
**REPORT OF THE
AMERICAN BIRDING
ASSOCIATION
CHECKLIST COMMITTEE
1987-1988**

Since our last report (*Birding*, December 1986) the committee has reached a conclusion on the status of the following species:

New species accepted
MUSCOVY DUCK
GREAT SPOTTED WOODPECKER
SHINY COWBIRD

New species rejected
GRAY SILKY-FLYCATCHER

MUSCOVY DUCK
(*Cairina moschata*)

Where:

Texas, Starr Co., Santa Margarita Bluff

When:

11 April 1986

Observers:

Greg Lasley, Barry Zimmer, Victor Emanuel

Published details:

American Birds 39(2):186, 1985; Victor Emanuel manuscript (unpublished, submitted to *Audubon* magazine)

Documentation:

Photographs, field notes

ABA Records File:

VIREO numbers z04/1/001; z04/1/002; z04/1/003; z04/1/004

Expert Opinions:

Frank Gill, Greg Lasley, Kenn Kaufman

Identification:

No substantial debate

Origin:

The principal issue discussed was whether the individuals observed were wild vagrants from Mexico or escaped feral birds. Most committee members were convinced of the former, because of the response of this species to a nest box program sponsored by Ducks Unlimited of Mexico. Summarizing this conclusion were the comments of one committee member:

“From what I can piece together, these—at least some of them—appear to be wild-plumaged birds, not barnyard fowl. I accept the identifications. Further, I accept the proposition that they probably arrived in Texas on



Photo: H. Brokaw

their own, without human transport, and thus are wild in that sense.

The only question I would have is, does the nest box program constitute some sort of human agency that would disqualify these records? After some consideration, I have decided that the records should be accepted. From what I can discover, no birds were introduced, which would have constituted a reintroduction and perhaps provided a valid argument against acceptance at this time (a reintroduction would have to become established over a period of time; e.g., the White-tailed Ptarmigan in California). Instead, man has simply provided the necessary habitat (admittedly boxes, not trees) and the birds have spread on their own into this newly created "habitat." Had we managed to provide large trees with holes, as existed in the past, the result would have been the

same.

"Nevertheless, I am open to negative arguments of this sort, and I think the Committee needs to address this problem. Certainly man has played an important role in the occurrence of Muscovy in Texas."

Motion to add:

Gill/Kaufman

Vote(s):

5/2; 6/1

Dissenting Opinions:

"The evidence in favor of considering the Starr Co. Muscovy Duck records as pertaining to wild birds is strong, but not 100% convincing . . . and I have to be 100% convinced to vote for addition of a species to the North American list. The reason that I am not convinced is that the records could all pertain to a pair of feral birds that act like truly wild birds and

successfully bred, producing the immature noted in April 1986. Although the likelihood of this seems small, such a 'devil's advocate hypothesis' cannot be excluded as far as I can see.

"Steve Cardiff and Donna Dittmann saw an all-black Muscovy Duck fly across I-10 near Lafayette, Louisiana, last year, so, we cannot state categorically that flying, all-black Muscovy Ducks must be of natural origin. Adding to the dilemma are free-flying, clearly feral (some white on head) Muscovy Ducks that inhabit the Rio Grande Valley.

"My 'gut feeling' is that the Texas Muscovies are wild birds. Hopefully, a deluge of additional records will soon refute the feral hypothesis."

GREAT SPOTTED WOODPECKER (*Dendrocopos major*)

Where:

Alaska, Attu Island

When:

27 April 1986

Observers:

George F. Wagner

Published details:

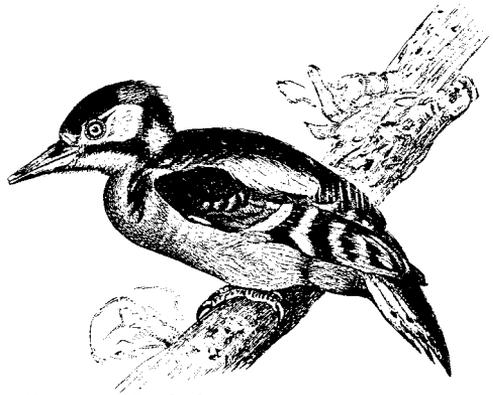
None

Documentation:

Specimen on deposit in the University of Alaska museum (No. 5337, subspecies *D.m. kamtschaticus*)

ABA Records File:

Photographs of specimen, VIREO numbers v01/4/001, v01/4/002, v01/4/003



Expert Opinion:

