

Brewer's Blackbird *Euphagus cyanocephalus*



Folk Name: (none)

Status: Migrant, Winter Visitor

Abundance: Rare

Habitat: Cattle pastures and feedlots, plowed fields

The Brewer's Blackbird is a bird of the American West and central Great Plains. It is about the same size and shape as a Rusty Blackbird, but during breeding season, it is a much more glossy bird with iridescent black, a purplish head, and blue-green body. During the fall and early winter, it is less glossy than during breeding season, but the male never has the markedly brown appearance of a Rusty Blackbird. The eye of the male Brewer's Blackbird is a bright yellow-white. The eye of the female is dark.

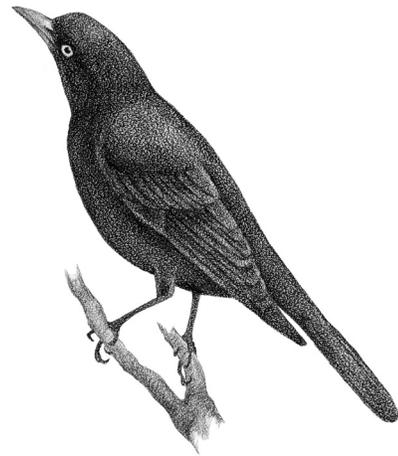
The first record of Brewer's Blackbird ever recorded in either of the Carolinas was from Chester County, South Carolina. On December 9–10 in 1886, Leverett Loomis collected five specimens, three males and two females, near the Chester Court House. These specimens are still in the collections at the Smithsonian Museum.

Loomis wrote:

That these birds were waifs and strays, mere accidentals, seems improbable. Their numbers and condition (those taken were very fat), considered in connection with the demonstrated tendency of certain species of the West to extend their migrations to the South Atlantic States, appear to indicate that they were irregular migrants, borne eastward on the cold wave which struck Chester on the night of December 3, covering the ground for a week with snow.

South Carolina's second and third records of this bird were recorded 40 years later at Clemson. Franklin Sherman collected a male specimen on April 17, 1926, and George Hudson collected a male and a female from a flock of 20 found there on December 18, 1926. A year later, a specimen was collected in Beaufort County. Twenty-six years later, Gabriel Cannon published a sight record of several Brewer's Blackbirds found in Spartanburg County near Landrum, SC, on April 21, 1953.

The Brewer's Blackbird was first reported in North Carolina in 1930 when it was discovered by Thomas Burleigh in the Mills River Valley near Asheville. He found it there again in 1931 and 1932. Scientists studying this species noted the expansion of this blackbird's wintering range beginning in the 1950s and continuing through the 1970s, along with a corresponding increase in their population throughout the west. By the end of the



1970s, the Brewer's Blackbird had become established as a fairly regular migrant and winter visitor in southeastern states from Georgia to the Gulf Coast.

In North Carolina, its status gradually transitioned from "rare migrant" to "winter visitor" by the 1980s. By 1985, a cattle farm in Townville, South Carolina, was the only location in both states where this bird had been seen on a regular basis. In the winter of 1987–1988, John Fussell documented the first evidence of a large flock of 50–60 Brewer's Blackbirds as a "winter resident" spending the entire winter season at Open Grounds Farm in Carteret County. By 1989, this species was designated a "rare winter visitor" in South Carolina as well. Today, this blackbird remains an infrequent migrant and rare winter visitor in the Carolinas.

Around the Central Carolinas, Brewer's Blackbirds have been reported in Anson, Cleveland, Mecklenburg, Forsyth, and southwestern Randolph counties in North Carolina, and Chester, York, Spartanburg, and Kershaw counties in South Carolina. They are "usually found foraging in open short-grazed cattle pastures or barren areas in and around cattle feedlots." These birds seem to "have an affinity for foraging near barns, farmhouses, and other agricultural out-buildings" and will often feed somewhat apart from other blackbirds when they are found in large mixed blackbird flocks. The Brewer's Blackbird is considered a special find on Christmas Bird Counts. Unfortunately, this species is easily misidentified and some historical reports may be incorrect. Sightings of Brewer's Blackbirds outside of agricultural habitats are usually problematic.

In Mecklenburg County, observers have reported Brewer's Blackbird periodically from the 1960s onward. Elizabeth Clarkson reported one she observed on October

19, 1962, in her “city garden” at Wing Haven. Doug Pratt reported another lone Brewer’s Blackbird in southwest Mecklenburg County on October 30, 1966. This bird was listed as “observed carefully.” One was reported as “studied carefully in cattails at edge of a small lake” on the Stanly Spring Bird Count held April 27, 1968. This habitat and the habitat at Wing Haven is surprising for this species and differs greatly from where other Brewer’s Blackbirds have been found in the Carolina Piedmont.

An unprecedented flock of 1,500 was reported by observers on the Charlotte Christmas Bird Count in 1971. The group was part of a mixed blackbird flock estimated at 2,160,000 birds. Bill Sayward “found the Brewer’s Blackbirds among the outbound flight from the roost on count morning. Familiar with the species from numerous trips to western states, he had good views of two individuals in his yard later in the day. Elizabeth Clarkson also noted Brewer’s Blackbirds during the count period.” Two males were seen on 31 March at Rock Hill, SC, by Michael Boatwright.

In 1982, reports of Brewer’s Blackbirds in North Carolina were reviewed and many sightings, especially those in residential areas and semi-wooded habitats, were brought into question. Harry LeGrand, Briefs for the Files editor for *The Chat*, provided this comment: “I now believe that a handful of the recent published records, including the report of 1500 on the Charlotte, NC Christmas Bird Count in 1971, may have been of birds incorrectly identified.”

In 1973, David and Jeff Wright recorded specific field marks and plumage details of three Brewer’s Blackbirds they observed on the Charlotte Christmas Bird Count on 29 December. They submitted their report to the regional editors of *American Birds* magazine. The details provided

were considered by the editors to be a “good study” and were determined sufficient for adding the species to the official count summary. On February 3, 1978, a Brewer’s Blackbird was captured in Mecklenburg County. The bird was examined in hand by researchers from UNC Charlotte. It was banded and released.

Heathy Walker reported finding a Brewer’s Blackbird in a mixed blackbird flock in northern Mecklenburg County on January 14, 1989. David Wright found two males and a female at a cattle farm near Charlotte on November 15, 1989.

From one to six Brewer’s Blackbirds were reported on each of 10 different Charlotte area Christmas Bird Counts conducted during the 1980s and 1990s. Many of these sightings occurred at a single location—the Wallace Dairy Farm in eastern Mecklenburg County. This farm was one of the last active dairy farms in the county, and the acreage used by the grazing cattle provided a unique and exemplary habitat for several types of birds. The Wallace family welcomed birders to their farm and usually one or two local specialties could be found there. Unfortunately, the farm was forced to cease dairy operations after a residential subdivision was built next door and residents complained of the odor. The habitat on the farm has since changed and local rarities are now infrequent there.

Rob Van Epps had a total of six Brewer’s Blackbirds at the Wallace Dairy Farm while conducting the Southern Lake Norman CBC on December 21, 1997, and five on the count there the following year on December 20, 1998. The count editor noted that “good details” were provided with the reports.

Scientists warn that the breeding population of the Brewer’s Blackbird is rapidly declining throughout its range.