1. Head and Back

Distinct rusty cap with rusty-brown coloration extending onto the nape. In full light, the brownish back appeared to have several faint grayish streaks running down it. The eye was light yellow. The supercilium (eye stripe) was light buff. A black eyeline extended from the base of the beak, through the eye, then behind the eye. Some black encircled the eye. Below the eyeline was brown. This gave the appearance of an ear patch, black above then grading to dark brown then to light brown below. The ear patch was bordered below with buff (a shade darker than the supercilium). A faint whisker stripe extended from the lower base of the beak, separating the "face" from the throat. The chin and throat were whitish with a faint tinge of buff in it. The throat was noticeably whiter than any buff color on the bird. There appeared to be faint dark flecks in the throat feathers. As per field guide keys, the black beak was relatively long and pointed. Though this is subjective since there was nothing to compare it too. The base of the beak was rather thin and did not look finch-like or conical in any way, probably due to the overall length of the beak. The beak did not appear to droop at all.

2. Rump and Tail

The rump and tail were a medium gray, with the coloration getting slightly darker as it proceeded from rump to tail. The coloration shift from the brownish back to the gray rump was very distinct. Even in poor light or odd angles where the coloration could not be discerned, the change in shading between the back and rump was distinctive. The bird was observed several times with its back turned toward me and thus offered very good views of this feature.

3. Breast and Belly

The coloration underneath was often difficult to judge because of the angle of the light. When first observed, the breast and belly seemed very light. As further observations were made, a more distinctive color pattern was seen. Moving "south" from the throat - the area immediately below the throat was light brown. This color was very similar to the lightest brown of the ear patch. The brown from the ear patch continued back towards the crook of the wing (shoulder), then down to the upper breast. This color was lighter than the brown of the back. The brown of the upper breast then graded into a brownish-light gray on the lower breast. There appeared to be some slight flecking or streaking in the breast, but it was difficult to distinguish. It was possibly caused by the wind or body movements exposing the darker underfeathers. The transition from breast to belly was rather abrupt. The belly being a gray to dark gray depending on the light. In good light it was several shades darker than the lower breast and did not seem to have any brown in it. There appeared to be faint vermiculations or striping on the belly and flanks. Again, this was not distinctive and probably due to the darker underfeathers.

The Monday observation showed that the feathered upper legs were more of a buffy-brown than a gray. This was not noticed on Sunday. The bare tarsi were black.

3. Wings

The primaries, secondaries and tertials, in general, appeared dark brownish-gray. The secondaries and tertials were edged with rust. The coverts were more distinctively brown to rusty brown throughout. The rust in the secondaries and tertials were distinct in good light, though it was often difficult to tell which feathers were being observed as the bird was usually moving and turning, or facing the wrong way. On Monday, I again observed the tertials and they still appeared to be edged in rust, thus supporting the previous days observations.

The described bird generally fits the description of a fall plumage female rusty blackbird in the field guides. Fall plumage

Brewer's can apparently show extensive light coloration, and rust in the wings. Field guides show a much darker bird underneath, particularly in the throat area on down. Much of this is subject to the degree of molt taking place. Unfortunately, the available field guides do not deal much in immature fall plumage birds, and I am not familiar with these birds. If the guides are even halfway correct, it would be tough to call the observed bird a Brewer's. The overall colorations and distinct gradations in color seem to rule out the Brewer's. The distinctive grayish rump and rusty in secondaries and tertials would further confirm this. The habitat preference would also indicate a rusty blackbird, not a brewer's.

The bird was observed again on January 12 and 13. On the 16th, the bird was observed as it was flushed and pursued briefly by a northern harrier.

All features indicate that the bird was an adult female rusty blackbird. The grayish rump and brownish back and wings would rule out males of the rusty or either sex of brewer's. The light face, throat and breast markings would rule out any variant male brewer's. These males should show some black throughout the belly, breast, and throat. The rusty edges to the tertials confirm it as a rusty blackbird. The tertials appeared new and were of the same color and gleam as the secondaries. Immatures of either species normally retain their "juvenile" tertials during the prebasic (fall) molt. Therefore an immature bird would have worn, faded brownish tertials; this bird did not. Also an immature bird would tend to have more rust color throughout the wing feathers and the nape and back, although this can vary. Underwing coverts are also much lighter on immatures, since these normally are retained during the prebasic molt. This feature could not be observed on the bird. Generally, immature and adult female rustys can only be distinguished in the hand by these underwing coverts and even then are sometimes inseparable.

The bird was observed numerous times and was last observed on February 10. It was seen almost exclusively along the same mudflat of the Avocet canal, though was observed on 2 days at different locations on the canal.