Richard Banks

Identification:

No debate

Origin:

Fall vagrant. One committee member's analysis follows:

"The problem is one of means—did the bird arrive naturally or was it assisted? The biggest question is, would a nomadic bird like this be likely to fly 400 miles over water? While I find it hard to believe that a woodpecker would, at least three other "nomadic" species (Eurasian Bullfinch, Common Redpoll, Pine Grosbeak) have reached Attu. While the arguments above are far from conclusive, I believe the likelihood of natural occurrence outweighs the chances of it having hitched a ride all the way from coast to island. It might have rested on a boat, but it might also have rested on the Commander Islands. A woodpecker probably would find nothing to eat on a boat and would leave it."

Motion to add:

Gibson/Gill

Vote:

7/0

SHINY COWBIRD
(*Molothrus*
bonariensis)

Where:

Florida, Monroe Co., Lower Matecumbe Key and Islamorada

When:

June 1985, June 1986, and subsequently

Observers:

Alexander Sprunt IV, Karen Sunderland, P. William Smith

Published details:

American Birds 41(3):370–371, 1987

Documentation:

Published photographs

ABA Records File:

VIREO numbers s14/2/001-003

Expert Opinions:

Committee

Identification:

No debate

Origin:

No debate; appearance in Florida predicted from current expansion throughout Caribbean

Motion to add:

Gill/Kaufman

Vote:

7/0

Photo: J. Bunning, VIREO



GRAY SILKY-FLY-CATCHER
(*Ptilogonys cinereus*)

Where:

Texas, Cameron County, Laguna Atascosa National Wildlife Refuge

When:

31 October 1985

Observers:

Greg Lasley and Thomas Pincelli

Published details:

Birding 18(1):34-36, 1986

Documentation:

Published photographs

ABA Records File:

VIREO numbers 107/5/001, 107/5/002

Expert Opinions:

Committee

Identification:

No debate

Origin:

An extended debate centered on whether this individual was a natural vagrant or an escaped caged bird. Although the record was from a location that has produced many exciting finds, this sedentary species has no known history of vagrancy. It is, however, a known Mexican caged bird. Compounding this concern was the molting tail, which was clearly evident in the photo. Perhaps, some conceded, this species will prove to be a local migrant that could wander across the border, but as a rule passerine birds don't molt

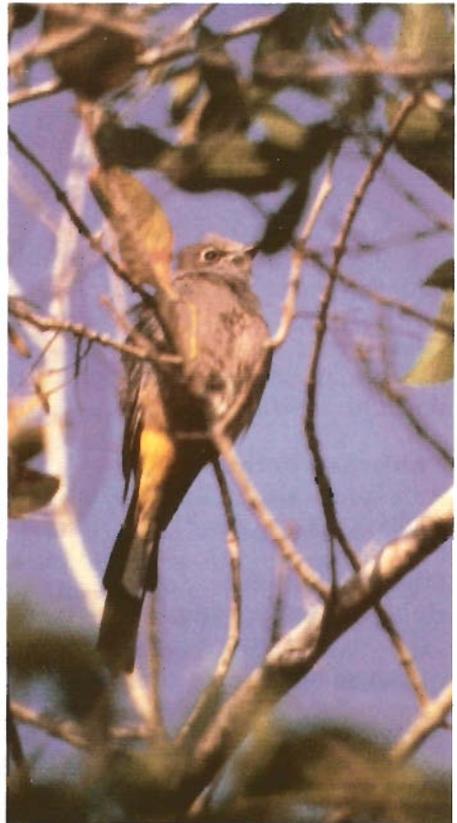


Photo: Nick Jackson, VIREO

while migrating. More likely, they argued, this bird lost its tail feathers as a captive. In addition to being an abnormal passerine that appeared to be molting while migrating, the individual in question was molting at the wrong time of the year. August is the normal time, not late October. Caged birds often accidentally lose and replace their tails. After four votes, this view prevailed, and the species was rejected.

Motion to add:

Gill/Kaufman

Dissenting Opinion:

"As I've already said, I'm not swayed by the issue of tail molt on this bird. And at places in Mexico that I've visited repeatedly I've seen enough variation in numbers to believe that these birds move around somewhat. For these reasons, I still believe there is a good chance the Texas bird was wild. But Binford knows the species better than I do, and I have to agree with most of Remsen's points, so I won't vote to accept this time.

