

## Next up for Texas?

I've heard the call of southern North America for a long time. When I was a kid, the electric colors of birds like Pink-headed Warbler, Red-breasted Chat, and Lesser Ground-Cuckoo seemed to jump off the page of my Peterson and Chalif Mexico guide. By junior high, I had decided that if I wanted to have any chance of seeing all these crazy, little-known birds when I grew up, I needed to sign up for freshman Spanish. Once I got into college and headed south with friends one Christmas vacation, there was no looking back. I was hooked.

That first trip into northeast Mexico was an eye-opener. At a random stop alongside the road not far south of Brownsville, and out of what seemed inadequate, dry scrubby habitat popped a glorious ball of lavender, blue, and black with a yellow handkerchief: a Yellow-winged Tanager. If this bird could exist *here*, would it be much longer before one flew another 120 miles north across identical habitat to rest at Santa Ana National Wildlife Refuge or a backyard in suburban Brownsville? Ever since, I've been interested in how close many "Mexican" species come to the U.S. border. Last April, I found a Blue-gray Tanager as far north as that

Yellow-winged Tanager. Every year, birders find more tropical species on the seemingly unstoppable march north toward the as-yet-unfinished border fence. These species can be assigned to one of

three categories: resident species that are expanding north, probably due to climate change; elevational migrants that breed in Mexican mountains but are pushed into the lower elevations (irrespective of latitude) by unusually cold winter temperatures; and boreal migrants that breed in northern Mexico but winter farther south.



Quiz Photo A—September.

### Quiz Photo A

It is this last group to which Quiz Bird A belongs. If you're like most North American birders, you're thinking, "He's kidding, right? That's obviously a Sulphur-bellied Flycatcher. They migrate, and nothing else looks like it." Well, almost. There are two smaller lookalikes: Variegated and Piratic Flycatchers, both considered to be of casual occurrence ("Code 4") in the ABA Area. Besides size, both of these have contrasting solid, dark caps and small bills. Our bird has a massive bill, so Variegated and Piratic are out. In fact, could it be *too* massive? There also appears to be a fleshy base to the (lower) mandible. Looking closer, there are other details that are wrong for Sulphur-bellied. Our bird has a faint malar stripe that blends into the other relatively thin streaks on the underparts, not the bold, thick malar stripe and breast streaking of a Sulphur-bellied. While Sulphur-bellied has white edges to the wing coverts, our bird has a noticeable cinnamon tinge to the edges of the outer coverts. And come the think of it, where's the obvious sulphur belly?

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There are two species of *Myiodynastes* flycatchers in North America. One is Sulphur-bellied, and the other is our quiz bird. This **Streaked Flycatcher** (*M. maculatus*), the less northerly of the two, was photographed by the author on 13 September 2007 at the Río Silanche Preserve in northwestern Ecuador, where the species is resident. Mexican breeders, however, are long-distance boreal migrants. They breed commonly along the eastern flank of the Sierra Madre Oriental of Tamaulipas and winter in South America, a behavior shared by Plumbeous Kite and Yellow-green Vireo. Red-legged Honeycreeper also follows this general pattern. The vireo is a regular vagrant to the U.S. both as a spring overshoot and a summer/autumn reverse migrant. Streaked Flycatcher could conceivably be found in Texas and along the Gulf Coast as a migrant, or in the summer in some of the moister patches of Big Bend National Park's Chisos Mountains, the northernmost finger of the Sierra Madre Oriental.



**Quiz Photo B—February.**

## Quiz Photo B

Altitudinal migrants provide southern Texas with some of its most famous Mexican vagrants, like Crimson-collared Grosbeak, White-throated Thrush, and Blue Mockingbird. Tropical species don't deal well with large swings in temperature, and when powerful cold fronts, called *nortes*, sweep into northeastern Mexico, the cold temperatures force montane species into the warmer lowlands.