"Parenthetically, I think the species may be sufficiently irregular in its "normal" movements that it will be hard to establish any regular pattern of vagrancy. Look at the scattershot pattern of long-distance vagrancy in *Phainopepla*, to cite a species with some similarities. Since Gray Silkies are often more gregarious than *Phainopeplas*, our best chance for believing a US record might be with a small flock in the Chisos or the Chiricahuas; but I wouldn't want to guess what time of year they might show up!"

VOTES IN PROGRESS

GREEN PARAKEET (*Aratinga holochlora*)—enlist

MOTTLED OWL (*Ciccalsa virgata*)—enlist

AZURE GALLINULE (*Porphyryla flavirostus*)—enlist

CRANE HAWK (*Geranospiza caerulescens*)—enlist

YELLOW-BREASTED BUNTING (*Emberiza aureola*)—enlist

MUGIMAKI FLYCATCHER (*Ficedula mugimaki*)—remove from list

FUTURE VOTES

WEDGE-TAILED SHEARWATER (*Puffinus pacificus*)—in review

SOLANDER'S PETREL (*Pterodroma solandri*)—await state (CA) decision

SWALLOW-TAILED GULL (*Creagrus furcatus*)—await state (CA) decision

GRAY GULL (*Larus modestus*)—await state (LA) decision

XANTUS' HUMMINGBIRD (*Hylocharis xantusii*)—await state (CA) decision

COX'S SANDPIPER (*Caliris paramelarotos*)—Before we can formally consider this record, we must await a taxonomic decision from the AOU Check-list Committee, specifically whether it will be accorded species status.

ABA AND THE AOU CHECKLISTS: CONCORDANCE AND COLLECTING

Some ABA members have expressed concern about discrepancies between the American Ornithologists' Union (AOU) Checklist and the ABA checklist. Some suggest that we accept only what AOU accepts. As Chairman of this committee I disagree, both in principle and in practice. A few years ago much duplication of effort existed. Now the AOU Checklist Committee relies on us (ABA) for critical reviews of possible additions to their checklist. Our partnership involves the birding community in ornithology in a positive and complementary way.

We prepare the files, or inherit them from state records committees, and make our decisions, which the AOU committee then considers. Burt L. Monroe, Chairman of the AOU Check-list Committee, receives copies of our files and discussion. Just as the ABA committee usually yields at first pass to state or provincial committees, so the AOU typically yields to us. It is unlikely the AOU would accept anything we reject, but they retain the option of rejecting our positive decisions. This is as it should be, because the purposes of the two checklists both overlap and differ slightly. The AOU Checklist is a conservative statement of scientific knowledge; the ABA Checklist, a summary of birding records scrutinized by experts. Different criteria and perspectives guide the decisions of these two committees as they debate fact versus fiction, and biological versus artificial vagrancy. Collected specimens and verifiable photographs are valued by both committees as the best possible documentation.

Pete Dunne has written strongly against any further collecting of specimens to document the distribution of birds (see *Living Bird Quarterly*, Vol. 7, No. 2) and has also lambasted "the AOU's advocacy of specimen records for inclusion in the North American list as an anachronism predicated upon a philosophy that died over 60 years ago." As chairman of this committee, and also Vice-President of the AOU last year, I felt obliged to reply on behalf of the many who do not agree with Pete. My reply appears in the October 1988 issue of *Living Bird Quarterly*, but the

final paragraph merits reprinting here (with permission from managing editor, Richard E. Bonney, Jr.):

"We must remind ourselves of the purpose of the AOU Checklist, which Pete challenges as irrelevant and archaic. This premier checklist documents what are the facts about the distribution of North American (and Central American) bird species. Compiled carefully by experts of considerable stature, it is, and should always be, a conservative document, not prone to speculation or to acceptance of uncertainties, which then will have to be changed in future editions. Reasonable doubt opposes the conclusion of fact, and so results in the rejection of some records. Facts also must be verifiable in the future, hence the need for good documentation—photographs, tape recordings, or specimens—that permit expert scrutiny and bear up to critical challenge. Otherwise, we would base our science on fiction, on possible myth. Certainly, with the advent of extraordinary binoculars and cameras, specimens dropped by shotguns no longer must prevail as a means of identification or verification. At times, however, a specimen will be desirable and even essential to confirm an identification, to separate fact from fiction. So I suggest that we all—ornithologists, birders, and superbirders alike—humbly recognize our limited skills and our occasional fallibility. If we do, birding and ornithology both will prosper."

Frank B. Gill
Chairman, ABA Checklist
Committee