Before we look at plumage pattern, let's try to pin down a family using shape. Our bird has a clear vertical posture, which reminds us right away of the flycatchers. But its bill is on the thick side for a flycatcher. The extensive white in the wing and the short tail are wrong for every North American tyrannid, most of which are colored in shades of brown, while this bird is clad in gray, black, and white. There is a group of mainly black, gray, and white flycatcher-like birds with thick bills: the tityras and becards. Tityras

have much larger bills, and their wings and tails are patterned in large, unbroken patches of black and white. Our bird's wings and tail are made up of black feathers with white feather edgings and tips. There are only two gray becards in Mexico. Many ABA members are familiar with the Rose-throated Becard from visits to Arizona and Texas. Rose-throated Becards have unpatterned wings and tails, though, and lack our bird's white spectacles. They also have relatively longer tails. This male **Gray-collared Becard** (*Pachyramphus major*) was photographed by Chris Sloan in Quintana Roo on 29 February 2008. Females and young males are variably rusty

above and buffy below but always share the adult male's pale spectacles and patterned wings and tail.

The species breeds in the Sierra Madre Oriental very close to the U.S., as far north as Monterrey. As with Streaked Flycatcher, finding one in Texas's Chisos Mountains wouldn't be out of the question. Gray-collared Becards also undergo considerable elevational movements in cold winters, making the species a prime candidate to show up in southern Texas during one of those magical rarity-filled winters. Other altitudinal migrants to keep an eye out for include Brown-backed Solitaire, Black Thrush, White-winged Tanager, Black-headed Siskin, and the incomparable Pine Flycatcher.

## Quiz Photo C

First of all, what in the world is that nasty green goo hanging from the branch? Believe it or not, it's a big clue to the identity of this bird, but back to that in a bit. Assuming the "goodrops" are quite small, we have a diminutive, brightly colored passerine here. It has a fairly stout bill, so we're probably not dealing with a warbler or a tit. There aren't any emberizids clad in blue and orange, so we're left with cardinalids, finches, and tanagers. Cardinalids all have long tails, but our bird's is remarkably short. So, tanager or

finch? Good question! Ornithologists have been wondering about this themselves for a long time. The combination of powder blue hood, burnt orange underparts, black throat, and (barely discernable in this photo) chestnut forehead is unique in North America and belongs to the adult male Elegant Euphonia (*Euphonia elegantissima*), shown here in a photo taken by the author on 12 February 2008 in Jalisco. Females are olive overall but share the adult male's rusty forehead and blue hood.

Genetic evidence recently persuaded the AOU to move euphonias from the tanager family (Thraupidae) into the finch family (Fringillidae). Like "our" finches, Elegant Euphonias often travel in large, roving flocks outside the breeding season as they scour the countryside for their preferred food—mistletoe berries in the case of euphonias. Has the identity of that green goo crept into your mind yet? Our euphonia is perched in the middle of a mistletoe clump. So even in this photo, microhabitat is helpful in the identification. The green goo is euphonia excrement, made remarkably viscous and green by all those resin-filled mistletoe berries. Gray Silky-flycatchers, Aztec Thrushes, Brown-backed Solitaires, and Scrub and Yellow-throated Euphonias also love to eat the berries, so it's always a good idea to check fruiting mistletoes.

## Quiz Photo D

What do we have here? The bill is too thin and pointed for a crow. Surely, it's a blackbird. A *truly* all-black blackbird, in fact. Even the eyes are black. We can just see the bird's wing coverts (which are black), eliminating Red-winged and Tricolored Blackbirds. Plus, this all-black bird is singing, but singing Red-winged and Tricolored Blackbirds would have their epaulets flared for maximum sex appeal. The bill is too long for Shiny Cowbird,



Quiz Photo C—February.

and the bird is, well, just not shiny or purple enough. Seemingly everything about the bird is a boring, flat black. What this bird lacks in looks, though, it makes up for in voice. If we could hear it, we'd be instantly impressed by its rich and powerful yet monotonous popping and downslurred whistles, somewhat resembling a classically trained Great-tailed Grackle trying to imitate the introduction of a Northern Cardinal's song. This Melodious Blackbird (*Dives dives*) was photographed by Kevin Watson on 27 March 2006 at Crooked Tree, Belize.

Melodious Blackbirds have been rapidly colonizing new areas in Mexico and Central America in the past couple of decades, including areas of central Tamaulipas. Other nonmigratory species recently noticed on the slow march northward include Bare-throated Tiger-Heron, Bat Falcon, Sungrebe, Southern

Lapwing, Squirrel Cuckoo, Lineated Woodpecker, Boat-billed Flycatcher, Scrub Euphonia, and the two tanagers mentioned in the introduction. Coincidentally, there's a Sungrebe in the ABA Area as I type. As Rick Wright said so succinctly in the last issue's Photo Quiz Answers, "the future is now."



Quiz Photo D—March.